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Opening Extract from...

Shibumi

Written by Trevanian

Published by Headline

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INTRODUCTION

The kettle started to bubble about the time I read an e-mail from my agent asking if the word *'shibumi'* meant anything to me.

Well, yes.

Shibumi (which means the quality of casual elegance in Japanese) was the title of the iconic thriller by Trevanian that featured the polyglot assassin, Nicholai Hel.

Shibumi changed the very nature of what a thriller could and should be. Here we had a character who was not merely crafted to fit the action, but whose character itself *defined* the action. Here was a character with a distinctive world view, a unique style of life, and an intricate moral code. Here was a complex and fascinating individual, the perfectly integrated product of myriad cultures and experiences, who spoke and acted solely from his own philosophy.

And what masterful speech and action. Nicholai Hel is on the short list of the great thriller heroes, dispatching his business with a suave efficiency (should we say 'casual elegance'?), witty commentary, but also a sense of humanity. One of the great charms of Hel is his gift for friendships and his love for the woman in his life, Hana – a relationship that stands alone in the thriller genre. One of its other great charms is its willful quirkiness – Trevanian writes what he wants to write about – the Basque country, spelunking, and the like (I can only imagine the spirited debate with the editor) – and does it with such skill that he takes you with him.

Shibumi is a dazzlingly courageous book in terms of its structure, taking the risk of spending as much time on its character's back-story as it does in 'real time'. This was revolutionary, and personally very influential to me. I took the lesson – back-story matters, history matters, character development *matters*. If the reader doesn't care about the character, the reader won't care about what the character does.

Shibumi taught me to trust the reader's intelligence.

As fresh and exciting a read as it ever was, *Shibumi* still feels revolutionary, *sui generis*, and a damn fine read. I was blown away by it thirty years ago – I am blown away by it today.

The 'e-correspondence' went on and then I was asked if I'd like to 'be' Trevanian and write a sort of 'prequel' to *Shibumi*.

There is – and will ever be – only one Trevanian, and only one *Shibumi*.

The style is unique, the voice so powerful, the characters so distinctive that an attempt to simply imitate the original book could only result in an embarrassing spectacle akin to a lounge singer 'doing' Sinatra.

But how do you turn down the chance to write about a character as rich as Nicholai Hel?

Foolishness, I thought, to attempt it.

Folly.

But if you are passed *that* ball, with open field in front of you, you make a run.

I only hope I made a good one.

The result is a book called *Satori*, an homage to Trevanian.

Does the word *'shibumi'* mean anything to me?

Well, yes.

Don Winslow
Julian, California, 11 March 2011

Trevanian was the pen name of Dr Rodney William Whitaker. He wrote several classic international bestsellers, including *Shibumi*, *The Eiger Sanction*, and *The Summer of Katya*. He lived in the mountains of the French Basque country and died in 2005.

Also by Trevanian

The Eiger Sanction
The Loo Sanction
The Main
The Summer of Katya
Incident at Twenty-Mile
Hot Night in the City
The Crazyladies of Pearl Street

1339 or So: Being an Apology for a Pedlar (Writing as Nicolas Seare)
Rude Tales and Glorious (Writing as Nicolas Seare)

Shibumi

TREVANIAN

headline

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To the memories of the men who here appear as:

Kishikawa
Otake
de Lhandes
Le Cagot

All other characters and organizations in this book
lack any basis in reality –
although some of them do not realize that.

GAMEFORM OF *SHIBUMI*

PART ONE — *Fuseki* – the opening stage of a game when the entire board is taken into account.

PART TWO — *Sabaki* – an attempt to dispose of a troublesome situation in a quick and flexible way.

PART THREE — *Seki* – a neutral position in which neither has the advantage. A 'Mexican standoff.'

PART FOUR — *Uttegae* – a sacrifice play, a gambit.

PART FIVE — *Shicho* – a running attack.

PART SIX — *Tsuru no Sugomori* – The confinement of the cranes to their nest,' a graceful maneuver in which the enemy stones are captured.

PART ONE

FUSEKI

Washington

The screen flashed 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3 . . . then the projector was switched off, and lights came up in recessed sconces along the walls of the private viewing room.

The projectionist's voice was thin and metallic over the intercom. 'Ready when you are, Mr Starr.'

T. Darryl Starr, sole audience member, pressed the talk button of the communication console before him. 'Hey, buddy? Tell me something. What are all those numbers in front of a movie for anyway?'

'It's called academy leader, sir,' the projectionist answered. 'I just spliced it onto the film as a sort of joke.'

'Joke?'

'Yes, sir. I mean . . . considering the nature of the film . . . it's sort of funny to have a commercial leader, don't you think?'

'Why funny?'

'Well, I mean . . . what with all the complaints about violence in movies and all that.'

T. Darryl Starr grunted and scrubbed his nose with the back of his fist, then he slipped down the pilot-style sunglasses he had pushed up into his cropped hair when the lights first went off.

Joke? It damn well better *not* be a joke, I shit thee not! If anything has gone wrong, my ass will be grass. And if the slightest little thing *is* wrong, you can bet your danglees that Mr Diamond and his crew will spot it. Nit-picking bastards! Ever since they took control over Middle East operations of CIA, they seemed to get their cookies by pointing out every little boo-boo.

Starr bit off the end of his cigar, spat it onto the carpeted floor, pumped it in and out of his pursed lips, then lit it from a wooden match he struck with his thumbnail. As Most Senior Field Operative, he had access to Cuban cigars. After all, RHIP.

He scooted down and hooked his legs over the back of the seat before him, like he used to do when he watched movies at the Lone Star Theater as a boy. And if the boy in front objected, Starr would offer to kick his ass up amongst his shoulder blades. The other kid always backed off, because everybody in Flat Rock knew that T. Darryl Starr was some kind of fierce and could stomp a mud puddle in any kid's chest.

That was many years and knocks ago, but Starr was still some kind of fierce. That's what it took to become CIA's Most Senior Field Operative. That, and experience. And boo-coo smarts.

And patriotism, of course.

Starr checked his watch: two minutes to four. Mr Diamond had called for a screening at four, and he would arrive at four – exactly. If Starr's watch did not read four straight up when Diamond walked into the theater, he would assume the watch was in need of repair.

He pressed his talk button again. 'How does the film look?'

'Not bad, considering the conditions under which we shot it,' the projectionist answered. 'The light in Rome International is tricky . . . a mixture of natural light and fluorescent overheads. I had to use a combination of CC filters that brought my f-stop way down and made focus a real problem. And as for color quality—'

'I don't want to hear your piddly-assed problems!'

'Sorry, sir. I was just answering your question.'

'Well, don't!'

'Sir?'

The door at the back of the private theater opened with a slap. Starr glanced at his watch; the sweep second hand was five seconds off four o'clock. Three men walked quickly down the aisle. In the lead was Mr Diamond, a wiry man in his late forties whose movements were quick and adroit, and whose impeccably tailored clothes reflected his trim habits of mind. Following closely was Mr Diamond's First Assistant, a tall, loosely jointed man with a vague academic air. Not a man to waste time, it was Diamond's practice to dictate memos, even while en route between meetings. The First Assistant carried a belt recorder at his hip, the pinhead microphone of which was attached to his metal-rimmed glasses. He always walked close beside Mr Diamond, or sat near him, his head bowed to pick up the flow of clipped monotonic directives.

Considering the heraldic stiffness of CIA mentality, it was inevitable that their version of wit would suggest a homosexual relationship between Diamond and his ever-hovering assistant. Most of the jokes had to do with what would happen to the assistant's nose, should Mr Diamond ever stop suddenly.

The third man, trailing behind and somewhat confused by the brisk pace of action and thought surrounding him, was an Arab whose Western clothes were dark, expensive, and ill-fitting. The shabby look was not his tailor's fault; the Arab's body was not designed for clothes requiring posture and discipline.

Diamond slipped into an aisle seat across the auditorium from Starr; the First Assistant sat directly behind him, and the Palestinian, frustrated in his expectation that someone would tell him where to sit, finally shambled into a seat near the back.

Turning his head so the pinhead microphone could pick up the last of his rapid, atonic dictation, Diamond closed off the

thoughts he had been pursuing. 'Introduce the following topics to me within the next three hours: One – North Sea oil rig accident: the media suppression thereof. Two – This professor type who is investigating the ecological damage along the Alaska pipeline: the termination thereof by apparent accident.'

Both these tasks were in their final phases, and Mr Diamond was looking forward to getting in a little tennis over the weekend. Provided, of course, these CIA fools had not screwed up this Rome International action. It was a straightforward spoiling raid that should not have presented any difficulties, but in the six months since the Mother Company had assigned him to manage CIA activities involving the Middle East, he had learned that no action is so simple as to be beyond CIA's capacity for error.

Diamond understood why the Mother Company chose to maintain its low profile by working behind the cover of CIA and NSA, but that did not make his job any easier. Nor had he been particularly amused by the Chairman's lighthearted suggestion that he think of the Mother Company's use of CIA operatives as Her contribution to the hiring of the mentally handicapped.

Diamond had not yet read Starr's action report, so he reached back for it now. The First Assistant anticipated him and had the report ready to press into his hand.

As he glanced over the first page, Diamond spoke without raising his voice. 'Put the cigar out, Starr.' Then he lifted his hand in a minimal gesture, and the wall lights began to dim down.

Darryl Starr pushed his sunglasses up into his hair as the theater went dark and the projector beam cut through slack threads of blue smoke. On the screen appeared a jerky pan over the interior of a large, busy airport.

'This here's Rome International,' Starr drawled. 'Time reference: thirteen thirty-four GMT. Flight 414 from Tel Aviv has

just arrived. It's going to be a piece before the action starts. Those I-talian customs jokers ain't no speed balls.'

'Starr?' said Diamond, wearily.

'Sir?'

'Why haven't you put that cigar out?'

'Well, to tell you God's own truth, sir, I never heard you ask me to.'

'I didn't *ask* you.'

Embarrassed at being ordered around in the presence of a foreigner, Starr unhooked his leg from the seat in front and ground out the almost fresh cigar on the carpet. To save face, he continued narrating as though nothing had happened. 'I expect our A-rab friend here is going to be some impressed at how we handled this one. It went off slick as catshit on linoleum.'

Wide shot: customs and immigration portal. A queue of passengers await the formalities with varying degrees of impatience. In the face of official incompetence and indifference, the only passengers who are smiling and friendly are those who anticipate trouble with their passports or luggage. An old man with a snow-white goatee leans over the counter, explaining something for the third time to the customs officer. Behind him in line are two young men in their twenties, deeply tanned, wearing khaki shorts and shirts open at the throat. As they move forward, pushing their rucksacks along with their feet, camera zooms in to isolate them in mid-close-up.

'Those are our targets,' Starr explained needlessly.

'Just so,' the Arab said in a brittle falsetto. 'I recognize one of them, one known within their organization as Avrim.'

With a comically exaggerated bow of gallantry, the first young man offers to let a pretty redheaded girl precede them to the counter. She smiles thanks, but shakes her head. The Italian official in his too-small peaked cap takes the first young man's passport with a bored gesture and flicks it open, his eyes straying again and again to the girl's breasts, obviously unfettered beneath a denim shirt. He glances from the photograph to the young man's face and back again, frowning.

Starr explained. 'The mark's passport picture was taken before he grew that silly-assed beard.'

The immigration official shrugs and stamps the passport. The second young man is treated with the same combination of mistrust and incompetence. His passport is stamped twice, because the Italian officer was so engrossed in the redheaded girl's shirtfront that he forgot to use the ink pad the first time. The young men pick up their rucksacks, slinging them over their shoulders by one strap. Murmuring apologies and twisting sideways, they slip through a tangle of excited Italians, a large family pressing and standing on tiptoe to greet an arriving relative.

'Okay! Slow 'er down!' Starr ordered over the intercom. 'Here's where it hits the fan.'

The projector slowed to one-quarter speed.

From frame to flickering frame the young men move as though the air were gelatin. The leader turns back to smile at someone in the queue, the motion having the quality of a ballet in moon gravity. The second one looks out over the crowd. His nonchalant smile freezes. He opens his mouth and shouts silently, as the front of his khaki shirt bursts open and sprouts blood. Before he can fall to his knees, a second bullet strikes his cheek and tears it off. The camera waves around dizzily before locating the other young man, who has dropped his rucksack and is running in nightmare slow motion toward the coin lockers. He pirouettes in the air as a slug takes him in the shoulder. He slams gracefully against the lockers and bounces back. His hip blossoms with gore, and he slips sideward to the polished granite floor. A third bullet blows off the back of his head.

The camera swishes over the terminal, seeking, losing, then finding again two men – out of focus – running toward the glass doors of the entrance. The focus is corrected, revealing them to be Orientals. One of them carries an automatic weapon. He suddenly arches his back, throws up his arms, and slides forward on his toes for a second before pitching onto his face. The gun clatters silently beside him. The second man has reached the glass doors, the smeared

light of which haloes his dark outline. He ducks as a bullet shatters the glass beside his head; he veers and runs for an open elevator out of which a group of schoolchildren are oozing. A little girl slumps down, her hair billowing as though she were underwater. A stray has caught her in the stomach. The next slug takes the Oriental between the shoulder blades and drives him gently into the wall beside the elevator. A grin of anguish on his face, he twists his arm up behind him, as though to pluck out the bullet. The next slug pierces his palm and enters his spine. He slides down the wall and falls with his head in the elevator car. The door closes, but reopens as the pressure pads meet the obstructing head. It closes again upon the head, then reopens. Closes. Opens.

Slow pan back over the terminal. High angle.

. . . A cluster of shocked and bewildered children around the fallen girl. One boy screams in silence . . .

. . . Two airport guards, their little Italian automatics drawn, run toward the fallen Orientals. One of them is still firing . . .

. . . The old man with the snow-white goatee sits stunned in a puddle of his own blood, his legs straight out before him, like a child playing in a sandbox. His expression is one of overwhelming disbelief. He was sure he had explained everything to the customs official . . .

. . . One of the young Israeli boys lies facedown on his missing cheek, his rucksack improbably still over his shoulder . . .

. . . There is a largo minuet of stylized confusion among the gaggle of Italians who were awaiting a relative. Three of them have fallen. Others are wailing, or kneeling, and one teenaged boy is turning around and around on his heel, seeking a direction in which to run for help – or safety . . .

. . . The redheaded girl stands stiff, her eyes round with horror as she stares at the fallen boy who just seconds ago offered to let her pass ahead . . .

. . . The camera comes to rest on the young man sprawled beside the coin lockers, the back of his head missing . . .

'That-a – that-a – that-a – that's all folks!' said Starr. The beam from the projector flickered out, and the wall lights dimmed up to full.

Starr turned in his seat to field questions from Mr Diamond or the Arab. 'Well?'

Diamond was still looking toward the white screen, three fingers pressed lightly against his lips, the action report on his lap. He let the fingers slip to beside his chin. 'How many?' he asked quietly.

'Sir?'

'How many killed in the action?'

'I know what you mean, sir. Things got a little wetter than we expected. We'd arranged for the I-talian police to stay clear of the area, but they got their instructions all balled up – not that *that's* anything new. I even had some trouble myself. I had to use a Beretta so the slugs would match up for I-talian. And as a handgun, a Beretta isn't worth a fart in a hurricane, as my old daddy would have said. With an S&W, I could of dropped those Japs with two shots, and I wouldn't of hit that poor little girl that stepped out into my line of fire. Of course, in the first part of the action, our Nisei boys had been instructed to make it a little messy – make it look like a Black September number. But it was those panicked I-talian cops that started spattering slugs around like a cow pissing on a flat rock, as my old—'

'Starr?' Diamond's voice was heavy with disgust. 'What was the question I asked you?'

'You asked how many were dead.' Starr's tone was suddenly crisp, as he discarded the good ol' boy facade behind which he habitually took cover, to lull the target with the assumption that it was dealing with a bucolic fool. 'Nine dead in total.' A sudden grin, and the down-home twang was back. 'Let's see now. There was the two Jew targets, of course. Then our two Nisei agents I had to maximally demote. And that poor little girl that bumped into one of my slugs. And that old fella who collected a stray.

And three of that family of locals that were loitering around when that second Jew ran past them. Loitering's dangerous. It ought to be against the law.'

'Nine? Nine killed to get two?'

'Well, sir, you gotta remember that we were instructed to make this look like a Black September-type action. And those boys have this tendency to be some extravagant. It's their style to open eggs with sledgehammers – no offense intended to Mr Haman here.'

Diamond looked up from the report he was speed-reading. Haman? Then he remembered that the Arab observer seated behind him had been given Haman as a cover name by the imaginative CIA.

'I take no offense, Mr Starr,' said the Arab. 'We are here to learn. That is why some of our own trainees are working with your men at the Riding Academy, under a Title Seventeen grant for cultural exchange. To tell truths, I am impressed that a man of your seniority took the time to deal with this matter personally.'

Starr waved that aside with pleased modesty. 'Think nothing of it. If you want a job done right, give it to a busy man.'

'Is that something else your old daddy used to say?' Diamond asked, his eyes not leaving the report as they raced vertically down the center of the page, speed-reading.

'Matter of fact, it is, now you mention it.'

'He was quite the folksy philosopher.'

'I think of him more as a rotten son-of-a-bitch, sir. But he did have a way with words.'

Diamond sighed nasally and returned his attention to the action report. During the months since the Mother Company had assigned him to control all CIA activities touching the interests of the oil-producing powers, he had learned that, despite their institutionalized ineptitude, men like Starr were not stupid. They were, in fact, surprisingly intelligent, in the mechanical,

problem-solving sense of that word. None of the chitlin grammar, none of the scatological paucity of language ever appeared in Starr's written reports of wet-work assignments. Instead, one found concise, arid prose calculated to callus the imagination.

From going over his biographic printout, Diamond had learned that Starr was something of a hero figure among the younger CIA operatives – the last of the old breed from the precomputer era, from the days when Company operations had more to do with swapping shots across the Berlin Wall than with controlling the votes of congressmen by amassing evidence of their fiscal and sexual irregularities.

T. Darryl Starr was of the same stripe as his over-the-hill contemporary who left the Company to write inarticulate spy novels and dabble over his head in political crimes. When his gross ineptitude led to his being caught, he clung to truculent silence, while his cohorts sang mighty choruses of mea culpa and published at great profit. After serving a bit of soft time in federal prison, he sought to ennoble his panicked silence by falling back on The Unwritten Code, which declares, 'Thou shalt not squeal – out of print.' The world groaned as at an old joke, but Starr admired this bungling fool. They shared that blend of boy scout and mugger that characterizes old-timers in the CIA.

Diamond glanced up from the report. 'According to this, Mr . . . Haman, you went along on the spoiling raid as an observer.'

'Yes. That is correct. As a trainee/observer.'

'In that case, why did you want to see this confirmation film before reporting to your superiors?'

'Ah . . . yes. Well . . . in point of most absolute fact . . .'

'It wouldn't be possible for him to report his eyeball reactions, sir,' Starr explained. 'He was with us up on the mezzanine when it all started, but ten seconds later we couldn't find hide nor hair of him. A man we left behind to sweep up finally located him in the back stall of the public benjo.'

The Arab laughed briefly and mirthlessly. 'This is true. The calls of nature are as inopportune as they are empirical.'

The First Assistant frowned and blinked. Empirical? Did he mean imperative? Imperious?

'I see,' Diamond said, and he returned to his scan-reading of the seventy-five-page report.

Uncomfortable with the silence, the Arab quickly filled in with: 'I do not wish to be an inquisitor, Mr Starr, but there is something I do not understand.'

'Shoot, pal.'

'Exactly why did we use Orientals to make the slap?'

'What? Oh! Well, you remember that we agreed to make it look as though your own men did the *hit*. But we don't have no A-rabs in the shop, and the boys we're training out to the Academy ain't up to this kind of number.' Starr did not consider it tactful to add that, with their genetic disabilities, they probably never would be. 'But your Black September boys have been members of the Japanese Red Army on their operations . . . and Japs we got.'

The Arab frowned in confusion. 'You are saying that the Japanese were your *own* men?'

'You got it. A couple of Nisei boys with the Agency in Hawaii. Good ol' boys too. It's a real pity we had to lose 'em, but their deaths put what you call your stamp of verisimilitude on your otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative. The slugs they dig out of them will be from a Beretta, and the local cops will get credit for pinching them off. They carried documents identifying them as Red Army members helping their A-rab brothers in what you call your unending struggle against the capitalist whatevers.'

'Your *own* men?' the Arab repeated in awe.

'Don't sweat it. Their papers, their clothes, even the food that'll be found in their stomachs . . . it all makes them out to be from Japan. Matter of fact, they flew in from Tokyo just a

couple of hours before the hit – or slap, as we sometimes call it.'

The Arab's eyes shone with admiration. This was precisely the kind of organization his uncle – and president – had sent him to the United States to study, to the end of creating a similar one, and ending their dependence on their newfound allies. 'But surely your Japanese agents did not *know* they were going to be . . . what is your term for it?'

'Maximally demoted? No, they didn't know. There's a rule of thumb in the shop that actives shouldn't know more than they need to do the job. They were good men, but even so, if they' da known they were gonna do a Nathan Hale, they might' a lost some of their enthusiasm, if you catch my drift there.'

Diamond continued to read, his vertical sweep of eye always well ahead of the mixing and analyzing operations of his mind, which sorted and reviewed the data in a way best described as intellectual peripheral vision. When some bit failed to fall into place, or rang false, he would pause and go back, scanning for the offending fragment.

He was on the last page when the internal alarms went off. He paused, turned back to the preceding page, and read carefully – this time horizontally. His jaw muscles rippled. He lifted his eyes and produced a characteristically understated exclamation: for a moment he did not breathe.

The First Assistant's eyes flickered. He knew the signs. There was trouble.

Diamond drew a long-suffering sigh as he handed the report back over his shoulder. Until he had evaluated the problem, he would not alert the Arab observer. His experience told him that it is unwise and wasteful to equip Arabs with unnecessary information. It is not a burden they carry gracefully.

'Well?' he asked, turning his head slightly. 'Are you satisfied, Mr Haman?'

For an instant the Arab failed to recognize his code name,

then he started and giggled. 'Oh, yes. Well, let us say that I am impressed by the evidence of the films.'

'Does that mean impressed, but *not* satisfied?'

The Arab pulled in his neck, tilted his head, and lifted his palms, smiling in the oblique way of the rug merchant. 'My good friends, it is not for me to be satisfied or unsatisfied. *Dis*satisfied? I am merely a messenger, a point of contact, what you might call . . . a . . .'

'Flunky?' Diamond offered.

'Perhaps. I do not know that word. A short time ago, our intelligence agents learned of a plot to assassinate the last two remaining heroes of the Munich Olympics Retaliation. My uncle – and president – expressed his desire to have this plot staunched . . . is that the word?'

'It's *a* word,' Diamond admitted, his voice bored. He was out of patience with this fool, who was more a broad ethnic joke than a human being.

'As you recall, the staunching of this evil plot was a condition for continued amicable relations with the Mother Company in matters relating to oil supply. In its wisdom, the Mother Company decided to have CIA handle the matter – under your close personal supervisory, Mr Diamond. I mean no offense to my brave friend, Mr Starr, but it must be admitted that since certain bunglings of CIA-trained men led to the downfall of a most friendly and cooperative President, our confidence in that organization has not been without limits.' The Arab tipped his head onto his shoulder and grinned apologetically at Starr, who examined his cuticles with deep interest.

The Arab continued. 'Our intelligence organ was able to supply CIA with the names of the two Zionist gangsters assigned to this criminal attack, and with the approximate date of their departure from Tel Aviv. To this, Mr Starr doubtless added his own sources of information; and he decided to avert the tragedy by technique of what you call a "spoiling raid," arranging that

the criminals be executed before they committed their crime – a most economical judicial process. Now, you have shown me certain audiovisual medias proving that this raid was successful. I shall report this to my superiors. It is for them to be satisfied or nonsatisfied; not me.'

Diamond, whose mind had been elsewhere through most of the Arab's singsong monologue, now rose. 'That's it, then.' Without further word, he strode up the aisle, followed immediately by his First Assistant.

Starr hooked his leg over the seat before him and drew out a cigar. 'You want to see it again?' he asked the Arab over his shoulder.

'That would be pleasant.'

Starr pressed the talk button of his console. 'Hey, buddy? Let's have it again.' He slipped his sunglasses up into his cropped hair as the lights dimmed down. 'Here we go. A rerun. And on prime time.' Pronounced: prahm tahm.

As he walked quickly down the white-walled corridor of the Center, Diamond's fury was manifest only in the sharp click of his leather heels over the tiles. He had trained himself to restrict his emotions to a very narrow band of expression, but the slight tension around his mouth and his half-defocused stare were sufficient to alert the First Assistant that anger was writhing within him.

They stepped into the elevator, and the First Assistant inserted a magnetic card into the slot that replaced the button for Floor 16. The car dropped rapidly from the main lobby to the subbasement suite coded as Floor 16. The first thing Diamond had done when he took over CIA activities on behalf of the Mother Company was to create a work area for himself in the bowels of the Center. No CIA personnel had access to Floor 16; the office suite was enclosed in lead sheeting with antibugging alarms designed to keep that organization in its traditional state of ignorance. As further security against govern-

mental curiosity, Diamond's office was served by a direct computer link with the Mother Company through cables that were armored against the parallel-line/incidental capacitance method of eavesdropping by means of which NSA monitors telephone and telegraph communications in the United States.

In constant touch with the research and communications facilities of the Mother Company, Diamond needed only a staff of two: his First Assistant, who was a gifted artist at computer search; and his secretary, Miss Swivven.

They stepped out into a large open work space, the walls and carpets all in matte white. In the center was a discussion area consisting of five lightly padded chairs around a table, with an etched glass top that served as a screen upon which television images generated by the computer complex could be projected. Of the five chairs, only one could swivel: Diamond's. The others were set rigidly into the floor and were designed to provide minimal comfort. The area was for quick, alert discussion – not for small-talk and social fencing.

Into the wall across from the discussion area was built a console that linked their computer with the Mother Company's master system: Fat Boy. The bank also contained television, telephoto and teletype connections back to Fat Boy for printout of verbal and visual data, together with local storage banks for short-term hold and cross-reference. The First Assistant's place was always before this console, upon which instrument he played with unique abstract artistry, and with great affection.

Raised slightly on a dais, Diamond's own desk was conspicuously modest, with its white plastic surface only fifty centimeters by sixty-five. It had no drawers or shelves, nowhere to lose or overlook material, no way to delay one matter by pushing it aside on the excuse of attending to something else. A priority system, ordered by a complicated set of strict criteria, brought each problem to his desk only when there was sufficient research available for decisions, which were made quickly, and matters

disposed of. Diamond despised both physical and emotional clutter.

He crossed to his desk chair (constructed by an orthopedic specialist to reduce fatigue without providing narcotizing comfort) and sat with his back to the wide, floor-to-ceiling window beyond which could be seen a neat patch of park and the stele of the Washington Monument in the middle distance. He sat for a moment with his palms pressed together in a prayerlike attitude, forefingers lightly touching his lips. The First Assistant automatically took his place before the data console and awaited instructions.

Alerted by their entrance, Miss Swivven entered the work area from her anteoffice and sat in her chair beside and below Diamond's dais, her notepad ready. She was in her late twenties, lush of body, with thick honey-colored hair done up in an efficient bun. Her most salient feature was an extreme fairness of skin beneath which her veins traced faint bluish patterns.

Without raising his eyes, Diamond tilted his praying hands from his lips and directed the fingertips toward the First Assistant. 'Those two Israeli boys. They belonged to some organization. Name?'

'The Munich Five, sir.'

'Function?'

'To avenge the killing of Jewish athletes at the Munich Olympics. Specifically, to hunt down and kill the Palestinian terrorists involved. Not official. Nothing to do with the Israeli government.'

'I see.' Diamond turned his fingers toward Miss Swivven. 'I'll dine here tonight. Something quick and light, but I'll need a protein shock. Make it brewer's yeast, liquid vitamins, egg yolks, and eight ounces of raw calf's liver. Do it up in a blender.'

Miss Swivven nodded. It was going to be a long night.

Diamond turned in his desk chair and stared sightlessly out toward the Washington Monument. Walking across the lawn

near the base was the same group of schoolchildren that passed every day at exactly this time. Without turning from the window, he said over his shoulder, 'Give me a data pull on this Munich Five.'

'What indices, sir?' the First Assistant asked.

'It's a small organization. And recent. Let's begin with history and membership.'

'At what depth do I scan?'

'You work that out. It's what you do well.'

The First Assistant turned in his chair and began instructing Fat Boy. His face was immobile, but his eyes behind the round glasses sparkled with delight. Fat Boy contained a medley of information from all the computers in the Western World, together with a certain amount of satellite-stolen data from Eastern Bloc powers. It was a blend of top-secret military information and telephone-billing records; of CIA blackmail material and drivers' permits from France; of names behind numbered Swiss bank accounts and mailing lists from direct advertising companies in Australia. It contained the most delicate information, and the most mundane. If you lived in the industrialized West, Fat Boy had you. He had your credit rating, your blood type, your political history, your sexual inclinations, your medical records, your school and university performance, random samplings of your personal telephone conversations, a copy of every telegram you ever sent or received, all purchases made on credit, full military or prison records, all magazines subscribed to, all income tax records, driving licenses, fingerprints, birth certificates – all this, if you were a private citizen in whom the Mother Company had no special interest. If, however, the Mother Company or any of her input subsidiaries, like CIA, NSA, and their counterparts in the other democratic nations, took particular notice of you, then Fat Boy knew much, much more than this about you.

Programming facts into Fat Boy was the constant work of

an army of mechanics and technicians, but getting useful information out of Him was a task for an artist, a person with training, touch, and inspiration. The problem lay in the fact that Fat Boy knew too much. If one scanned a given subject too shallowly, he might not discover what he wanted to know. If he scanned too deeply, he would be overwhelmed with an unreadable mass of minutiae: results of former urine tests, boy scout merit badges won, predictions in high school annuals, preference in brand of toilet paper. The First Assistant's unique gift was his delicate touch in asking just the right questions of Fat Boy, and of demanding response at just the right depth of scan. Experience and instinct combined to send him after the right indices, the right permutations, the right rubrics, the right depths. He played the instrument of the computer masterfully, and he loved it. Working at his console was to him what sex was to other men – that is to say, what he assumed sex was to other men.

Diamond spoke over his shoulder to Miss Swivven. 'When I'm ready, I'll want to talk to this Starr person, and to the Arab they call Mr Haman. Have them kept on tap.'

Under the First Assistant's manipulation, the console was warming and humming. The first responses were coming in; fragments were being stored in the local memory bank; the dialogue had begun. No two conversations with Fat Boy were alike; each took on its own patois, and the delights of the problem were beginning to stroke the First Assistant's considerable, if exclusively frontal, intellect.

It would be twenty minutes before a full picture was available. Diamond decided not to waste this time. He would take a little exercise and sun, tune up his body and clear his mind for the long haul to come. He gestured with a fingertip for Miss Swivven to follow him into the small exercise room off the principal work area.

As he stripped down to his abbreviated shorts, Miss Swivven put on a pair of round, dark eyecups, handed him a similar pair,

and turned on the bank of sunlamps installed along the walls. Diamond began doing sit-ups on an inclined platform, his ankles held by a loop of velvet-covered rope, while Miss Swivven pressed against the wall, keeping her vulnerably pale skin as far away from the intense glare of ultraviolet as possible. Diamond did his sit-ups slowly, getting the most work out of the fewest repetitions. He was in excellent shape for a man of his age, but the stomach required constant attention. 'Listen,' he said, his voice tight with a withheld grunt as he rose and touched his right knee with his left elbow, 'I'll have to bring some CIA clout in on this. Alert whoever is left at the top after that last round of cosmetic administrative shakeups.'

The highest-ranking administrator below the political shills that came and went as sacrificial lambs to outraged public opinion was the Deputy International Liaison Duty Officer, who was typically referred to by his acronym. Miss Swivven informed her superior that he was still in the building.

'He'll do. Order him to keep himself on tap. Oh – and cancel my tennis date for this weekend.'

Miss Swivven's eyebrows lifted above her dark eyecups. This must be something very serious indeed.

Diamond began to work with the weights. 'I'll also want a Q-jump priority on Fat Boy for the rest of the afternoon, maybe longer.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Okay. What do you have on your pad?'

'High protein input in liquid form. Alert and freeze Mr Starr and Mr Haman. Alert and freeze the Deputy. Request Q-jump priority on Fat Boy.'

'Good. Precede all that with a message to the Chairman.' Diamond was breathing heavily with the effort of exercise. 'Message: Possible that Rome International spoiling raid was imperfect. Will seek, sort, and report alternatives.'

When Miss Swivven returned seven minutes later, she was

carrying a large glass of thick, foamy, purplish liquid, the color lent by the pulverized raw liver. Diamond was in the last phase of his exercise routine, working isometrically against a fixed steel pipe. He stopped and accepted his dinner, as she pressed close to the wall, avoiding the sunlamps as best she could, but knowing perfectly well that she had already had enough exposure to burn her delicate skin. Although there were many advantages of her job with the Mother Company – overtime, good retirement plan, medical benefits, company vacation resort in the Canadian Rockies, Christmas parties – Miss Swivven regretted two aspects of her career: this getting sunburnt every week or so, and the occasional impersonal use Mr Diamond made of her to relieve his tensions. Still, she was philosophic. No job is perfect.

'Notepad cleared?' Diamond asked, shuddering slightly as he finished his drink.

'Yes, sir.'

Disregarding her presence, Diamond stepped out of his shorts and into a glass-fronted shower stall, where he turned on a full spray of bracing cold water, over the noise of which he asked, 'Did the Chairman respond to my message?'

'Yes, sir.'

After a short silence, Diamond said, 'Please feel free to tell me what the response was, Miss Swivven.'

'Pardon me, sir?'

Diamond turned off the shower, stepped out, and began to dry off on the rough towels designed to heighten circulation.

'Do you want me to read the Chairman's message to you, sir?'

Diamond sighed deeply. If this twit had not been the only attractive one in the over-100 wpm pool . . . 'That would be nice, Miss Swivven.'

She referred to her notepad, squinting against the glare of the sunlamps. 'Response: Chairman to Diamond, J.O.: "Failure in this matter not acceptable."'