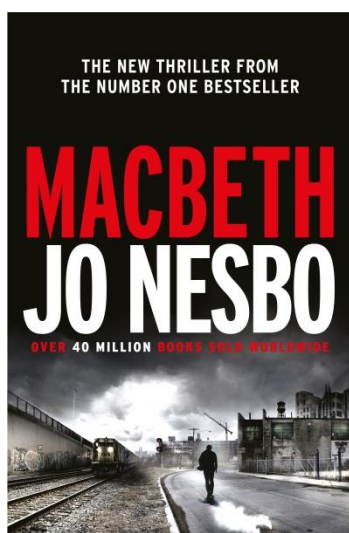


## MACBETH – EXTRACT



The man hadn't shown himself for months, but only one person owned that helmet and the red Indian Chief motorbike. Rumour had it the bike was one of fifty the New York Police Department had manufactured in total secrecy in 1955. The steel of the curved scabbard attached to its side shone.

Sweno.

Some claimed he was dead, others that he had fled the country, that he had changed his identity, cut off his blond plaits and was sitting on a terrazza in Argentina enjoying his old age and pencil-thin cigarillos.

But here he was. The leader of the gang and the cop-killer who, along with his sergeant, had started up the Norse Riders some time after the Second World War. They had picked rootless young men, most of them from dilapidated factory-worker houses along the sewage-fouled river, and trained them, disciplined them, brainwashed them until they were an army of fearless soldiers Sweno could use for his own purposes. To gain control of the town, to monopolise the growing dope market. And for a while it had looked as if Sweno would succeed, certainly Kenneth and police HQ hadn't stopped him; rather the opposite, Sweno had bought in all the help he needed. It was the competition. Hecate's home-made dope, brew, was much better, cheaper and always readily available on the market. But if the anonymous tip-off Duff had received was right, this consignment was big enough to solve the Norse Riders' supply problems for some time. Duff had hoped, but not quite believed, what he read in the brief typewritten lines addressed to him was true. It was simply too much of a gift horse. The sort of gift that – if handled correctly – could send the head of the Narco Unit further up the ladder. Chief Commissioner Duncan still hadn't filled all the important positions at police HQ with his own people. There was, for example, the Gang Unit, where Kenneth's old rogue Inspector Cawdor had managed to hang on to his seat as they still had no concrete evidence of corruption, but that could only be a question of time. And Duff was one of Duncan's men. When there were signs that Duncan might be appointed chief commissioner Duff had rung him in Capitol and clearly, if somewhat pompously, stated that if the council didn't make Duncan the new commissioner, and chose one of Kenneth's henchmen instead, Duff would resign. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Duncan had suspected a personal motive behind this unconditional declaration of loyalty, but so what? Duff had a genuine desire to support Duncan's plan for an honest police force

that primarily served the people, he really did. But he also wanted an office at HQ as close to heaven as possible. Who wouldn't? And he wanted to cut off the head of the man out there.

Sweno.

He was the means *and* the end.

Duff looked at his watch. The time tallied with what was in the letter, to the minute. He rested the tips of his fingers on the inside of his wrist. To feel his pulse. He was no longer hoping, he was about to become a believer.

'Are there many of them, Duff?' a voice whispered.

'More than enough for great honour, Seyton. And one of them's so big, when he falls, it'll be heard all over the country.'

Duff cleaned the condensation off the window. Ten nervous, sweaty police officers in a small room. Men who didn't usually get this type of assignment. As head of the Narco Unit it was Duff alone who had taken the decision not to show the letter to other officers; he was using only men from his unit for this raid. The tradition of corruption and leaks was too long for him to risk it. At least that is what he would tell Duncan if asked. But there wouldn't be much cavilling. Not if they could seize the drugs and catch thirteen Norse Riders red-handed.

Thirteen, yes. Not fourteen. One of them would be left lying on the battlefield. If the chance came along.

Duff clenched his teeth.

'You said there'd only be four or five,' said Seyton, who had joined him at the window.

'Worried, Seyton?'

'No, but you should be, Duff. You've got nine men in this room and I'm the only one with experience of a stake-out.' He said this without raising his voice. He was a lean, sinewy, bald man. Duff wasn't sure how long he had been in the police, only that he had been in the force when Kenneth was chief commissioner. Duff had tried to get rid of Seyton. Not because he had anything concrete on him; there was just something about him, something Duff couldn't put his finger on, that made him feel a strong antipathy.

'Why didn't you bring in the SWAT team, Duff?'

'The fewer involved the better.'

'The fewer you have to share the honours with. Because unless I'm very much mistaken that's either the ghost of Sweno or the man himself.' Seyton nodded towards the Indian Chief motorbike, which had stopped by the gangway of *MS Leningrad*.

'Did you say Sweno?' said a nervous voice from the darkness behind them. 'Yes, and there's at least a dozen of them,' Seyton said loudly without taking his eyes off Duff. 'Minimum.'

'Oh shit,' mumbled a second voice.

'Shouldn't we ring Macbeth?' asked a third.

'Do you hear?' Seyton said. 'Even your own men want SWAT to take over.'

'Shut up!' Duff hissed. He turned and pointed a finger at the poster on the wall. 'It says here MS Glamis is sailing to Capitol on Friday at 0600 hours and is looking for galley staff. You said you wanted to take part in this assignment, but you hereby have my blessing to apply for employment there instead. The money and the food are supposed to be better. A show of hands?'

Duff peered into the darkness, at the faceless, unmoving figures. Tried to interpret the silence. Already regretting that he had challenged them. What if some of them actually did put up their hands? Usually he avoided putting himself in situations where he was dependent on others, but now he needed every single one of the men in front of him.

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