The Hungry Machine

The human brain is a remarkable object. It contains a hundred billion neurons, all talking to each other via tiny electrical sparks, like a never-ending fireworks display inside your skull.

Your brain weighs three pounds. It makes up only one-fiftieth of your body, yet it uses up a over a fifth of your blood supply and oxygen.

The brain is a hungry machine. It never shuts down. Even while you are asleep *it* is awake, keeping your lungs breathing, your heart beating, the blood flowing through your veins. Without your brain you can do nothing. It allows you to ride a bike, read a book, laugh at a joke. It can store a whole lifetime of memories.

But it is very fragile.

Alexis Fairburn was painfully aware of this, because there was a pistol pointing at his head, and he knew that if that gun were fired, all those precious memories, that he had been storing up for the last thirty-two years, would be blasted into oblivion. Then his lungs would fall still. His heart would stop pumping. The blood would freeze in his veins and Alexis Fairburn would cease to be.

The pistol was a six-shot revolver with a short, stubby barrel. Not very accurate at long range, but deadly enough close up. What made it more deadly was its grip, which doubled as a knuckleduster. The fingers of the man holding it were curled through big brass rings. One punch would shatter a man's jaw.

Fairburn knew that this type of gun was called an Apache, after the vicious street thugs who had carried them in Paris at the end of the last century. Their weapons had also carried blades that swung out and could be used like bayonets.

He sometimes thought he knew too much.

And even as he stared at the nasty black hole in the gun's nose he heard a click, followed by a metallic scraping sound, and a four-inch-long, spring-loaded stiletto blade slid out from beneath the barrel and snapped into place.

Sometimes Fairburn wished that he could be happy and stupid, blissfully unaware of everything that was going on in the world around him. Sometimes he wished that, instead of spending half his life expanding his brain and filling it with facts and figures, he had devoted some of that time to his body. In moments like this he wished that he had big muscles and quick reflexes. If only he had learnt how to disarm a man he might now be able to grab his attacker's wrist and wrestle the gun out of his hand, maybe even turn it on him. He had read about such things. He knew in theory that it could be done, but he also knew that it would be useless to try. He was weak and he was timid and he was clumsy.

Now that he thought about it, however, he realized that he wasn't scared.

That was interesting.

He would have assumed that he would be terrified. But, no, all he felt was disappointment. Regret that his remarkable brain was soon to be switched off.

'Don't try to run, or resist in any way,' said the gunman and, for the first time, Fairburn looked at him, rather than at his gun. He was tall and thin and stooped, with a huge, bony head that looked too heavy for his shoulders. His large black eyes were set in deep hollow sockets and the skin was pulled so tight on his head that it resembled a skull.

The gunman was not alone. He had an accomplice, a younger man with a pleasant, unremarkable face. He wouldn't have looked out of place behind the counter in a bank, or scribbling away at a ledger in an office. Fairburn found that it helped to think of him as a clerk rather than as a potential assassin. It made him less threatening.

'You know what will happen if he pulls that trigger?' said the clerk with a hint of menace.

The menace was unnecessary. Fairburn knew exactly what would happen. The hammer of the gun would snap forward and strike the percussion cap at the rear of the bullet casing. This would set off a small explosion which would propel the shell at twenty-five feet per second out of its casing and down the barrel, where a long spiral groove would cause it to spin, so that it would fly straighter. Finally, it would burst out of the gun, not six inches from Fairburn's forehead.

The bullet would be soft-nosed, designed to stop a man. As it hit bone it would flatten and widen like an opening fist and then it would tunnel through his head, sucking out any soft matter as it went.

A bird sang in a tree nearby. Fairburn knew from its song that it was a chaffinch. He glanced up and saw that it was sitting on the branch of a yew tree. It was a British custom to plant yews and cypresses in graveyards. A custom they had adopted from the Romans. It was also a Roman custom to put flowers on a grave.

Fairburn sighed. His brain was full of such a lot of useless information.

'What are you looking at?' said the one like a clerk.

'I'm not looking at anything,' said Fairburn. 'I'm sorry. I was distracted.'

'I would advise you to pay attention.'

'Yes. I do apologize,' said Fairburn. 'But might I ask what exactly you want me to do?'

'We would like you to accompany us, Mister Fairburn,' said the gunman.

So they knew his name. This was not a random attack. They must have followed him here. But what did they want?

Fairburn thought hard, casting his mind back over the day. What had happened? Who had he met? What had he said that would cause these two men to be here in the middle of Highgate cemetery, with one holding an Apache to his head?

Up until now it had been a fairly ordinary Saturday. He had followed the same routine that he had been

keeping to for the last few weeks. He had driven up to London first thing from Windsor, visited the Reading Room at the British Museum, then had lunch at his favourite restaurant in Fitzrovia, and finally he had come here to the cemetery, where he had been making sketches and jotting down notes for a book he was planning to write on Victorian London.

The last thing he had done was to take a rubbing from a headstone with an interesting inscription. He had forgotten to bring any rubbing paper with him and had been forced to use the back of a letter from his friend Ivar Peterson. He still took a childlike delight in rubbing the wax over the paper and watching the writing form. He had just finished and was putting the neatly folded letter back into his coat pocket, when the men had appeared. They had walked briskly up the path, nodded a friendly greeting and the next thing he knew the ugly snout of the pistol was in his face.

Peterson. Of course. This must be to do with him. Or, more precisely, to do with what Peterson had written about in the letter.

This was to do with the Nemesis project.

He realized that he still had the letter in his hand, hidden inside his pocket. Perhaps he could drop it somewhere. It would be some small clue that he had been here, and, if anyone read it, they might be able to help him.

Idiot.

It would be meaningless to anyone else. Unless somehow he could direct the right person here, someone who could understand what it meant.

Good. His mind was working. He gave the paper one more fold and squeezed it tightly into the palm of his hand.

'We are going to walk you to your motor car,' said the clerk. 'Calmly and casually, like old friends. Then you will drive my brother and I to our destination. We will advise you of the route along the way. The gun will be trained on you at all times, and if you do not follow our precise instructions, we will not hesitate to shoot you. Another colleague of ours will be following in your own motor car. Is that clear?'

'Perfectly,' said Fairburn, treading on one end of his shoelace and feeling it come undone. 'But I still don't know what you want of me.'

'For now you don't need to know,' said the gunman. 'Just walk.'

Fairburn took a step and then stopped. 'My lace,' he said, looking down at his shoe.

'Tie it,' said the young man.

'Thank you,' said Fairburn. He crouched down and carefully slipped the piece of folded paper up inside the bottom of his trouser leg. If he dropped it now it would be easily spotted, but this way he could delay it until the men were distracted again.

He straightened up.

'All set,' he said, as cheerily as he could manage.

He glanced around at the cemetery, taking a last look and imprinting the images on his brain. He looked at the statues and crosses, and at the gravestones, standing beneath the trees, many overgrown and neglected. Then he took his first step, brushing against some low winter foliage, and,

as he did so, he shook his leg and felt the scrap of paper fall out. He didn't look down to check, but he prayed that it would be lying hidden by the side of the path.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was all he had. All the hope in the world.

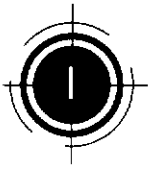
His heartbeat skipped and he felt a tingling in his scalp.

He had lived a dull and secluded life with very little danger and nothing to disrupt the even flow of his days. He was experiencing a new emotion, now, excitement. In a way, he was even enjoying it.

He still had his brain. He must use it somehow to escape from his predicament. He was confident that he would think of something. There wasn't a problem in the world that couldn't be solved with brainpower.

You just had to make sure that you kept your brain inside your head.

Part One: FRIDAY



Thoughts in a Side-valve Tourer

James Bond was sitting in the passenger seat of his uncle's Bamford and Martin tourer wrapped in a heavy winter overcoat, his face masked with goggles and a scarf.

His friend Perry Mandeville, similarly dressed, was at the wheel. It was too cramped and awkward to drive with the rain cover up, so they were completely exposed to the grisly December weather. They didn't care, though, they were on the open road and, despite the icy wind buffeting them, they felt reckless and free.

The car had belonged to James's uncle who had left it to James when he died. James kept it secretly at the school. Perry had always dreamt of taking it out on the road but James had never let him before today.

This was an emergency.

Perry drove well but fast and James had to constantly remind him to keep his speed down. There was very little traffic on the road, but they still had to be careful. They didn't want to risk being stopped by a police patrol or, worse still, crashing into a ditch.

Perry was older than James, but not yet seventeen, which was the minimum driving age. If anyone found out

what they were up to they would at best be beaten soundly and thrown out of Eton, and at worst thrown into jail.

But James wasn't thinking about any of that. He was filled with a burning excitement. He needed the thrill of danger. It was only on an adventure like this that he came alive. His day-to-day life at school felt grey and dull, but now the boredom had lifted and all his senses were heightened.

That still didn't mean that he could be careless, however. The goggles, hats and scarves were as much worn as disguises as to shield the two boys from the cutting wind.

They were speeding away from Eton towards Cambridge having left a pack of lies behind them. A pack of lies that could soon be snapping at their heels if they didn't watch out.

James thought back to when this had all begun.

It had been the end of the summer holidays, a few days before James was due to return to Eton. He had been helping out at the Duck Inn in Pett Bottom, the village where he lived with his Aunt Charmian. He earnt a bit of pocket money there washing barrels and stacking crates of empty bottles behind the pub. He was rolling an empty barrel across the ground when he looked up from his work and saw a black car driving through the fields.

He straightened up and followed its progress.

There was a chill in the air and he shivered. The summer was nearly over.

The car slowed as it approached the pub and stopped. The window was wound down. James recognized the familiar

face of his classical tutor, Mr Merriot, the man responsible for his education at Eton. With him was Claude Elliot, the new Head Master. They both looked rather serious.

'Climb aboard,' said Merriot, and he tried to force a friendly smile on to his face, his unlit pipe wobbling between his teeth.

James got in.

'Do you know why we are here, James?' asked Merriot kindly.

James nodded. 'I've been expecting a visit since I talked to you at Dover, sir.'

Earlier in the summer holidays James had gone on a school trip to Sardinia with two masters, one of whom had turned out to be a criminal. Both masters had been killed and James himself had nearly lost his life. When he came home, James had been met by Mr Merriot straight off the boat, and had told him everything that had happened. At the time Merriot had asked James not to breathe a word about it to anyone else. Now it looked like the Head Master had come to make sure that the secrets would remain buried.

James sat in the back of the car between the two men feeling hot and stuffy.

'We have been talking about what happened in Sardinia,' said the Head, a tall man with round, wire-framed spectacles whose hair was receding at the temples, leaving only a thin strip down the centre of his high forehead.

'And we think it is for the best if you never speak about these things,' he went on, 'not at home, not at school, not anywhere. We would prefer it not to get out that one of our masters was a criminal.'

James sat in silence saying nothing. He just wanted to forget about the whole episode and be a normal schoolboy again.

'We shall stick to the story that the locals have given out,' said Mr Merriot.

'What story is that, sir?' said James.

Merriot sucked his pipe. 'The official line is that there was an accident,' he said. 'A dam burst and both Mister Cooper-ffrench and Mister Haight died in the flood that followed.' He paused before adding, 'They both died a hero's death.'

James smiled a brief, bitter, smile before nodding.

'The truth must never come to light,' said the Head.

'I understand,' said James, although he thought it was terribly unfair that an evil man should be remembered as a hero. But, if it meant that he wouldn't have to deal with endless questions from curious boys, and newspaper reporters, and people pointing at him in the street, he would go along with the lie.

'I won't tell anyone,' he said.

'This is the end of it, then,' said the Head, his face brightening. 'None of us will ever talk of this again. And, James?'

'Yes, sir?'

'From now on you must live a quiet life. Will you promise me that you will stay out of danger? Keep away from excitement and adventure.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good.' The Head slapped him heartily on the knee. 'Thank you, James, I hope that it will be some time before our paths cross again.'

'Yes, sir, so do I, sir,' said James.

'Now. Perhaps we could get you an ice cream, or something?'

'That's all right, thank you, sir,' said James. 'I need to get back.'

'Of course, of course . . .'

James laughed when he remembered that day. He'd stayed out of danger all right. He'd avoided excitement of any kind as the long weeks of the Michaelmas half had played themselves out. The days had plodded past, growing shorter and darker, and as winter crept in, it brought with it fog and rain and chilly air. James had struggled through endless dreary Latin lessons, and science demonstrations, and maths tests. The only thing he'd had to look forward to was Christmas with its promise of roast goose and carol singers and presents underneath the tree.

He'd managed to be a model, if unenthusiastic, pupil all that time, and the effort had nearly killed him, because, despite what he had said to the Head Master, he knew that he could never keep out of trouble.

And now, at last, he was cut loose. Now he was doing what he loved best. He was facing danger. He was taking risks.

He was alive again.

Just four days ago, everything had changed and his life at Eton had once more been turned upside down.

He had been in his room at Eton playing cards with two friends, Teddy Mackereth and Steven Costock-Ellis, and his Chinese messmate, Tommy Chong.

Tommy, as usual, was winning. He was passionate about cards and claimed that the Chinese were the best card players in the world. 'After all,' he was fond of saying, 'the Chinese invented playing cards.'

It was very cold in the room. The boys were each allowed only one big lump of coal every other day, and today it was James's turn to have a fire. The tiny fireplace didn't throw out much heat and the boys were wearing fingerless gloves.

Outside the room a group of boys were playing a very noisy game of passage football and they could hear their thumps and shouts as they charged up and down the corridor using someone's hat as a 'ball'.

It was a new year at Eton, and James and his friends were no longer among the youngest boys in the school. They felt quite grown up and couldn't quite believe that they had once been as scared and helpless-looking as the timid fourth formers they saw wandering about the place.

There were changes in the House. Last year's senior boys had moved on and a new group had taken their place. This new bunch seemed keen to push their weight around and show the younger boys who was in charge. They had carried out a record number of beatings and had not made themselves at all popular.

But James and his friends felt safe now, tucked away in this little room, playing cards and chatting.

'I'll trounce you one day, Tommy,' said James, throwing his cards down on to the tabletop and looking across at Tommy, who was eagerly scooping up a small pile of coins.

'You must be cheating,' said Teddy Mackereth sourly.

'No,' said Tommy. 'I'm just better than you saps.'

'One more hand?' said Costock-Ellis. 'You've got to give us the chance to win some of our money back.'

'That's fine with me,' said Tommy.

'Give it up, James,' said a fifth boy, who was lounging on James's bed filling in a crossword puzzle from that morning's *Times* newspaper. He was James's other messmate, Pritpal Nandra, the son of an Indian maharaja.

'I'm not the type to give up,' said James. 'I'll keep chipping away at him until something gives.'

'I fear you will be an old man with a long white beard before that happens,' said Pritpal.

'You want to join us, Prit?' asked Tommy, shuffling the cards expertly.

'No, thank you. I will stick to my crossword,' said Pritpal.

'I don't know what you see in those things,' said James.

'It is a challenge,' said Pritpal. 'I am pitting my wits against the person who set the puzzle. But I am afraid I am stuck.'

'Here. Let me have a look.' Costock-Ellis snatched the newspaper from Pritpal and peered at it, wrinkling his nose.

'This doesn't make any sense at all,' he said.

'You're all useless,' said, James, reaching across and plucking the paper from the other boy's hands. 'I'll show you how it's done.'

He looked at the crossword. Pritpal had neatly filled in half the answers in the grid and crossed out the clues he had completed.

'Three down,' said James. '"Top-secret monkey" – four

letters, first letter "A"' He stopped and frowned. 'I don't even understand the clue,' he said. 'So how am I supposed to work out the answer? Anyone here heard of a top-secret monkey?'

'King Kong,' said Tommy. 'He was a secret until they found him on Skull Island.'

'It is a cryptic crossword,' said Pritpal, taking the paper back. 'It is like a code that you have to unlock. A secret message.'

'A top-secret message,' said Teddy Mackereth.

'Well, it's beyond me,' said James. 'I can't do anything more complicated than "Small flying mammal, three letters". Second letter "A", third letter "T".'

'Rat,' said Tommy, dealing a fresh hand.

'A rat can't fly,' said James.

'It can if you throw it out of the window,' said Tommy and he laughed.

'Ha, ha, very funny,' said James.

'Or a cat,' said Teddy. 'If it was chasing the rat.'

'I'll throw you lot out of the window if you don't stop making feeble jokes,' said James picking up his cards. He had always been a good card player, but at Eton his skills had improved enormously, mostly due to the experience he'd gained playing, and regularly losing, against Tommy.

So far this evening they'd played pontoon, poker, Black Maria, a Chinese game called Big Two and another Chinese game that Tommy had given a rude English name to.

They were currently playing rummy, at sixpence a hand.

'Rummy is stolen from the Chinese game, mah-jong, you know?' said Tommy, leaning back in his chair.

'No, it's not,' snorted Costock-Ellis. 'What proof do you have?'

'Don't bother arguing,' said James. 'According to Tommy, the Chinese invented everything.'

'It's true,' said Tommy. 'We have always been hundreds of years ahead of you Westerners. Paper money, gunpowder, playing cards, kites. You name it. We invented it.'

'Cricket,' said Teddy Mackereth.

'Nobody but the English could have invented a game as strange and as pointless as cricket,' said Tommy.

'Well, if this game's Chinese, no wonder you keep winning,' said Teddy Mackereth, dropping his cards on to the little square table. 'Let's play something else.'

'OK,' said Tommy, collecting up the pack. 'I'll show you a casino game. It's like pontoon. It's called baccarat, or chemin de fer.'

'That's French for railway,' said Pritpal, without looking up from his newspaper.

'Go back to your crossword,' said Costock-Ellis.

'Are you in, Steven?' asked Tommy.

'Afraid not,' said Costock-Ellis. 'You've cleaned me out. I'll tell you what, why don't we share all the money out and start again?'

'That sounds like communist talk,' said Tommy.

'I bet you don't even know what communist is,' said Costock-Ellis.

'We've been learning all about the Russian Revolution,'

said Tommy. 'I know all about how the peasants were poor and badly treated by the Tsar so they rose up and threw him out. No more bosses! Everybody equal! Share out all the money so that there are no more poor people and no more rich people.' Tommy laughed. 'It could never happen in China.'

As soon as Tommy stopped speaking the noise from the game of passage football also stopped and there was an ominous silence outside, which could only mean one thing.

'Codrose!' said James and the boys snapped into action.

Codrose was their House Master, and while he couldn't stop the boys from playing cards, he didn't allow gambling.

Teddy had made a false top for the table in the Woodwork School. It fitted neatly over the real top and had just enough depth beneath it to hide all the cards and money.

In a second the top was in place and the boys assumed expressions of sweet innocence.

Presently there was a knock and a familiar face appeared around the door.

Cecil Codrose was one of the most unpopular House Masters at Eton. He was small and tough with a pale face and a wiry beard. His suspicious, flinty eyes were ringed with blue skin and his heavy brows had a permanent frown.

He peered at each boy in turn and then moved slowly into the room.

James realized there was someone with him. It was the Head Master, Claude Elliot.

Pritpal slithered off the bed as the other boys jumped to their feet and they all stood awkwardly in the small room.

Codrose looked slowly from Teddy Mackereth to Costock-Ellis to Tommy.

'You may leave us,' he said and the three of them gratefully hurried out, mumbling their goodbyes and nodding to the two men.

James wasn't sure whether to stay or go. He was in an awkward position as this was his room, and although he was curious to know what this was all about, he also wanted to get away. He shuffled towards the door.

'Stay please, Bond,' said the Head. 'This concerns you.'

'Oh,' said James and he stood there, feeling uncomfortable.

'A letter has arrived for you, Nandra,' said Codrose, his voice dry and dusty.

'I see, sir,' said Pritpal, who was plainly confused.

Codrose held out a slim white envelope towards Pritpal. 'We took the liberty of opening it,' he said, 'for reasons that will soon become apparent.'

Pritpal studied the envelope. His name was on it, but there was no stamp or address.

'It arrived this afternoon, inside a letter addressed to myself,' the Head Master explained. 'It is from Alexis Fairburn.'

'Oh,' said Pritpal, taken aback.

'You may have noticed,' said the Head Master, 'that Mister Fairburn has not been at the school for the past few weeks.'

'I know he wasn't there for my last two mathematics classes,' said Pritpal. 'Bloody Bill took us instead.' Pritpal stopped suddenly and looked panicked. 'I mean Mister Marsden, sir. I'm sorry.'

Codrose cleared his throat but said nothing.

'Also, sir,' said Pritpal, trying to fill the lengthening silence, 'he wasn't at our last Crossword Society meeting. I gather he has not been well.'

The Head Master sniffed and looked intently at a picture of the king on James's wall. 'That is the version of events that we have been encouraging,' he said. 'but the truth of the matter is that Mister Fairburn has left the school.'

'Oh,' said Pritpal with a puzzled expression on his round face.

'You run the Crossword Society, do you not?' said the Head Master.

'Yes, sir, I do, sir,' said Pritpal. 'Though, really, it is Mister Fairburn who's in charge, without him we would never have . . .'

'It is in your capacity as head of the Crossword Society that Fairburn has written to you,' the Head Master interrupted.

'Really, sir?' said Pritpal.

'Yes. In his letter to me he gave instructions that I should pass this note on to you.'

'I'm not sure I understand, sir,' said Pritpal.

'I'm not sure *we* do either,' said the Head Master and he smiled, trying to put Pritpal at ease. 'The letter we received today is the first we have heard from Mister Fairburn since he left,' he said. 'It is a letter of resignation.

It is highly irregular and most awkward. He has not given us any notice and left us short-staffed. He claims that he is unable to continue at the school and has been offered a better post in London, but his letter to me is brief and rather vague. We were hoping that his letter to you might throw some light on the matter, which is why we opened it, but it has left us mystified.'

'We should like you to read it aloud,' said Codrose. 'And then tell us if it has any meaning for you?'

Stevens and Oliver

Pritpal took the letter out from its envelope and unfolded it. 'There's no return address, or anything' he said. 'It just starts '*Alexis Fairburn, London*, and the date . . . *seventh of December, 1934* . . . Oh, he's put that wrong. It's not yet *1934*.'

'The man always was absent-minded,' said Codrose dismissively. 'His head was permanently in the clouds. He was always forgetting what day it was.' Codrose said this in such a way as to imply that this was not something he himself would ever do in a million years.

'Carry on,' said the Head Master.

Pritpal swallowed and began to read. '*My dear Pritpal,*' he said, his voice shaky and self-conscious, '*it's not every Tuesday one comes across seven boys with a love of crosswords. Don't feel down! The mighty Crossword Society will easily solve puzzles by themselves, now that I am gone. As I am sure old baldy Elliot will have explained* . . .' Pritpal stopped and blinked at the Head Master, embarrassed.

'Go on,' said the Head Master.

'*As I'm sure Mister Eliot will have explained,*' said Pritpal, '*I have had to leave Eton. In fact I am leaving the country. My*