

VETERANS OF THE
PSYCHIC
**WARS**

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For Yvonne Teresa Trotman & Rita Enez Callender

Forever missed...

Chapter 1

Roman Doyle activated his Bluetooth earpiece as he walked towards the cashpoint machine. The tall, twenty-five-year-old black man had a lean, athletic build and cast a long shadow from the amber street lamp a few metres away. Roman knew the wisdom of observing his shadow, especially when he walked the streets of North London late at night.

Seven years ago, observance of his shadow saved him from grievous bodily harm. Roman noticed his shadow swiftly approached by another, broader and shorter. Raised high, its thick arm bore a long thin object.

The stocky criminal, equipped with a metal pipe, did not know his potential victim was an accomplished martial artist. Had he known, he would have attacked the much larger businessman who barrelled past fifteen minutes before. At merely seventy kilograms, Roman seemed an easier target.

The astounded thug found himself the recipient of a shattered nose from a gyaku zuki reverse punch, and two broken ribs from a dwet chagi spinning sidekick. The mugger sailed through the air, and seconds later, slammed onto the kerb - unconscious.

A cool, relaxing summer breeze, starkly contrasted the urgently vibrating mobile phone in Roman's right jacket pocket.

It's very late.

This call was no surprise. He knew the caller; her striking Nubian features had suddenly flooded his thoughts seconds before the phone's mechanical response.

She's probably wondering where I am, he mused.

To an onlooker, Roman would seem schizophrenic as he spoke into the discreet receiver.

"Hello?"

The husky, playful tones of a familiar female voice reassured him that his intuition was yet again correct.

"Roman. Where are you Roman?"

It's Soraya.

Her mild Trinidadian accent immediately conjured up pleasant memories of his early childhood on the tropical island; vivid memories of swarms of brightly coloured butterflies surrounding him.

"I'm at a cash-point," said Roman, quickly scanning the secluded street.

He removed a leather wallet from his trouser pocket, slipped a debit card from it and guided the plastic into the slot of the silent cashpoint machine. The screen refreshed instantly:

ENTER PIN:

- - - -

"I've been thinking about you," Soraya said, and Roman recalled how similar her brown eyes were to those of his mother.

"Uh-huh?"

"I've been thinking about your name - Roman, such a strong, sexy name."

"Hmmm," he responded with a hint of sexual provocation.

"But I also like Moses," Soraya added unexpectedly.

A furrow suddenly appeared in his dark brow. He typed the last digit and the screen refreshed again, prompting him to enter the required cash amount.

"Soraya, we've had this conversation... I'd like to pass on my name," Roman divulged with more than just a tinge of irritation.

"But Moses so much better dan Junior," she claimed, not bothering to speak the Queen's English.

Roman typed 2 0 0, then pressed ENTER.

"So we'll call him Romeo. This is the fourth time we've had this discussion in as many days Soraya; it's late, and I'm not in the mood."

The debit card emerged from the slit in the machine with a low mechanical whirr and Roman returned it to his wallet.

"Romeo sound so - tragic," Soraya's playfulness now giving way to disappointment.

From his rooftop vantage point, with long black hair wildly billowing in the wind, a darkly clad man with Oriental features spied Roman through the viewfinder of an extremely sophisticated pair of binoculars. The ever-changing illuminated characters on the screen were thousands of years older than the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Even though Roman stood three hundred metres away, the display captured his every move with startling clarity. Betraying exceptional stealth, the

man retracted the binoculars, tucked them within his black tunic, and silently leapt off the roof into the murkiness below.

"Honey," Roman said, grabbing the cash dispensed by the machine, "I thought we decided that we'd call him Roman? Moses will be his second name."

Soraya responded, "We'll talk about it when yuh get home. Doh forget meh peanut butter yuh know."

"Okay," a smile traced across Roman's face.

I almost forgot.

He quickly counted ten twenty-pound notes, placed them in the wallet, and returned the now bulging billfold to his trouser pocket. Roman proceeded across the seemingly deserted street, briskly heading towards his dark grey BMW E87 hatchback parked sixty metres away.

"An' de ice cream," Soraya added.

"Okay Sugar, I'll be home before you can say rum 'n' raisin."

"Bye," she purred.

"Bye."

He pressed a small button on his Bluetooth earpiece ending the call.

In an eerie snake-like fashion, five large men with Oriental features and shaven heads emerged from the darkness. They followed Roman, who remained oblivious to the menacing shadows, which gradually converged on his own.

With a wry grin, Roman anticipated the reward that awaited him if he found rum 'n' raisin ice cream and peanut butter after 1:00 AM.

Yes, Soraya would be most pleased.

Soraya, his wife of just eleven months, was two months pregnant. This was their secret. They had not told family or friends. During the past week, Roman developed the belief that profound changes in Soraya's hormone levels were the cause of these strange cravings.

Still smiling to himself, he suddenly experienced a sharp pain in his head.

What the hell?

Surprised, he winced and pulled the earpiece off his ear.

Maybe the earpiece is faulty.

Then, to his shock, Roman noticed a drop of blood at his feet and realised that he also had a nosebleed. Quickly tugging a neatly folded handkerchief from his back trouser pocket, he mopped the blood from his nose.

Ominous, whispered voices seemed to come out of nowhere, adding terror to Roman's unfolding nightmare - voices that grew louder within his mind, until they became a roar. Suddenly, he heard an inhuman cry, like a thunderbolt cleaving through the branch of a majestic oak tree.

Turning swiftly, he saw two of the five men charge. A gust of wind whisked the bloodstained handkerchief from his grasp as the pair approached with bewildering speed.

Before Roman could react, the men somersaulted over his head in unison. They landed three metres behind him. The other three stood their ground, glaring at him with undisguised malice.

Stunned and dizzy, Roman tasted blood as his nose continued to haemorrhage. His handkerchief sailed through the air unnoticed until someone shrouded in darkness snatched it from the wind.

For a painfully tense moment, Roman stood perfectly still. Two men blocked his retreat; three stemmed his advance. Characters, which seemed better placed in a graphic novel than on the streets of London, effectively surrounded him. Their outlandish weather-beaten clothing bore symbols that Roman could not decipher.

Suddenly feeling a surge of adrenaline, his experience with the mugger seven years ago flashed through his mind.

Roman reassured himself that at twenty-five years of age, he now weighed a healthier eighty kilograms, and through continued training, he attained third dan black belts in Shotokan Karate and Taekwondo. Roman felt certain he would achieve fourth dan grades in both forms before his twenty-sixth birthday. In the ancient arts of Karate and Taekwondo, the black belt not only signified maturity and proficiency, it also symbolised the wearer's imperviousness to darkness and fear.

Three years ago, not satisfied with the well-known Japanese and Korean arts, Roman commenced training in Muay Thai Boxing and Chinese Wing Chun – a fact, which many of his competition rivals were unaware of. This he felt gave him an additional edge. Confident in his abilities and proud of the many tournaments he had won, Roman held the opinion that few men could withstand a motivated assault incorporating all four styles.

Muggers beware.

However, these are no ordinary muggers.

Each man weighed over one hundred and fifteen kilograms, yet Roman had the impression they could sprint one hundred metres in under nine seconds. They moved with precision and perfect equilibrium. Their toned bodies, dark green tunics, leather utility belts and tall boots screamed military training.

Who are these guys?

The man at the centre appeared to be their leader. He stepped forward. In response, Roman took one stride back, quickly glancing over each shoulder at the men to his rear. The leader motioned with authority and his four henchmen stood frozen. In unison, threatening smiles appeared on the faces of all five antagonists.

Roman shot to full alert status and the leader's sinister grin transformed into a cold stare. Suddenly, metal rods slipped from under the leader's sleeves into his enthusiastic hands.

This could be serious, thought Roman.

The leader rolled one of the rods to Roman's feet and held the other firmly in his right hand. Then, with a flamboyant flourish, he stretched out his arm. His foot-long baton instantly extended three feet each side. The other men stood back in silent anticipation as their leader moved another step towards Roman.

One on one - how sporting.

Roman did not pick up the staff at his feet.

Instead, he shouted defiantly, "Listen, I've worked really hard for my money!"

Without further ado, the leader attacked, and Roman narrowly evaded his furious blows. In a fast-flowing movement, he picked up the shaft from the floor, activated it and counter attacked. But very soon, a relentless whirlwind of impossible force drove Roman into desperate defence. To his surprise, every parry threatened to crumble his wrists and elbows.

The sharp clamour of metal violently striking metal resonated across the surrounding streets of North London. Dizzy and distressed, Roman tried unsuccessfully to break the circle, but the four mountainous henchmen prevented any escape. They forced him to resume his battle for survival with a much stronger opponent.

This is no ordinary mugger.

Roman could not recognise the man's fighting style. It seemed a confusing mix of practically everything and nothing at all; at least nothing that Roman had encountered in his martial arts training.

Somehow the man anticipated Roman's every move. The blows Roman received, as a result, made his intolerable headache even worse. The throbbing flow of blood from his nose adversely affected his vision; and, for the first time in his life, it dawned on Roman that he would be clubbed to death.

During the fight, Roman failed to notice that his driving licence had fallen out of his coat pocket. Even if he had noticed, he could have done little about it. A devastating blow to the back of his head temporarily robbed him of his sight. Three blows followed in quick succession, forcing him to his knees, barely conscious and utterly defenceless.

The ease of his defeat seemed beyond comprehension. He tried to speak but his mouth failed to cooperate.

Take the car, take the phone, take my watch, and take the cash. Take it all; I just don't want my wife to be a widow...

The leader retracted his staff and smirked confidently. In unison, strange blades slid from the sleeves of the other four men into their eager hands. The four advanced collectively with a cry - arms raised, about to strike Roman.

The leader raised both arms, and his men stopped dead in their tracks. They froze momentarily then retreated with a sinister reluctance.

Roman's sight slowly returned. He used the long metal weapon in an attempt to stand, but an unseen force oppressed him. An invisible yoke prevented him from becoming upright.

Then, in an almost theatrical manner, the leader stretched out his right arm towards Roman and he instantly fell prostrate to the ground. Roman clutched his throat with his right hand; and to his astonishment, strangled himself.

Chapter 2

From his second-storey bedroom, William Norris, a fifty-six-year-old shopkeeper rubbed his sleepy eyes and peered through a gap in the thick drapes of a large Victorian window. Gangs of youths had tried to break into his shop on the ground floor several times before. The steel shutters, which covered the front of his mini-mart, did not deter young hooligans from crashing a stolen van into the store three weeks ago.

Four days later, the ram raiders were apprehended, but the incident left the shopkeeper enraged and paranoid. The current commotion suggested that more young offenders had arrived.

If it's trouble they want, it's trouble they'll get.

For a moment, the aging man could not understand why he had difficulty seeing.

Then, he remembered, *I'm not wearing my glasses.*

Cobwebs from a restless sleep clouded his mind, and he fumbled in the darkness.

Where are those bleedin' glasses?

He recalled leaving them on the wooden table adjacent to his bed. With varifocals firmly donned, he peered through the gap in the drapes once more.

Now I can see the brazen little bastards getting up to no good downstairs.

He consulted an alarm clock on the old bedside table.

It's 1:36 AM. The scallywag, who drove the Ford Transit into my shop three weeks ago, was only fourteen years old. What type of parents allowed their fourteen-year-old children to roam the streets at this hour? What has England come to? If I had a gun, I'd blast the little blighters to Hades, but then I'd be the one behind bars. Suppose I'll just have to call the Old Bill again. They have guns, at least their armed response team does.

So William phoned the police and added a bit of embroidery to his story. The type he thought would guarantee an immediate, aggressive response.

He lied, "There's a mindless mob of hooligans outside. They're all black, and one of them has a gun."

Seized by desperate panic and no longer in control of his body, Roman continued to strangle himself. Suddenly a dart-like object shot out of the surrounding shadows. Roman's unknown opponent moved with incredible speed to avoid

being impaled. The object narrowly missed the startled man's shaven head; and instantly, Roman stopped suffocating himself. He immediately gasped for air. Dangerously close to fainting, he swooned with shock, unable to rationalise what just occurred.

What the hell is going on, did he use some kind of hypnosis on me?

Without the slightest trepidation, the silhouette of the mysterious dart-thrower strode confidently from the shadows. His black tunic, long dark hair and Fu Manchu moustache seemed to symbolise all that Roman's black belts did - *imperviousness to darkness and fear!*

The man in black stared with contempt at the feet of the five larger men who surrounded Roman. He considered their treacherous eyes unworthy of his piercing gaze. He tilted his head towards Roman, and in a fleeting moment, the twenty-five-year-old swore he heard a voice. It was faint, almost imperceptible.

The voice said, "*Rise Master.*"

Then the man in black savagely attacked the four henchmen. Roman used the opportunity to sweep the leader off his feet, and the large man landed on his posterior, his face red with embarrassment. But he recovered in an instant and was upon Roman like a swarm of Africanised honey bees.

With the support of the darkly clad stranger, Roman regained much-needed strength.

Thank God he came when he did, but who the hell are these guys?

Steel rods and razor sharp blades clashed viciously, shooting silvery sparks into the summer air.

Roman observed that his attackers fought in an unfamiliar and unorthodox martial art - utterly unpredictable. Whatever it was, they all did it; and they did it exceptionally well. The henchmen fought with unnatural accord, engaging in a well-rehearsed dance of death, executed with fanatical accuracy.

Yet, the man in black seemed relentless. His form differed from that of his opponents. Far more refined, with a devastating elegance. Roman had no way of knowing that this martial art was called Hatari Ikou, the way of matchless power. Hatari Ikou had evolved into a supreme form of combat, millennia before an earthquake toppled the bronze Colossus of Rhodes; and the man in black was its consummate master. Exhibiting alarming agility and perfect balance, he hurled his body in a devastating arc, delivering brutal kicks to the heads of his four assailants. Propelling them an impossible distance before they hit the pavement like discarded rag dolls.

Gaining inspiration, Roman vengefully retaliated against their leader forcing the larger man to defend himself. Little by little a pattern emerged from

the apparently random assaults, feints and deflections. There was a method to his opponent's madness.

The man-mountain was proficient in a fighting style based on deception. This secret art was older than the Sphinx. It was called Nyoka Sentou, the way of the serpent. But Roman, and the men who trained him, had no way of knowing this.

Every movement in Nyoka Sentou undermined, distracted, eluded and destroyed. An opponent encountered nonexistent openings, unstoppable strikes, and elusive targets.

The henchmen viciously retaliated. Faced with overwhelming aggression, Roman and his helper found themselves back to back with the five attackers enclosing them.

With an accent difficult to place, the man growled angrily, "Master Armon, have your custodians taught you absolutely nothing? Have they betrayed your father's trust? In light of your apparent lack of combat proficiency, wisdom dictates that I urge you to run."

Master Armon? Betrayed your father's trust?

Roman had just a second to ponder the stranger's odd statement, before the fight resumed - two against five.

Suddenly a silver BMW 5-Series Touring arrived at the scene. The armed response vehicle or ARV was crewed by three uniformed officers. Members of CO19, the name allocated to the Specialist Firearm Command branch of London's Metropolitan Police Service. With silently flashing blue lights, the estate swerved to an abrupt halt ten metres from the conflict and the officers within made an immediate assessment of the situation.

In the brawl, Roman was the only combatant distracted by this fortuitous development.

The long arm of the law has arrived. Perhaps I'll live to fight another day.

CO19 swiftly concluded that armed containment was necessary. Two of the crew, the officers designated as the 'driver' and the 'observer', deployed leaving the 'operator' in the vehicle to call for further reinforcements.

The driver barked, "Police! Drop your weapons!"

Both policemen drew their handguns. All three officers were equipped with standard-issue GLOCK 17 short recoil 9mm Luger semi-automatic pistols.

The armed response team had immediately responded to an urgent call. A black youth brandishing a pistol had threatened members of the public. The fact that Roman was the only person of African descent present suggested to the driver that the other members of the gang had wisely fled the scene.

He targeted Roman's chest with his GLOCK and his colleague set his sights on the leader of the Oriental gang. In retrospect, this action proved to be a serious mistake.

Displaying casual disregard, the Oriental warrior motioned with his hand; and like men possessed, both officers immediately raised their loaded pistols to their temples and fired. A terrifying eruption of blood brain skull and hair instantly followed.

"Shit!" the operator screamed into the police radio, as the twitching bodies of his colleagues crumpled to the pavement.

Horrified and frantic, Roman knocked one of his attackers off his feet with a reverse ankle sweep, then took the man in black's advice and ran like hell. As he fled, he narrowly avoided being hit by a second ARV. Looking over his shoulder, Roman saw the leader motion towards the swiftly approaching BMW. Instantly, the driver of this second vehicle veered and crashed into the first. The impact fatally pinned the officer within, instantly silencing his crazed requests for backup.

Roman looked around, but he could no longer see the man in black. Meanwhile, the five thugs painfully introduced the remaining CO19 officers to Nyoka Sentou. Roman ran a short distance before stumbling and falling to the pavement. He rose to his feet, dizzy and exhausted with blood still seeping from his nose.

You idiot, you're going the wrong way, he chided himself for foolishly running in the opposite direction of his BMW hatchback.

Roman hoped that, at any moment, he would wake from this terrible nightmare and prepare for another uneventful day as a primary schoolteacher. But the horror continued and a disturbing thought entered his mind.

Maybe this attack isn't just a random act of violence.

Wailing sirens approach from a distance and Roman's concern focused on his expectant wife, Soraya. He struggled to retrieve his mobile phone from his coat pocket and at that moment, the man in black appeared at his side.

"Thanks for helping me," Roman cried breathlessly.

The man said, "My duty is to serve you, Master Armon."

Bewildered by these words, teetering on the brink of unconsciousness, and unable to locate his mobile, Roman offered a weak plea.

"I need to call my wife."

"Forgive me Master," the man in black said.

He returned Roman's bloodstained handkerchief. Roman took it and gently dabbed a fresh stream of blood from his nose. Then, without warning, the helper jabbed a futuristic device into Roman's exposed neck. A hypodermic needle found Roman's internal carotid artery; and, paralysed by the unidentified

substance forcibly injected into his bloodstream, Roman collapsed in a state of shock.

As he slipped into the darkness of oblivion, one question reverberated in his mind.

Why?