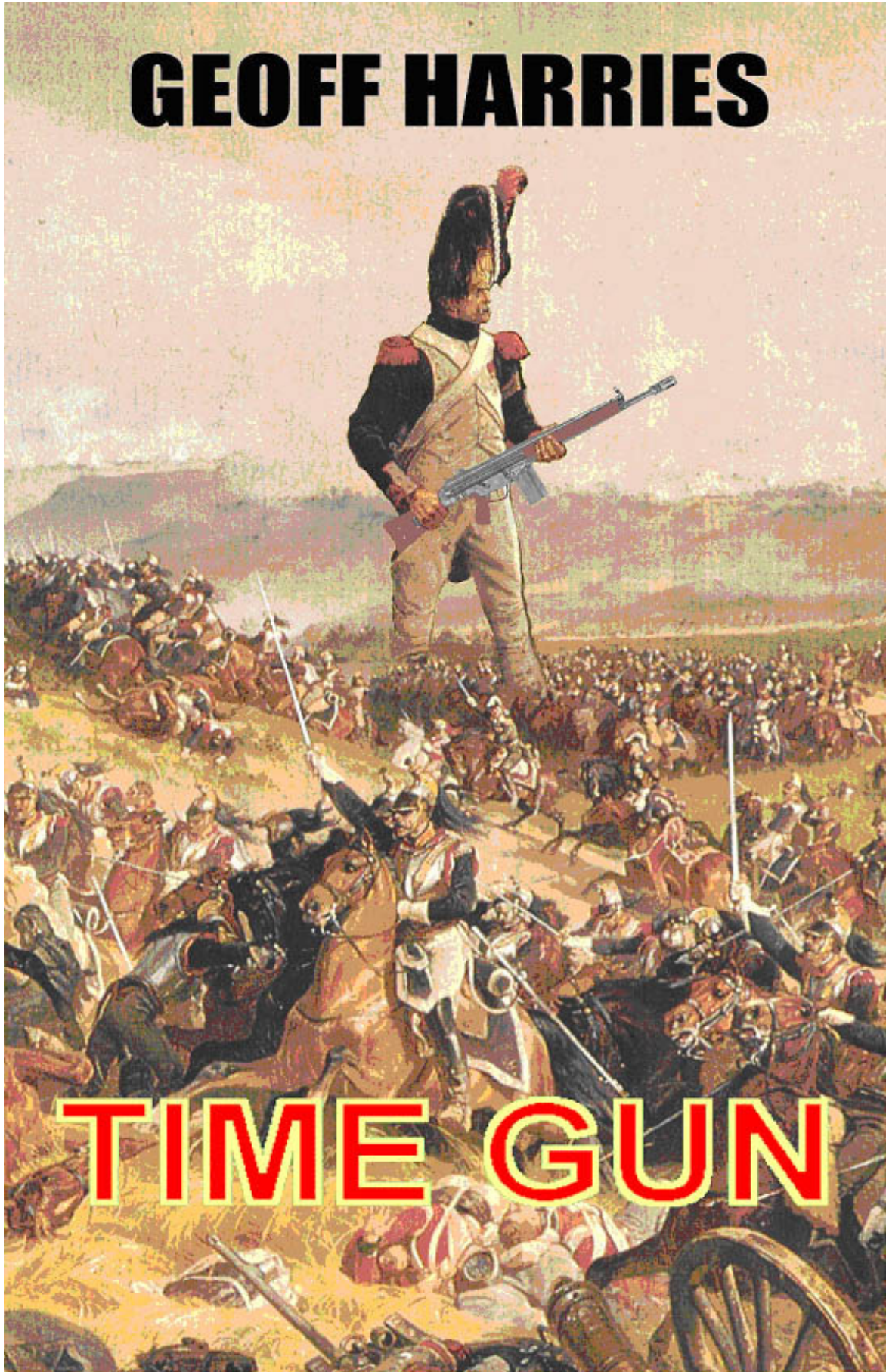


GEOFF HARRIES



TIME GUN

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“Dig”, an ex-Special Services officer, is recruited by “CHRONDISP”, a Time Travel organization, to be sent back to discover the secret of a unique weapon used by the French in the time of Napoleon. Follow Dig through his training, his improvised defense of CHRONDISP from hi-tec terrorists and his “Insertion” into Jan, a Breton gun-maker. See through Jan’s eyes the Paris of 1815, a crooked gambling club and finally the Battle of Waterloo.

“Good story-telling, good plotting and well-done battle scenes.” Prof. John Cramer (Transaction Interpretation of quantum mechanics.)

“I enjoyed the hell out of your book. Good story-telling, nice writing, good imagination. Interesting people.”
Bob Pease (“Electronic Engineering”)



Geoff Harries is an aero-space engineer who after service in the RAF lived many years in Canada, the USA, France and now Germany. Living in Munich he writes for a devoted circle of fans among the ex-patriate scientists, engineers and students who can identify with his competent cool hero.

18 Oct 98

(Chrondisp 1)

Chapter 1

I was alone in the workshop at the back of our gun shop in the Maxburg Strasse when Dieter, my partner, came to the door and said a Mr Jones wanted to see me.

‘He arrived in a chauffeur-driven limousine,’ he said, an almost reverent look on his square Bavarian face. ‘He looks like an English noble.’

Intrigued I put down the ionizer from an early Asiablock electro-pistol I had been repairing and followed Dieter to the front of the shop. We did get some unusual visitors but not yet a member of the British aristocracy. Most unlikely with that name, anyway.

Waiting for us was a tall slim hatched-faced man of about 40 with a pale complexion, a straight nose and a high forehead. He was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and a dark-blue striped tie. British Civil Service, Foreign Office, I would have said. Approaching curiously I received a direct stare from deep-set hooded unsmiling cold grey eyes that was like a cold shower.

‘Digby,’ I said in the German fashion I had fallen into since I had come to live in Munich.

`Jones,' he replied equally briefly, and being British we didn't shake hands. He turned to Dieter.

`Thank you,' he said with glacial politeness. Dieter hesitated angrily at this curt dismissal then returned to his office, banging the door. I cancelled any friendly remarks I was about to make and closed my face. We looked at each other for a moment.

`I am interested in antique fire-arms, particularly muskets,' he said.

A customer then. Well, I didn't have to like him.

`I see,' I replied, gathered my thoughts and turned to our collection which lined the walls. `The earliest item we have is dated ...' I began and I was off into my usual chat.

As I moved around lifting the various muskets from their racks to show him, I listened carefully to his accent (and no one listens to accents more carefully than the British) but couldn't place it. Neutral southern English spoken in a light voice but now and then a word with American intonation.

At the same time I began modifying my opinion of him. He listened intently, asked intelligent questions and I felt myself warming to him. His initial coldness must have been nervousness or an official front.

As we continued talking I found myself continually revising upwards my opinion of him. The stiffness gradually disappeared, to be replaced by an apparently dormant boyish enthusiasm and a sort of sardonic humour which reminded me of the much decorated colonel of my old Regiment. I felt myself irresistibly drawn to him, grinning at his use of slang expressions I had not heard since I had left the Army. It turned out that his main interest was in muskets built around 1800 and fortunately we had several.

But finally I secured the last musket back into its rack.

`And I'm afraid that's all we have,' I said over my shoulder with genuine regret that I had no more to show this fascinating and knowledgeable man. What was he? A career diplomat satisfying an eccentric hobby? Judging by his aura of confident authority he must have an important and responsible position in some big organization.

`Mr Digby,' he said behind my back as I fastened its restraining clip.

`Yes?' I said, turning round with a smile, to find him staring into my eyes, a visiting-card case in his hand. The smile froze on my face. Holding my gaze he withdrew a card and after consideringly clicking his thumb-nail on its edge a moment, handed it to me formally. Surprised, I took it, feeling as though I was being awarded some sort of certificate.

Very fancy. The luminous green holo-lettering leapt up at me. `Frank E. Jones', followed by a line of abbreviated qualifications of which `Ph.D' was the only one I recognized.

And modestly in the bottom right-hand corner, `Chondisp Institute'.

Jesus! I looked up at him startled then down at the card again. It looked expensive enough to be genuine.

`Do you have somewhere private?' he asked.

If he was really from the famous and fabulously secretive Chondisp Institute we couldn't talk here. Not with Dieter who was now chatting with a customer and straining his ears to hear what we were saying.

`My office,' I said, opening the door.

I gestured to the visitor's chair, closed the door and after sitting opposite him laid his card on the desk between us.

`"Chrondisp",' I said, looking at him in a mixture of awe and nervous hilarity. `You are a Time Traveller.'

In spite of myself I imagined the famous helmet on his head and heard the "Time Traveller" theme from the holo series.

He moved his head in annoyance. I supposed he was used to this reaction.

`I work for the Institute but am not an Observer,' he said frigidly. He picked up his card, put it back in his wallet and looked at me pensively.

`We may be able to offer you employment at the Institute,' he said. And then with a infectious smile the charm returned. `But first could you tell me what you understand by Chronological Displacement?' I was irritated to find myself smiling back at him.

But it was a good question. What did I know? What did anyone know? I remembered about two years ago a French scientist had written an odd paper on the Structure of Time. He had complained in the media that "Nature" had refused publication. A little controversy had blown up and then the trouble in Afghanistan had started again and he had been forgotten. About a year later an enterprising reporter had found that funds were being channelled from different Westblock governments into the building of a large and fantastically well-guarded installation in the middle of the Sahara desert. It was assumed to be something to do with genetics and the usual articles on the production of supermen, human clones etc. were given an airing again.

But then the news had broken that science had discovered a way to send a person back in time. The technical press had been full of it and the French scientist had written "explaining" it in terms of a multi-dimensional mathematics that hardly anyone could understand, least of all me. Dieter had tried to describe to me how you had to go into another dimension to be able to say "how fast time moved" but I don't think he knew any more than anyone else. Like a lot of Germans, he just liked explaining things.

The media had seized on time-travelling and handsome men wearing the famous helmet were to be seen most nights on the holo, rescuing beautiful nude maidens from the torture dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition or leading a squadron of Spads into battle over the Western Front of World War I.

`The "Chrondisp Institute" have built a time-machine called an Inserter that can send a person, an Observer, back into the past,' I began. `The past has been found to consist of a Main Timeline which links Key Events all through history down to us in the present. Then there are Branch Timelines which are connected to the Main Line but don't lead anywhere important. The Main Timeline is fixed; if the Observer is sliding along it he can only observe what's going on. But if he's sliding along a Branch-line he can sometimes bend it too.'

`Yes,' said Mr Jones who had been rather impatiently twisting his steel watch-strap round his wrist as I talked. `That is near enough. I could add that there are many many Branch lines. Most of humanity lives on Branch Lines. They live their lives away peacefully, generation after generation, doing nothing important, nothing to change the course of history. Whether they marry or not, have children or not, lead irreproachable lives or a life of crime is unimportant.' He shrugged. `If they don't influence the Main Timeline their lives are irrelevant.'

`Then the guys who live on a Main Timeline ...' I began.

`No one lives on a Main Timeline,' interrupted Mr Jones with a tolerant smile. `If you're very lucky, or maybe unlucky, you might just touch the Main Timeline once in your life.'

He thought a moment, then pointed at me.

`As a military example, take the case of Colonel Macdonell. A conventional career in the Scots Guards until Lord Wellington put him in charge of a farmhouse guarding the British right flank at the Battle of Waterloo. The French made strenuous efforts to capture this farmhouse and finally a company, hidden by gunsmoke, rushed round the back where they found the main gate to the courtyard open. The defenders put up a desperate fight and killed the French general leading the attack but the French finally overpowered them and streamed into the courtyard.

Colonel Macdonell heard the triumphant cries of the French and called to four of his men. They forced their way around the side of the fighting mass and managed to slam the gate closed and drop the locking-bar in place just before French reinforcements could arrive. The French now trapped in the courtyard were killed or captured.' He paused.

Yes, it was a good example and I had heard of it. In fact my old Regiment had an oil-painting of it on the wall in the dining room of the Officers' Mess.

`And that was a Key Event on the Main Timeline,' I said.

`It was indeed. If the French had captured the Hougoumont farmhouse they would have been able to roll up the British line from the right. Napoleon would have won the battle of Waterloo, Brussels would have been captured, Belgium fallen, and maybe we would be talking now in French instead of English.' He smiled again and I smiled back. I'd never thought of it like that.

`But what about those who live all their lives on Branch Timelines?' I asked. `Are their lives really just a waste of time?'

`No, not necessarily,' he said looking at me in pleased surprise. `Consider the case of say, a tribal witch doctor who discovered gunpowder years before the Chinese but just used it to improve his image before the tribe. One evening at an especially ambitious performance he and all his assistants suddenly joined their ancestors in a spectacular explosion, taking the gunpowder secret with them.'

He moved a hand expressively and I smiled.

`Now if we could go back into the past and observe this Branch Line we could discover the secret of making gunpowder and bring it into the present and profit from it.' He shrugged. `If it hadn't already been discovered in the meantime, of course.'

`Yes,' I said. `Bringing the secret of gunpowder into the present would surely be a Key Event if it hadn't already been discovered. But if I understand this right, it couldn't be used as the Main Timeline can't be bent.'

`That's right,' he said, nodding his head in approval, `once the Main Timeline is in place it cannot be moved. But this is a special case. The information brought forward from the past can be used to influence the direction the Main Timeline takes, now, while it is being formed.' He stabbed his finger down on the desk. `It's not the same thing.'

I digested this. `So the Chronodisp Institute can rediscover forgotten inventions,' I surmised.

`Good,' he said with a smile and I felt a glow of pleasure. `It's an important application and it's why I'm here, Mr Digby. We have a problem and we think that you with your background and specialized knowledge of old firearms can help us. I invite you to visit the Institute. When can you come?'

I thought quickly - there was nothing in the near future that really required my attention in Munich. I shrugged and said I could come anytime.

He looked satisfied, glanced down at his watch and stood up.

As he briskly stepped out of our shop a large black Mercedes appeared from nowhere and drew up at the kerb. The burly uniformed driver stepped out and with a

polite smile held the passenger door open. But this was not quick enough for Mr Jones who made an impatient 'get on' gesture, climbed in and slammed the door.

The driver's smile disappeared as he returned hastily to his seat and Mr Jones was driven off without a backward glance. I watched as the car crashed a yellow and disappeared around the corner.

As I turned back into the shop I began to play back our conversation, remembering the way he had switched his charm on and off and blushing with embarrassment at my fawning reactions. Which was his real personality, charming diplomat or cold official?

But then my resentment vanished as it hit me. I was going to visit the Chrondisp Institute!

Chapter 2

Now I wasn't at all displeased by the arrival of Mr Jones. My life was becoming too peaceful, too predictable. I feel that when you can look ahead and imagine where you will be and what you will be doing in say, ten years, you are growing old.

Yes, of course I was glad the War (or "Affair" as they had called it) was over. It had been a short, ferocious and carefully conventional trial of strength and we, that is Westblock, had won, in the sense that Asiablock had been repulsed. We had been able to show that advanced weapons were superior to numbers, provided you were prepared to go in on the ground to use them if necessary. For part of the time I had been seconded to a sort of commando group called the Special Air Service Regiment or SAS and it had been necessary. I looked at the commemorative plaque on the shop wall: "The King's Own Rifles", my own and my father's Regiment before me. You would have thought that in the 21st Century it would have been the "King's Own Lasers". But no, the British Army loves its traditions.

I remembered how the Affair had ended. Goodbye to Battalion, a big party in the mess, the flight back home, a Victory Parade, a medal, speeches and then demobilization and leave-taking from Regular officers who had to stay and soldier on in peace-time.

I stayed with friends for a while and they politely listened to my stories but didn't really understand; modern warfare was too far from their experience. During the day they were out at work and I used to wander round their empty house, looking out of the windows at the garden and the sparse traffic on the street outside. I would sit in the weak European sunlight in their modestly furnished suburban front-room and remember the excitement of planning a night attack. The carefully shaded lights on maps, the eyes of my platoon commanders gleaming white out of their black camouflage-painted faces as I whispered last-minute instructions. The faint rattle of weapons, the sharp purposefulness, the intensity of life knowing this day could be my last. The power of command.

I became impatient and bored. It was the classical case of the soldier coming back from the wars and being unable to fit into the quiet routine of civilian life. I was hooked on adrenaline but knowing about it didn't help.

I heard from some of my friends who had become mercenaries. The activities of others were explained by the crime wave that always follows a war.

Me, I bought a tent and a stout pair of boots and went for a long camping holiday in the mountains of southern Bavaria. A German lieutenant who had been with us had described the beauty of the Alps. He had not survived the war but I remembered his thin face and how it had lit up when he talked of camping by the edge of a mountain lake, watching the sun sink and the stars come out one by one. I hiked from

Garmisch through Karwendel, through the Kitzbüheler Alps to Kufstein, past Tegernsee, sometimes walking 20 miles a day. I just wanted to avoid people, to tire myself out, to read. I pitched my tent and cooked a meal when evening fell.

To start with I found myself camping in small hollows out of the sight of mountain peaks or in the edge of a wood, with a small concealed fire. I would find myself avoiding open ground, keeping off the skyline, following contours. The moving figures of climbers on a distant peak would make me freeze for a moment. I woke up one night sweating, peering over the edge of a ditch, having leapt out of my tent. But it was only a stray cow in the woods nearby, not a Mongol patrol.

At the end of a day's climb I would stop at a small mountain Gasthof and sit on the terrace, sampling the beer and looking down at the evening mist gathering in the valleys.

Once whilst relaxing on the terrace of such a Gasthof I saw a quiet stocky Bavarian sitting alone. He had the characteristic gleam of a laser burn on his arm. Our glances had crossed but he was seeking his peace too. We had left in opposite directions.

When it was necessary I would descend into a valley and buy food. Butter, eggs, local cheese, ham and of course, that wonderful brown German Vollkorn bread. There must be as many types of bread as there are types of beer in Germany. There is a deep satisfaction in sinking your teeth into a thick Linsamenbrot sandwich filled with ham and cheese and washing it down with a "Halbes" of dark-brown beer. Bread, beer, work. The British are supposed to be basically German with a pinch of French and I certainly felt the pull of the German part in those days.

Slowly I was calming down. But there were relapses. I remember one clear night looking up at the stars through my tent-flap. I moved my head outside so I could see the whole heavens. Lying on a mountain-side and looking up at the stars at 4 o'clock in the morning is ... thought-provoking.

I was suddenly back with Battalion in the mountains of Northern Pakistan waiting to attack at first light. My radio operator was lying beside me. Apart from the warm night breeze, all was still but a thousand men lay concealed around us.

Quietly I had pointed out Sirius on the horizon and the Great Nebula in Andromeda far above us. I don't think he had ever looked at the stars before. He was a young lad from Liverpool and apart from radio-jargon and the conventional obscenities, was almost inarticulate.

'Does anyone live there, I mean anyone like us, sir?' he had whispered.

I had told him the little I knew, millions of stars, distant suns, thousands of light-years ...

'What's it like being an officer?' he had whispered, unexpectedly.

'Not much different from being a radio-operator,' I had replied seriously. 'We eat and shit and screw. Biggest difference is that we can't have friends as we may have to send them somewhere dangerous.'

I didn't tell him that his radio-antenna put him in one of the most dangerous positions on the battle-field.

Pause.

'What's it all about, sir? Life, I mean why are we here, what happened to Mike?' Private Mike Bailey had been his special "oppo" and had been killed in an ambush shortly after we had arrived.

I told him no one knew, mankind had been seeking answers to those questions for centuries. I had promised to lend him a book.

'A book,' he had said and had grinned in the starlight.

I wondered what had happened to him and if he was any wiser now. The unchanging stars were still there, silently wheeling around high in the heavens but he had been killed the next day.

However this time first-light appeared without the blowing of whistles, the howl of ground-hugging Jabos and the booming of assault artillery.

The sun just slid quietly from behind the Wendelstein and I sat outside my tent in the slanting warm golden light. I cooked my ham and eggs and drank my coffee, listening to the church-bells in the valley below. It was incredibly peaceful.

And gradually I was unwinding. I could set up my tent by the side of a lake without feeling that someone on a distant over-looking peak was quietly talking into a microphone, sending the co-ordinates of my position to a hidden battery. I could walk across an open meadow without feeling cross-wires on my back. No longer would my hair rise as I walked through a little wood, unconsciously looking for newly turned earth at the side of the path and for the thin gleam of the trip wire leading to a vicious jump-mine.

So when I finally descended the Kampen into Lenggries I felt the time had come for decisions. I had found I liked this part of the world so I resolved to stay here for a while.

I had transferred my savings and gratuity to a bank in Munich and after looking round, bought into a small "Waffen" shop, buying and selling old and not so old weapons. They were the only things I knew anything about.

It had turned out as well as possible. Dieter was the principal shareholder. He was a plump Bavarian, married and with one daughter. Apart from the shop, his main interests were sports; sports that would reduce his weight. I got on very well with him, and would have got on better if he wouldn't keep pestering me with questions about the Affair. Some of the people most interested in wars are those who have never been in one.

He had insisted that the "King's Own" plaque be mounted behind the counter and I suppose it had attracted some custom.

*

To my surprise, a letter arrived from Mr Jones the next day, including a piece of embossed plastic which I recognized as one of the new smart air tickets.

It was easier to get away from the shop than I had thought. Mr Jones had cautioned me against using the name of Chrandisp so I just told Dieter mysteriously that I would have to take leave of absence for a few weeks and let him accidentally see an old "On His Majesty's Service" envelope.

'Of course you must go when your King needs you,' he said seriously. 'No, I don't want to know anything about it.'

Yes, I should have remembered about the German sense of civic duty.

Chapter 3

And so a week later I found myself packing a bag in my small apartment in the Schwabing section of Munich. Mr Jones had been reticent about the length of my stay. 'We'll have to make a few tests first,' he had said vaguely. 'Say two weeks. All expenses covered, of course,' and he had mentioned a sum which would cover the cost of a holiday at a luxury holiday resort for a month at least.

What to take? Chrandisp was somewhere in the Sahara. Tropical kit? Hardly - the place would be air conditioned, would probably be like Southern California. I finally settled on a fairly formal Dacron suit and some leisure clothing. There would be ample sports facilities too so I packed my new Vari-tension titanium and silicon-

fibre squash racket. And of course my portable computer/holo/player with a few book chips I hadn't read yet.

I threw in a small tool-kit with spare chips in case the computer went wrong and a portable medical kit in case I did. I left my apartment computer on "stand by" as I might want some of my private data bank. A last look round and a call on the Hausmeister to tell him I would be away for a while.

Then the "Untergrundbahn" or subway to the airport and soon we were rising vertically over the north of Munich. The jets were slowly angled backwards and the wobbly vertical ascent gave way to the more stable horizontal flight. We picked up speed and looking down I could see the snow covered Alps and the glittering lakes where I had spent so much time two years ago, when I first came to Bavaria.

I shaded the window and switched on the screen in the back of the seat in front of me. I touched it to select the various menus, but there was nothing particularly interesting, so I decided to play a game of Scrabble in German - always a good way to increase the vocabulary, although you do tend to learn words beginning with a J or a Q (10 points each in German). I wondered how I could introduce "Jauche" (liquid manure, pus, ichor) into my next German conversation.

In the meantime we had landed at Milan, then Marseilles. Bored with Scrabble, I selected a display showing the view from directly under the aircraft, with a superimposed map and a moving point showing our position. I followed our course as we slid along the white beaches lining the southern coast of France and then down the east coast of Spain, over Gibraltar and finally sank with screaming jets into Tangier.

Tangier International Airport had grown considerably since I had seen it last, a sign of the fantastically booming tourist trade into Africa. I collected my case, passed Customs without comment and looked for "Information". As instructed, I slid my ticket into one of the many slots and after a pause the screen asked me to wait in four languages.

I waited.

A smartly dressed soldier wearing the blue UNO beret appeared and walking up to me, looked at something in his hand and then saluted.

'Captain Digby?'

It had been some time since I had been addressed in that way. I half returned his salute, remembered I was not in uniform and dropped my hand. He took my luggage, escorted me to a sand-brown car and drove me across the blinding-white runways to a far corner of the airport where a small white executive-type jet was waiting. It was unmarked except for its registration number.

I stepped out into the shadowless heat and suddenly smelled the fragrance of Africa, vividly remembering my last visit; to a French-run holiday-camp not far from here. Five years ago. It had seemed so important at the time but now it could have happened to someone else, to someone else in another century. I wondered what had happened to her.

The soldier had stowed my luggage and was waiting patiently by the door. I climbed in, sat down in one of the eight wide leather seats and looked around. It was luxurious and I was the only passenger. The soldier saluted impersonally and disappeared.

After a while the aircraft shifted slightly as the pilot climbed in up front. The door whined up and thumped shut. A recorded voice said "fasten your seat belts" in four languages and we were off.

Two hours later, after flying low and fast over brown desert with occasional rocky outcrops, the engine note changed and we went straight in to land at a small air-strip.

There was a sand-coloured control tower with angled windows and I noticed several batteries of "Javelin" ground-to-air missiles dug-in around the perimeter with figures in brown uniforms tending them. There was a hanger and parked outside it two aircraft similar to the one I was in.

Another salute, and a moment of intense dry heat as I transferred into another sand-brown car waiting on the otherwise deserted concrete apron.

Soon we were sliding rapidly along a dead straight concrete strip leading to the horizon.

'First visit to Chondisp, sir?' asked the driver conversationally.

I leant forward to turn down the cold air blasting into my face from the air conditioner and admitted it.

'Security is out of this world, but it may not be so bad for you, sir, being ex-military.' He pointed out a cooling tower, just appearing over the horizon. And then suddenly, in a dip, the whole Chondisp complex appeared, spread out in front of us. Low concrete domes as far as the eye could see, blindingly white in the glaring sunlight. Some small towers, several slowly moving gantry cranes. The whole dominated by the high black reactor cooling tower in the middle distance, surrounded with a slight shimmer of heat.

'Big group left this morning,' confided my driver.

And he was right about security. We drove through automatic gates in two high perimeter fences, then into an inconspicuous dome which was the entrance to a lift which took me deep underground for finger prints, eyerets and the new association tests I had only heard of.

'Well, you seem to be you, sir,' said the cold-eyed MP lieutenant behind the thick glass screen and grudgingly handed a small card to my guide, pointing to a door in the wall. My soldier guide opened it with the card and we were on a narrow train platform. It was cool, dry and smelt of rubber.

'Half an hour!' marvelled my guide. 'It usually takes two hours at least.'

A small train composed of six open carriages hissed into the platform on rubber wheels and we climbed in. My guide slid the card into a slot and the train restarted. There were a few more stops for various people in white coats or uniforms and then at one stop a light came on by our card slot. We climbed out and the train hissed off down the tunnel.

A lift and a short walk down an empty carpeted corridor. My guide opened a door for me, handed me the card, saluted and left, closing the door behind him with a click.

I was in a large quiet room containing a long polished table surrounded by chairs. There was a projector, a flip chart with some organization plan sketched on it and a small fridge buzzing in the corner. It was cool and dry.

Obviously a conference room and judging by the translucent slightly curved ceiling, on the surface. I tried the door. Locked.

I sat down to read some old magazines. Time passed. I looked at my watch - an hour! After the impressive start things had slowed down.

I began to feel impatient. I looked around but there was no telephone. I tried the door - still locked. I rapped on it without result. There was some sort of lock mechanism mounted on it with a card slot so out of curiosity I tried my card. It disappeared down into the slot with a mechanical whirr and a red light came on. I pushed on the door but it was still locked. Feeling foolish I sat down again at the table.

After a while I got up and looked at the door lock again. I could see my card deep in the mechanism, held by a clip, the red light glowing at me mockingly.

On an impulse I unscrewed the red lamp cover and then the lamp bulb. Nothing happened. The bulb lay hot in my palm. A small victory. Kneeling down I looked into the light socket. Shorting out the light socket would surely do a bit of no-good to the door lock. But the contacts were recessed. I looked at the lamp bulb in my hand. If only I could short out the filament somehow... I had an idea. I put the lamp-bulb on the floor and holding it steady, gently crunched it with my heel. Then I twisted the exposed wires together and screwed the shorted-out bulb back into the socket.

Immediate results! There was a "splat" and my card slid into my hand. At the same time the door swung open and in the distance I could hear the urgent sound of a klaxon. I stepped out into the corridor and looked up and down. Empty, but I could hear the approaching sound of running feet. I waited curiously.

Around a corner appeared a beefy figure in MP uniform, pounding towards me. He had some weapon in his hand and he raised it.

`Hold it right there!' he bellowed, followed immediately by the unmistakable buzz and crack of an electro-pistol!

Christ! I felt my hair rise with the nearness of the discharge. The fool could kill me! I ducked back into the conference room and quickly jammed a chair under the lock. The thumping feet approached then paused undecided as he tried to remember through which door I had disappeared. I could hear him grunting as he pushed at the other doors and then he tried mine. It moved slightly against the chair and I heard his cry of triumph.

`Open up!' he said loudly, banging on the door.

I didn't want him in here excited like that, so I jammed the chair more firmly in place. The door shook as he thumped against it, but the chair held.

`Come out or I'll fry you!' he shouted and the oaf started firing his pistol through the door.

Fountains of violet ionized air leapt from the door in all directions. The carpet started to char and there was a strong smell of ozone. I had to do something quickly - it would only be a matter of time before he hit me.

`Come and get me, you stupid pig!' I bellowed, through the door. Nothing like a direct appeal to the lower brain.

A scream of rage and the door shuddered again and again. Timing his blows on the door, I kicked the chair away and he rushed through right shoulder down, stumbled over the chair and crashed his head into the heavy conference table.

Silence. I pushed the door to, picked up his pistol, put it on "safe", placed it on the table in front of me and was thoughtfully looking at my recovered card when there were rapid footsteps outside in the corridor and the door crashed open. Two soldiers and an arrogant-looking young MP lieutenant jammed themselves in the doorway.

The officer snapped at the two soldiers who stepped back. He stalked in, hand on pistol butt, retrieved the weapon in front of me with a quick movement then looked around incredulously. The burly MP on the floor groaned and lifted his shaved head, blood dripping slowly from it onto the carpet.

`Call a medic,' the officer barked at one of the soldiers. Then he turned to me. `Who are you and what's this all about?'

I looked back at him. The Infantry doesn't have much time for non-combatants.

`You call me "sir"', I said coldly and laid my card flat on the table.

He picked it up and slid it into a pocket viewer. I glanced at the door card-reader/lock which was now unrecognisably smashed.

`"Captain Digby, visitor for Dr Duluth",' he read.

I stared at him and he saluted, reluctantly.

`This ape ran down the corridor and tried to electrocute me. I shut the door but he kept on firing.' I waved my hand around at the various scorch marks on the carpet and walls.

`I opened the door and he ran in and knocked his head against the table. Lucky, or I might not be alive to tell you this.'

The officer looked at his card reader again. A sharp one, this. He held up my card.

`This is a Class 4 card. An "all-doors-closed" card. How come the door was open - sir?'

I shrugged dismissively.

`I don't know anything about your security system.' He looked annoyed and baffled.

`Please come with me, sir,' he said abruptly and led me down the corridor. He opened another door.

I looked round. Someone's office. The same type of door lock as in the conference room.

I sat down. There were lots of shouts and running footsteps in the corridor and then the door clicked open. Mr Jones stood in the doorway, dressed in the same dark suit in which I had seen him in Munich. The officer stood behind him, hand on holstered pistol.

`Good afternoon,' I said, looking at my watch.

`It's all right, it's him,' said Mr Jones to the officer who then disappeared. `Now, Mr Digby, what the devil have you been doing?' There was no sign of the charm seen at Munich.

Finally I was getting annoyed.

`Listen to me, Jones or Duluth or whatever your name is. You asked me to come here. It's a long way and it took a long time but I came. And then I was locked up in a room for two god-damn hours. I look out in the corridor to try and get some coffee and some fool tries to kill me. And now you have the bloody nerve to ask what's going on!'

He looked at me expressionlessly.

`How did you get into the corridor? Your card would not open the door.'

`A child could open your doors,' I snarled, tossing the lamp with the shorted leads onto the table. `Dear God, if this is an example of how you do things in this organization, I want out!'

He picked up the broken lamp-bulb and left the room. Outside I heard voices raised in anger. Finally the door opened and Jones reappeared.

`I'm afraid we owe you an apology,' he said formally.

Chapter 4

The restaurant was empty now as mollified I sipped at my Cognac. It had been an excellent if silent meal. My host had eaten it rapidly and efficiently as though it was some ritual he had to go through. I doubt if he had tasted a mouthful.

During the meal I glanced at him curiously and could hardly believe he was the same person who had visited me in Munich. I could only suppose that in the, élitist and competitive Chondisp hierarchy he had had to suppress the warm human side of his nature.

He had apologized for my reception at Chondisp but had offered no explanation.

`I'm afraid it was just one of those things that occasionally occur in every big organization. A slight computer hiccup,' he said.

`Computer problems can be serious,' I said, thinking of the time I got no mail for a week once. `They should get someone to look into it.'

There was a pause.

`They are,' he said, looking into the distance. `But I musn't bother you with our little troubles.'

He put his water glass down, his grey eyes focussed on me and his voice became formal. He was going to tell me why I was at Chrodisp.

`It is common knowledge that with the Nuclear Stand-off neither side dares to use nuclear powered weapons for fear of retaliation,' he began, `and so world conflicts, and there are many of them, have become the affair of conventional forces. In other words, the infantryman. There is therefore a continual effort to improve the efficiency of the simple soldier. We can get him quickly to the conflict and we can train him to be prepared for most sorts of aggression from riot-control to a set-piece battle. But the permanent concern of our military is to make sure he has the best weapons.' It sounded like a quotation.

I thought over the armament available and must have looked a bit surprised.

`Yes, I know it's good. But remember, we pay Social Security to our unemployed whereas Asiablock put theirs in the Army. We are outnumbered four to one and so our weaponry and fighting methods must be four times better, just to achieve parity.'

`Now you know,' he continued, `electro-weapons can only operate in a dry climate, lasers and beam weapons are also weather dependent and in any case are only useful against soft targets. They need a nukepak to make them really effective and that is forbidden on the battlefield as it can escalate.'

`So we are back to the Soldier's Best Friend - his rifle,' I said.

`Exactly. Projectile weapons. Still the best way of delivering energy from A to B. You would think that the development of the soldier's personal weapon would have finished 100 years ago but that is not the case. New materials, new tactics - they all influence weapons. Now look at this.' He pulled out of his pocket what I recognized as a standard 5.56mm SEATO cartridge. He closed his left hand into a fist and pushed the cartridge into it.

`The bolt pushes the cartridge into the breech and holds it there. The striker hits the percussion cap which then fires the charge of propellant. The expanding gas of the explosion pushes the cartridge case against the wall of the breech to make a gas-tight seal so the whole force of the explosion is applied to the base of the bullet which is then driven down the barrel.'

He pulled out the bullet and put it on the table.

`The bolt extracts the empty cartridge case and it is thrown away.' He placed the bullet and the cartridge case side by side.

`In order to fire a bullet at the enemy, we have to deliver to the soldier, and he has to carry with him: one bullet 3.5 grams, powder 2 grams and one cartridge case 10 grams. Total 15.5 grams of which 10 grams is thrown away. Two thirds. If we could eliminate the need for the cartridge case he could carry three times as many rounds as now. Not to mention the transport costs, cost of manufacture, wastage of valuable metals.

It was true. I was impressed. Why had no one thought of it before? Big guns didn't have cartridge cases. The shell was pushed first into the barrel, then the driving charge. The breech was closed and the charge fired. Gas was prevented from squirting out from the breech by sealing it internally with a sort of squashy bag that was deformed by the pressure of the explosion. What was that called? The "obturator", that was it.

`Obturation,' I said, aloud.

`That's it,' he said, surprised. `Yes, of course, it's your job. The problem is to make a small light self-sealing breach for a rifle so the cartridge case is not necessary. No one has succeeded although many have tried and are still trying.'

`And Chrondisp think some guy may have solved the problem in the past? The idea wasn't sufficiently used or publicized and died with him? Someone on a Branch Line?' I must have looked sceptical.

`We're sure of it. Now, before I can tell you any more, you must "sign on".'

*

"Signing on" was done (or not done, I hadn't decided yet) in the Legal Department, in another dome. It was a sort of combined Contract and Will and made the Official Secrets Act look like advertising copy. A bored looking clerk handed it to me.

I read it all through with mounting incredulity and finally blew up over the section where the "undersigned at the termination of the Mission (see 43g above) will voluntarily without let or hindrance submit himself to a "selective memory erasure".

`You're out of your diminutive mind if you think I'm going to sign this!' I said angrily. `Memory erasure", even I know it's a completely experimental technique - more likely erasure of me! No and no again!' I tore the sheets up and threw them down on the table. I looked round for my coat.

The clerk tiredly picked up my card and punched a number. He held out the phone to me.

`Yes?' I snapped. `Oh, it's you. Have you seen these bloody "sign-up" forms? You were just getting me interested, but there's no way that I'm going to let anyone selectively or otherwise ... what?' I handed the phone back to the clerk who had been picking up the pieces of torn paper. It looked like he had done it before.

He pulled some more copies of the forms out of a drawer and with the phone clamped between ear and shoulder went through them, ticking off sections. He handed them to me.

I glared at them suspiciously. At least the memory section was out. I took off my coat and sat down again. A lot better. I slowly and carefully crossed out all the inoperative sections.

I read it through again. Legalese has a stiff ritualistic beauty of its own, like a Catholic High Mass: "In due consideration of which, the party of the third part, consanguineous to the party of the second part, accepts as full and complete compensation that ..." Ah, yes, compensation.

`A minor point,' I said. `But I don't see anything here about the ..er.. (I looked at the form) ..the "due compensation".'

He looked at my card. `Scale 6.'

`Which is?' Reluctantly he slid over a poor photocopy.

Scale 6 - not bad at all. For every week "On Mission", the equivalent of three month's salary at the shop. Plus free insurance and life insurance payable to a close relative. Plus free use of the canteen. Great.

I don't think the clerk expected me to sign on the spot so when I pointed at the phone he merely punched a number and a guide arrived. A few minutes later I was sitting in an office facing my Chrondisp representative.

I looked curiously around the orderly almost austere office. The desk empty except for the standard built-in terminal screen and a phone. On the wall a holo of a small sailing boat close-hauled, heeled over steeply, the spray glittering. The sea looked cold and its grey exactly matched the colour of Dr Duluth's eyes. In the corner of the office was a globe of the earth.

`Why the incognito bit?' I said, touching the "Dr Duluth" sign on his desk. "Project Coordinator" was written underneath it.

He shrugged.

`We try to keep our projects secret and if someone found that Chrondisp had approached you...,' He paused.

`They, you mean Asiablock, would wonder why you were suddenly so interested in old firearms,' I finished. And they would also be interested in the person who was advising Chrondisp on old firearms I thought suddenly. I was now in the firing line too.

I held up the form:

`I now have a signable contract but before I actually sign it, I need to know more.'

`Very well.' He moved the phone to one side. `As I told you, the military are looking for a self-sealing rifle breech. There are several rumours that one was developed in France around 1815 and that some breech-loading muskets using it were built and were used at the Battle of Waterloo in the same year. But in the confusion surrounding the end of this battle, at least on the French side, the inventor was killed and all existing models were lost.' He paused.

`Chrondisp have received a contract to go back and find out all we can about this musket,' he continued, `and this will be your Mission. As to how long you will be here ...,' he shrugged, `...it's difficult to say. First you will have to take a training course anyway and that lasts two weeks.'

`On full pay.'

`On full pay, of course. Then perhaps two Insertions, each of two weeks. Mission time is the same as subjective time, so say two months maximum.' He opened a draw in his desk and looked down into it. `And perhaps I should add that although you are sent for a specific objective it costs a great deal of energy to Insert you so we operate a sort of bonus scheme for anything else you find that may be useful. You will be given a list of such things before you leave.' He pulled a pen out of the drawer then looked up at me. `But on the other hand your stay here might be much shorter. Some people are untrainable - you might never make it.'

Seeing my expression he added, `I mean nothing happens to them; they just can't be Inserted.' He handed me the pen. `And now Mr Digby, that is definitely all I can tell you before you sign-on.'

That was the moment. I thought back over my life at the shop, of the peaceful sunny Maxburg Strasse. Of my ambition to buy an apartment in fabulously expensive Munich, perhaps to share it with some young Fräulein ... One month on the Chrondisp pay-roll would allow a good down payment.

I took the pen hearing alarm bells and feeling ghostly shivers. I signed. Dr Duluth came round his desk and shook my hand.

Chapter 5

I had had an idea I would be just issued a Helmet and then sent on my Mission, but there was more to it than that. It was in fact a bit like College. I was assigned a room/study and attended classes. There were 10 in our class; two of them were girls. Our instructor was a tall bald Australian called Pete. In the first lesson we learnt that chronological displacement had been discovered accidentally by people who had been struck by lightning. When they recovered consciousness (those that did recover consciousness), they found they had had strange dreams of the past.

We also learnt that the reason for the care taken in our training was not only for our personal safety but also because of the enormous amount of energy required to send us back even a short distance into the past.

I learnt that contrary to all the holos, you are not sent back in person; you are sent back into someone living in the selected time. You are Inserted into a Host, to use the jargon. Fairly early on we were taken to see an Insertion. It was spectacular.

The whole class piled into the rubber-wheeled train and were soon standing before a large steel door stencilled "Insertion Complex". Pete put in his card and the doors slid aside. We climbed down a few metal steps and found ourselves in a small gallery high on the wall of a huge echoing, cavernous chamber, sparsely lit by a few glow panels. It was cold and there was a faint smell of ozone hanging in the air.

Most obvious was a small cage, swinging slightly, suspended from the domed roof high above us. There was a light on in the cage and when he moved I saw a man in a white overall sitting there. And yes, he was wearing the famous Time Traveller's Helmet. Looming out of the darkness at the far side of the hall were huge voltage-multiplying columns, cross-connected and surmounted by big dully gleaming domes. On each side of the cage there was suspended a 2m diameter sphere. Far away and down to the right I could see the window of a brightly-lit control room where two men were reading print-outs.

Pete had been talking into a telephone mounted on the gallery wall and now called us round.

'Insertion in 5 minutes,' he said. 'The resonator bank is now being charged. It's not a big shot: only back 50 years. The pulse occurs between those two spheres,' he pointed. 'Ah, there they go now, moving into place.' There was a soft whine of servos and the two large spheres smoothly took up positions about 2m from the cage, one on each side. By looking closely I could see that they were in fact still moving very slowly around the cage. "Planetary movement compensation", we had been told.

A large clock on the wall came on, showing 120 seconds to go and counting down. A faint glow became visible over the domes at the top of the voltage multipliers and something seemed to be tugging at the hairs on the back of my hands. A klaxon started to sound.

With a startling rattle a heavy double-glazed screen with inserted metal mesh slid down in front of us, cutting us off from the hall and muting the sound of the klaxon.

Pete became silent and watchful. As the wall clock approached zero both spheres became covered with the ghostly blue flickering glow of corona discharge. Suddenly, a fine white-hot line seemed to join the two spheres to the cage (the laser triggers), followed immediately by a brilliant flash and a thunderous echoing crash. The cage was enveloped in a blue mist of plasma for an instant and I distinctly felt the radiated heat of the pulse on my face.

And that was it. The wall clock stayed at 000 for a few seconds then went off. The glass screen whined up out of sight and Pete looked relieved.

Far below a small door opened and two medical orderlies appeared pushing a white stretcher across the floor. They waited as the cage was slowly lowered and allowed to touch the metal floor before anyone approached it. The cage door was hinged upward and a slumped, white-coated figure helped out and laid on the stretcher. One of the orderlies bent over him for a while then straightened up and gave a thumbs-up signal to what I now noticed was another viewing gallery, further along the wall. The other orderly reached inside the cage, disconnected the Helmet connector and reconnected it to a box under the stretcher. The two of them slowly pushed their patient across the floor and disappeared through the door.

The door closed.

Chapter 6

I made a friend in our class, mainly because he was about my age and had also been in the Affair. Jim Prince was American and had been attached to their Marines. He was 32, like me, quite short but very solidly built. He came from California and was some sort of electronics wizard.

We were sitting in the restaurant and discussing the Insertion we had just seen. With a pencil in his stubby spatulate fingers Jim was doodling on a napkin.

‘What I don't get,’ he began, ‘is why they make such a big deal of it. I mean why only here, way out in the desert? It's easy enough to make lightning flashes.’

‘It looked pretty impressive to me,’ I said.

‘Child's play. Most science museums have got equipment in their electrostatic section that'll make a 2m long spark. And most countries have a facility somewhere for testing the effect of lightning on their overhead power lines. They can make a 4m spark easily, and that's without a laser trigger. So it should be common enough to take 50 year trips back in time. Why don't they?’ The napkin was covered with a complex system of squares.

‘They keep going on about the energy they need,’ I suggested, ‘there was a lot of heat from that flash. I don't remember feeling that at a science museum.’

‘Hm,’ said Jim. ‘You may have something there, Dig. A high current pulse.’

‘And they've got a fancy computer here too, I'm told.’

‘A Multi-Cray,’ he said absently, filling in the squares.

*

In Theory, we learnt of Insertion Threshold Energy, of Insertion Precision and the various factors affecting it. We looked at printouts of Timelines and learnt some of the strange jargon: Major and Minor Marker Points, Branchline Leadoff.

Someone brought up the possibility that people in the future could be Inserted into us. There was an excited burst of chatter as we considered the possibility of us being manipulated. But Pete looked as though he had heard the question before.

‘Probably not. Everything we are doing here must be Main Timeline stuff. But we won't really know until we get there, of course.’

*

‘It's all rather disconcerting,’ Jim had said later in the bar. He was doing his British thing. ‘I sure don't like the idea of some guy sitting in my head seeing everything I do.’ He raised his eyebrows comically. ‘And everything I think,’ he added as an afterthought.

‘It must be just as bad for him, if there is one,’ I said.

‘What! You mean my Observer may have an Observer sitting in his head? I hadn't thought of that.’ He paused, looking into the distance. ‘And of course he may also have an Observer...’

‘Have another beer,’ I advised him.

*

Next on the list was a visit to see what happened to us when we were On Mission.

Again the rubber-wheeled train, this time a much longer journey and judging by the drop in temperature, a lot deeper under the earth's surface. Finally we stopped at a small platform which ended in a steel door similar to that of the Insertion Complex. But this time security was much tighter. We all had to put in our cards and look into the binocular-type eyeret reader.

Once inside there was a glass-sided airlock and we were inspected by a slowly panning camera before the other glass door hissed to one side.

A swarthy Arab-looking man in a white doctor's coat met us and shook Pete's hand. He was introduced as Akim and they exchanged a few words as we followed them down a long wide cool corridor. The corridor was lined with thick glass and through the glass we could see rows of figures lying on white beds. Each figure wore a Helmet which was plugged into a bedside socket and a drip-tube going into the left arm, also connected to a wall socket. It was rather horrible, as though there had been a mass accident somewhere.

'Yes, it's pretty macabre,' said Pete, 'but they are OK. They are in our highest security area and their health, physical and mental, is being continuously monitored.'

'How long have they been here?' whispered one of the girls in our class - a German girl called Brigitte. She sounded as though she was afraid of waking them up.

'Anything up to a month,' answered Pete 'but most usual is a fortnight.'

'A fortnight?' said Jim, the American.

'Two weeks,' I translated.

'They sleep for a month!' exclaimed Jean-Pierre, another class member. 'How do you prevent atrophy of the muscles?' He must have been a doctor.

Pete looked across at Akim who answered.

'Stimulation of the brain motor centres. If you look carefully you can see them move.'

And you could too! All their chins moved up fractionally together, then the right hands all clenched in synchronism. The girls shuddered.

'Someone called them Zombies,' grinned the doctor. 'But they get off their beds in better condition than they got on - less fat, more muscle tone. We are thinking of selling the idea to one of those health corporations.'

'Well, that's all I can show you here,' said Pete. 'We also have the monitoring stations and the Computer Centre down here, but that's all classified.'

With a last glance of horrified fascination over our shoulders we left the rows of sleeping Travellers, all moving their left feet up and down in perfect step.

On the way out Pete explained to us that as soon as a Traveller awoke he was given a quick bedside debriefing and then taken to one of a series of small cabins further back where they recorded all their experiences in more detail.

Back in the classroom Pete said:

'That's all from me for the moment. We'll meet again at the Simulator but now you have to learn about Host Control. Your instructor will be AI.'

AI turned out to be a short dark Californian with a lively mobile face.

He told us that the only way to Observe the past was through the eyes and ears of a person living at that time.

'Ears?' said Jim. 'What if the guy is speaking in a foreign language? I have problems even in British.' He glanced at me.

'No problem,' said AI. 'Everything you hear will be in your own language.'

'You mean "fortnight" comes out as "two weeks" and "lift" as "elevator"?''

'And "I tell him now" will come out as "I inform him verbally at this point in time",' I added.

'All of that,' grinned AI.

AI then went on to say that Observing a particular event meant finding someone who had actually seen it. To save time the Timelines had been mapped out by teams of explorers and Hosts recommended for specialists like us.

`It's incredibly boring most of the time but you have to watch attentively, as the important bit can happen quite quickly and unexpectedly. Then you've only got his memory which can be flawed, especially if the data had an emotional impact on him.'

`Now "Control on a Branchline" - this is what you will mostly be doing. The golden rule is - "as little as possible". If he's going in the right direction; hands off. But if he's looking at something and not noticing it, you can give him a nudge. You can influence his mood to some extent. Make him optimistic if he's doing what you want and vice versa. Yes?'

`What happens if your Host is on a Mainline?' asked Claudio, one of the Italians on the course.

`Well, first of all, it's very rare that this ever happens; it's never happened to me and I've done more than 50 Insertions, but we are told that it's quite unmistakable. You just lose control of everything and get pushed aside. But please remember that we have sent out Observers to map the Mainline and these maps will be very useful to you, but you are wasting your time (and ours) if you ever stray onto a Mainline. We know all about it and you can't change anything anyway. OK?'

We were measured for our Helmets and finally issued with them, the internal amplifiers individually matched to our EEG signals and our names stencilled on the front. We put them on rather self-consciously. Jean-Pierre seriously told the two girls that there was a special Helmet for Belgians with extra-sensitive amplifiers to pick up the faint signals from the Belgian brain. Brigitte laughed but Yvette, the other girl was in fact Belgian and was not amused. (Belgians are for the French what the Poles are for the Americans.) Then Jim held his Helmet connector against Yvette's connector (the prettier of the two girls, I noticed), closed his eyes and said he could tell everything she was thinking. She blushed and snatched it away.

`OK, OK, kiddies' said Al, who seemed to have expected the fooling around.
`Playtime is over, let's get back to work.'

*

And so the course continued. In the Simulator we lay down on a couch one at a time and plugged in our Helmets to the drowsy humming of electro-narcosis. It worked for all of us although Claudio's Helmet had to be readjusted.

The Simulator itself was just a standard holo projector viewed through a black tube. It was supposed to imitate what we would see (see?) when we went back in time. It simulated all the nearby time markers so we would be able to find our way when we did the real thing.

The last item was practising how to strongly imagine certain "code thoughts" which we would use later when we wished to switch off narcosis and return from an Insertion. We were encouraged to use an image that covered at least two senses and of course it had to be an image that you weren't likely to think of accidentally when on a Mission. Pete, (who had returned) told us that he personally used a few lines of poetry that he had learnt as a child. He pointed out the difficulty of choosing a powerful image and not thinking of it.

Finally we were ready for our first test Insertion.

Chapter 7

Dressed in white coveralls and holding our Helmets on our knees, we sat on stools in front of racks of complicated-looking equipment. Pete was standing in front of us, giving last minute details and instructions.

`Now first, this is the training Inserter; it only has a small range, no more than 20 years, but in all other respects it is identical to the main Inserter. We usually let the

trainees stay here in the control room during test Insertions so you can see what happens while you are in the cage. But please keep away from the equipment and don't disturb the techs. Through the window there you can see what goes on outside.'

We looked and saw a bulky figure doing something to the cage which was swinging a foot above the ground.

'And that is Joe who will fit you into the cage.'

'During this, your first Insertion,' he continued, 'we are only going to send you back about 12 years to what we call the Arab. The Arab is, or was, sitting on a sand dune 50 miles north of here, looking after his goats. All I want you to do is Observe him for a few minutes and then say your return code.'

He spoke into his lapel microphone, the steel door to the Inserter hall opened and the stocky figure of Joe appeared and was introduced.

'Right. Mr Dupont first.'

Mr Dupont went out with Joe and we watched. Two casually dressed technicians were standing in front of the Inserter control. One was drinking from a cup marked "Emil".

'OK,' Pete said to them. 'One for the Arab in 5 minutes.' We looked out of the window and saw Joe closing the cage door on Mr Dupont.

Pete was standing before another panel - the Mission panel. He was talking into his lapel again and we heard Mr Dupont reply that everything was fine. Pete then asked Mr Dupont to say and think of various words like "mother", "red-hot poker", "juicy steak", "calm moon-lit night". At each image the screen was covered with a complex multi-coloured pattern and Pete pushed a key which froze it.

'Calibration,' he explained over his shoulder.

He looked across at the two technicians and the one with the cup nodded. Pete then pushed a key marked "Electro-narcosis" and waited, looking at a panel of small red lights, all of which turned green one after the other, except one. Finally the last lamp turned green and Pete said 'Now.'

The technician, who had put down his cup, was intently watching a screen. He pressed a large mushroom shaped knob and we could hear the klaxon sounding. There was a muted crash and the two technicians relaxed.

It was now Pete's turn to stiffen into attention in front of the Mission panel, intently watching three displays. One I recognized as the Timeline for the Chrondisp location, just the last 20 years. Leading off to one side was a brightly illuminated Branchline. Slowly moving down the Main Timeline was a small white spot - presumably Mr Dupont. It slowly and rather uncertainly turned onto the Branchline then faltered. Pete made a movement of his hand as though to push him on but it was too late. All the displays went to a neutral grey and two red lights came on. We could see that Mr Dupont had woken up in the cage.

Pete was speaking into his lapel again.

'A little slow down the Mainline, there. I'd like to try that again. OK?'

A mumbled reply, then 'It was fantastic, there was so much to ..it was just like you said ..I...'

Pete grinned at us.

'No one really believes it until they've actually done it. He'll be all right next time.'

And so he was. This time the spot of light moved confidently around the bend into the Branch Line and stopped at the end. The middle display became animated and Pete transferred his attention to it. The colours swirled for a few tens of minutes then purple streaks appeared. Pete watched a second then pressed a button marked "Return".

Immediately a voice came from the speaker:

`Why did you stop there? It was just getting interesting.'

We looked questioningly at Pete.

`The old Arab is thinking of his last visit to the Kasbah,' grinned Pete `we always know when they get to that bit and usually have to bring them back on manual.'

Jim had been pacing around the control room, looking intently at what everyone was doing. He sat by me.

`I think I see how some of it's done,' he said. `You see that guy Emil; he was phase-locking an external generator to a sub-harmonic of Dupont's EEG. And the external generator is what triggers the flash.'

He looked at my blank face.

`I mean the flash occurred at some special point in the EEG. And what's more, it's not a normal flash - they had it on that small display so they must have potted it down somehow. A normal flash is a damped sine-wave: this one was just straight up-down, almost a delta function.' He looked into the distance, biting his thumb-nail. `Not easy to do, that.'

I told him I hadn't the faintest idea of what he was talking about and anyway it was his turn. He picked up his Helmet and left.

And then, last but not one, I was called.

I walked out into the large Trainer hall and Joe helped me into the cage. I put on my Helmet and Joe plugged it in. I leaned back nervously. It really was very comfortable - like a dentist's chair is comfortable.

I looked around inside the cage. It was egg-shaped and silver plated. The seat and the boxes under the seat were all insulated from the metal of the cage by big yellow waxy looking insulators. I put my feet on the foot rests, my hands on the hand rests and my thumb on the conveniently placed red Emergency button. Joe slid down the cage door with a rather final-sounding click.

`Don't touch the cage,' he said automatically and stepped back. He spoke into his lapel and with a soft whine the cage rose about 2m in the air until it was centred between two very slowly moving spheres. I looked at them apprehensively.

`Don't swing the cage,' said Joe and disappeared into the Control Room.

`OK, Mr Digby?' said Pete's voice in my ear.

`Fine,' I replied.

`Good. Now repeat after me ...' Then followed the list of test objects I had already heard. I repeated and thought dutifully.

Pause.

`Right. Don't touch the cage.'

The familiar drowsiness overtook me but this time I had a distinct feeling of moving, rather like skin-diving but as though being pushed.

I moved through a white glow which I recognized as the 10 year Marker. A female voice said "Prepare to turn" and then a small green glow appeared. I "turned" and there was a complex pattern of colours which flashed past.

Damn.

Pause, then I woke up.

`You were moving much too fast,' said Pete's voice. `He's only 2 years down the Branch Line. We'll try again. OK? Don't touch the cage.'

Again the drowsiness, the white marker, the voice, the green Marker and finally the complex pattern. I slowly glided up to it and "Merged".

*

He was sitting under the shade of a thorn bush looking across limitless yellow sands. It was pleasantly warm - the sky a deep blue and not a cloud to be seen. His eyes moved down and he looked at the end of a stick he was poking idly in the sand.

I could see very clearly in the middle of his field of vision and less clearly to the side. It was a strange sensation, rather like watching a very realistic holo. He wasn't saying or thinking anything special but when he lifted up his eyes again a profound contentment filled him as he looked at his seven goats heads down in the scanty scrub. Time passed and I felt his contentment as a warm glow.

One of the goats was going to give birth in about two months.

'You're going to be a father soon,' I said politely, after a while.

'Twins,' he said contentedly.

'Boring job you've got here.'

'Dead boring. If it wasn't for the weekends, I'd pack it in, mate. But Kazmir, that's the place. Get tanked up on vino and then round to Ali's for a dollop of the old compressed corn semolina served with meat and mixed vegetables.' (What?! Oh, I was getting a translation. He must mean 'couscous'). 'And then no evening is complete without a visit to the Golden Tongue.'

'A singer, no doubt?'

'Cor, she'll make you sing all right.' He chuckled lecherously.

We chatted a bit more and then abruptly I woke up, to find Joe looking at me strangely. He helped me out of the cage and pointed to the Control Room.

Al was there with a man who I had only met once at our introductory talk. He was some high-up Director. Pete and all the others had left.

They were both looking at me intently.

'I remember him from somewhere,' said the Director 'Isn't he the one who caused us all that trouble with the Military?'

'And discovered a big hole in our security system,' said Al.

Reflective pause, then the Director looked at Al.

'Do you know how long you have been out?' Al asked me.

Oh, that was it.

'About half an hour?' I hazarded. 'Well, the old boy was telling me all about the fleshpots of ..er.. Kazmir, wherever that is and I guess I sort of forgot about getting back.'

'Remarkable, a natural,' said the Director to Pete. 'Debrief him and I'll see you in my office afterwards.' He left.

'Come over here,' said Al abruptly, sitting at a table in the corner of the Control Room. I sat down and put my Helmet on the table.

'Now just tell me what happened,' he said.

So I repeated it all as near as I could remember.

'How did you know the goat was pregnant?' he asked curiously.

'Well, during the Affair we had a company of Gurkhas attached to us and I got quite friendly with them. They kept some goats.'

'Gurkhas?'

'A remnant from our Imperial past. Mercenaries, I suppose you would call them but they're more than that. They come from Nepal and serve with the British Army. They're very good at jungle warfare. We like them.'

'I see,' he said, baffled.

Chapter 8

I met Jim in the restaurant.

'Hey, Dig! What happened to you? After you had been gone for ten minutes Pete got all excited and made a phone call. He shooed us all out of the Control Room and back to the classroom. The last guy didn't get his Insertion.'

I too was surprised at the effect my Insertion had had but I had nothing to add. I shrugged.

'Maybe something broke down,' I suggested. 'How was your Insertion?'

'Fantastic!' he said 'You just sit there, look where he looks, hear what he hears and feel what he feels. You are actually there! And all the time you can hear him muttering to himself.'

'What did you say to him?' I asked.

'Yeah, that would be something... You know, I always thought looking after goats was the end, it, I mean zilch, next stop the grave. But was I wrong! I tell you Dig, that guy gets into more nooky during a weekend than we here are likely to see in a hundred years! We've really got to check-out this Cats place.'

He went on about this some more and then said he had found that there was a small door in the recreation area which would open to his card and which led to the outside. It would not open during the day, 'too hot, I guess,' but someone in our class had found it would open in the evening and they had strolled around a bit. We decided to try it.

He told me it was cold in the evening outside so I went back to my room and selected a dark-blue anorak. Very useful in Munich where the weather could change from summer sun to winter hail in 15 minutes. I met him again by the door. He was still bubbling over with his test Insertion.

'Jeez,' he said, 'when you think you can go back and really check on history, really see what happened..' he fumbled in his pocket for his card but had forgotten it. I used mine. 'Maybe we'll finally learn something from History.'

We stepped out into the fresh air, me for the first time in two weeks. It was wonderful! An incredible sunset was in progress, the sun visibly sinking behind the domes. It was windy and quite chilly, the sand blowing in eddies and stinging my face. A few other people were walking around, hands deep in pockets.

We set out towards the sunset, Jim still going on about Real History and how we would finally know why people did things. I privately thought it would be better to leave the legends and the heroes where they were. We might find they had feet of clay.

We came at last to the perimeter fences, two, with a path between them for policemen to patrol with guard dogs. We moved away a bit and sat on a small sand dune, watching the sun set and the stars come out. Even Jim stopped talking for a while. The wind had dropped, it was very quiet and we were alone.

We lay on our backs looking up at the stars. Jim was calmer now.

'You know,' he said slowly, 'this really is a big step forwards; we'll really be able to use the whole brain power of the human race. I mean, when you look at Euclid's geometry theorems, we haven't got any smarter ... I tried to do that Pythagoras thing the other day and I had to look it up. A goddam Greek more than 2000 years ago! Just think of all those bright guys beavering away at .. psychic research, number theory... and never telling anyone.'

'And "Visitors from Space",' he continued. 'Just think how that would affect us if we found Aliens had visited!'

'Yes, Jim,' I said, 'OK for the history, but I'm not so sure about the Forgotten Genius. I can't help feeling that most bright ideas would have got through.'

Jim continued talking but the stars at night always have a powerful effect on me - and not only because of recent experiences in Pakistan. I remember how I felt when I was a little boy standing on the tip of England at Land's End and being told by my father that there was nothing between me and St John's Bay in Newfoundland, more than two thousand miles away. Somehow the fact that there was nothing between us

meant there was nothing stopping me going there. And there was Alpha Centauri our nearest neighbour, four-and-a-bit light years away if I remembered rightly, and nothing between me and it. And there, over by the fence was...what was that moving? Something low down and black against the faint remnant of the sunset. An animal - one of the guard dogs, I supposed. But surely they didn't just let their guard dogs run around between the fences alone?

Christ! It wasn't between the fences, it was inside the fence, on the same side as us! I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. I hate guard dogs. Dogs really are a man's best friend but those guard dogs have been deliberately treated cruelly, deliberately made into the equivalent of psychopaths. They were mad and seeking revenge for their inhuman treatment.

I seized Jim's arm and pointed silently.

'Holy shit!' said Jim, softly.

It was a large Alsatian. In the starlight it had loped silently along the inside of the perimeter fence but had then turned and was heading for the door in the recreation area dome, the door we had used. That door was now closed. And there was no one else around.

The dog stopped, raised its head and then started casting in circles, nose down, tail up. I looked back at the fence. 'Where's the fucking keeper?' But the dog was alone.

Crouching down we watched it, 50m away and circling rapidly. I had seen them doing that before - it was looking for a scent. I began to have a premonition.

'Jim, have you got a knife or anything?' I whispered.

'Only this.' He pulled a screwdriver with a 10cm blade out of his jacket pocket.

'Give it me.' I took off my anorak and put it on the ground in front of me, my eyes never leaving the dog, which had now stopped circling. It was looking around, head on one side listening.

'Watch your throat,' I whispered, 'and try to throw sand in its eyes if you can.' He picked up two handfuls.

Nose down now the dog was running directly towards us. I stood up suddenly and it froze about 5m away, haunches tensed. This dog wasn't waiting for us to throw him a stick.

It started delicately side-stepping, growling softly deep in its throat, its bared teeth visible in the faint starlight. I turned to face it, holding the anorak folded up across my chest. A sudden jump forward scattered the sand and now it was only 2m away. I didn't move.

Jim was moving out to the left. The dog gave him a quick intelligent glance then side stepped again, keeping me before Jim.

'Good, keep doing that,' I said and crouching lower, took a slow step forward, turning to follow the side-stepping dog. The dog was estimating distances now. It was going to kill me and then Jim. It didn't know that I was going to kill it first.

'Rush and throw when I say,' I said quietly over my shoulder.

'Check,' said Jim.

I took a big step to the right and the dog now found itself at the corner of a triangle with Jim and me at the other corners facing it. It glanced at Jim but returned to look at me. I took a firm grip on the anorak, screwdriver ready in my right hand.

'Not yet...not yet...get ready...now!'

We both rushed forward but I held the anorak out in front of me, twisted like a rope and parallel to the ground. The dog, distracted by the double attack, leapt at the first target - the centre of the anorak. And once they bite they don't let go.

Pulling it towards me I then heaved up and gave it a quick kick between its splayed open rear legs. It squealed and arched with pain. I threw the left half of the anorak over the muzzle, pushed it flat on the ground and then thrust the screwdriver blade deep into its right eye-socket, pulled it out and held it ready to thrust again. But it was not necessary. The dog twitched then lay still. Jim straightened up and kicked it.

`Sonofabitch!'

`Fortunately,' I said. I was breathing heavily and sweating in spite of the cold night. I dug the screwdriver a few times into the ground to clean it and then handed it back to Jim. Shivering with reaction I was filled with raw anger and personally wanted to see the fool who had let that dog escape.

`Let's get back,' said Jim, thrusting the screw-driver back into his anorak. He looked up at something over my shoulder.

`Hey, Dig, we've got company,' he said softly. I turned round quickly.

Two shadows were walking towards us, one with a flashlight. We shrank to the ground near the out-stretched body of the dog. As they approached I saw the faint starlight gleaming on the peaked caps of military police. Without a word we picked up handfuls of sand and crept forward.

They had now found the dog and were leaning over it talking.

I suppose I should have pointed out to them that guard-dogs ought not to be allowed to roam untended inside the compound as they might be distracted from their primary role of guarding the perimeter fence. I would then tell them I would have to reluctantly address a admonitory note to their superiors.

But they were military police.

`Ah, sergeant,' I said pleasantly.

They both spun round and both received facefuls of sand. Mine also received two stiff fingers in the throat. While he was on his knees choking, I tugged out his pistol and unclipped the lanyard. When I turned round Jim had the other one on his face in the sand, his pistol lanyard around his neck.

`I couldn't undo the catch,' he said almost apologetically. I showed him how and picked up the fallen flashlight.

`Get up.' They both stumbled to their feet, cursing and wiping sand out of their eyes. Mine was a sergeant. I had seen neither of them before.

`Is this your dog?' I asked the sergeant. He lurched towards me, fists up.

`Who the fuckinell are you and what the fuckinell..'

I was still trembling with reaction and when I thought that our lives had been in danger because of these two careless buggers, I saw red.

I hit him with the pistol forehand, just in front of the left ear. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the corporal lunge forward. Backhand I hit him across the right temple. He crashed to the ground and lay still.

Pistol in hand I watched them. After a while the sergeant staggered to his feet again but the corporal stayed down.

`Let's start again,' I said to the sergeant. `Your dog tried to bite us so we had to put it down. We'd like to know how your dog happened to be off the leash...'

`If you fuckin...'

`Now before we have any more misunderstandings, let me introduce you to my friend James O'Casey, an Irish American, who knows all about what the military police do in Northern Ireland and is just itching to do something for the Emerald Isle, right?'

`Shore thing and begorrah.' Jim's electro-pistol hissed and cracked and the body of the dead dog leapt convulsively into the air as its muscles contracted.

The sergeant's eyes gleamed with hate but he licked his lips.

`Corporal Lonofski's dog lead broke as he was taking it to the perimeter walkway and the dog ran off. We were trying to find it.'

I unhooked the lead from the recumbent Lonofski's belt and pocketed it.

`And you didn't think of putting out a general alarm that a dangerous dog had escaped?'

`I reported it,' he said sullenly. I looked at him consideringly but there was nothing more to be had here and I wanted to get back.

`A firework display?' I said to Jim.

We aimed our pistols away and pressed the triggers. The air was dry and the darkness was lit up with the hissing and crackling of violet ionized air. The sergeant froze petrified. We did not have long to wait. Lights came on round the perimeter fence, a siren sounded and from behind the domes appeared two Cushcars. We were coned with search-lights and a loud-speaker stridently told us to throw down our arms. They were empty anyway.

The first car hissed to the ground and the door whined open. Out looked the MP lieutenant I had already met.

`You again!' I said, my blood pressure rising. `I'm amazed that you are still here. Do you realize that you and your cretinous underlings have brought me nearer to death in the two weeks I have been at Chondisp than the whole of the Chinese Expeditionary Force to Pakistan was able to do during 10 months? Your men are an untrained rabble and you are a disgrace to your uniform! I am going to put in a report to your commanding officer. Now come out of that car.'

We climbed in. The young corporal driver kept his eyes ahead.

`Over there to the recreation centre.'

We hissed over rapidly and stopped outside the door we had left.

'Er, excuse me, sir.'

`Yes?'

`That door is locked after 2200h, sir.'

`Well open it then.'

He leaned forward and picked up a phone. After a few moments of agitated conversation, the door clicked open.

We entered and with common consent headed straight for the restaurant. Whilst we were silently downing our second beers Dr Duluth and a major in the uniform of the Military Police walked in. I put my beer can down and made to stand up but Jim put his hand on my arm. Dr Duluth came straight to the point:

`Tell us what happened.'

I told him and Jim nodded in agreement.

The major, a little self-important looking man, was boiling with rage.

`You were out in the compound at an unauthorized hour, you have killed a valuable guard-dog and wounded two police officers, one of whom is still unconscious in hospital.'

I said nothing but just leaned forward and looked at his chest. He wore the Pakistan Clasp which everyone received automatically, and some long-service medals.

Jim cleared his throat.

`It's not for me to criticize your security arrangements here,' he began, `but it does seem that something is seriously wrong if two unarmed civilians can disable two armed policemen and a guard dog in the middle of a field.'

`Unarmed,' spat out the major. `He's one of those SAS thugs.'

`We were both unarmed,' repeated Jim. `But the Chinks are not going to send in unarmed men if they want to penetrate Chrandisp.'

And that was it, of course. The policemen, by any interpretation, had failed miserably in their job.

`I'm not sure what form the report to my Government is going to take ...' he continued, looking into the distance.

There was a pause. The US contributes more than half the Chrandisp budget. If they started to think security was like a sieve...

The major clenched and unclenched his hands. I watched interestedly. Perhaps he would have a heart attack. Finally he got up and stamped out.

Dr Duluth looked at me reflectively.

`That's the second attack on you, nevertheless,' he said.

`I'm glad someone is noticing,' I said.

`The first time no one could have known but the second time several people knew,' he said ambiguously.

`Well, I knew both bloody times,' I said heatedly, and if ...'

Dr Duluth held up his hand.

`I think we need some time to think this over. I suggest we sleep on it.'

He didn't look displeased.

Chapter 9

Early next morning Dr Duluth called my room and requested a visit to his office. I put my card in the slot under the phone and he programmed it for his location.

Using the card, I took the rubber-wheeled train, climbed out when the light told me to and walked down the corridor to his office. I noticed all the door locks had been changed to a newer-looking flush-mounted type with recessed LEDs.

I pushed my card into the slot of Dr Duluth's door and after a pause it clicked open. He was sitting behind his desk and waved me to a seat in front of him.

`Before we start,' I said, `let me show you something.' I pulled out the dog-leash I had taken from Corporal Lonofski's wrist the night before.

`The significance of this is that the sergeant said the dog was loose because the leash broke.' He picked up the leash and looked at the end. It was linked metal cast in tough plastic.

`Cut, you think?' he asked

`Damn sure. We used that stuff when we dropped supplies. It'll take at least 500kg. And I'll tell you something else. That dog was looking for me. I've seen dogs tracking and that's exactly what it was doing. It smelled me and came straight for me. It ignored Jim completely.'

`But how did it know you? You've never been out before.'

`All you have to do is give them something to smell and say "go, go". And one last thing. Someone was in my room between 20h when I left to go with Jim, and 2330h when I got back.' I explained that at Chrandisp I had unconsciously dropped into the old wartime habit of carefully arranging articles in my room before I left it.

`And you think something was taken to give your scent to the dog?' He was looking at me intently.

`I can't find anything missing,' I said, `but then I'm not sure I remember everything I brought.'

`Excuse me a moment,' he said. He picked up the dog lead and went into the next room. I could hear him speaking quietly but with concentrated fury. Whoever was at the other end of the line didn't contribute much to the conversation.

After a quarter of an hour he returned and put the lead back on his desk. He sat down again, twisting his watch-strap round his wrist and looking grim.

'I don't know what to say. I will have the leash analyzed and we will be making stringent enquiries. It could all be a coincidence... The safest place for you now is on Mission.'

'What!' I exclaimed, 'Lying down sleeping with all those zombies. I'd be a sitting duck.' I shivered in recollection.

'No, seriously. We keep our main computer in the same complex and it is the most secure area we have. There have been penetrations into Chrodisp before, but there has never been a breath of suspicion in that section.'

He paused.

'You were due to go on Mission anyway. Your training here is finished. I can give you a day to think it over but finally you must decide whether to go on Mission or leave Chrodisp. I can understand your reluctance and of course you will be fully indemnified.'

Put up or shut up. I thought of Munich, the shop in the quiet sunny street, the occasional visitor....

'Well, provisionally... Tell me more about the Mission.'

'Good. I must say I would be very sorry to lose you.' His voice changed. 'What particularly pleased me,' he continued, 'is the fact that you were able to "Empathize" with the old Arab they use as a target during training. It's a rare ability. No one, not even an instructor, has managed to do that yet.'

'"Empathize"? That's a new word.'

He looked at me, annoyed.

'I thought Training would have explained all that to you,' he said. He continued:

'"Empathizing" is the ability to sympathize, to make friends if you like, with the Host. If done properly the Host just accepts you as a voice inside himself, as himself.'

'If I start hearing voices inside myself...', I began.

'No, no, it's not like that. The Host feels just like you do when you suddenly get a good idea and wonder where it came from. Like when you suddenly make a joke in a conversation at a party and everyone laughs, including yourself.'

Yes, it often happened. I had a chilling thought, thinking of my conversation with Jim.

'Does that then mean...?'

'That someone in the future is trying to Empathize with you? Who knows? Perhaps.' He absently looked at the cut end of the dog lead. 'Following your debriefing the instructors have all been reading up on goats and trying again,' he said, 'but it hasn't done them any good.' He put the lead down. 'And now as to your Mission ...'

He reached under his desk, the lights of the office dimmed and a map of northern France appeared in the air between us. There was a circle surrounding a coastal town in the north west.

'Brest,' said Dr Duluth. 'In the year 1810 there was a small gun-manufacturing company called Le Foc Frères: the Le Foc Brothers, Jacques and Jan.'

'Old records identify Jan as the technical brains of the partnership. They apparently lived by making one-off shot-guns for the local gentry but Jan was always experimenting, trying to make a breech-loader. I don't need to tell you of the advantages that that would confer, especially in a military musket.'

Faultless reasoning there. A military muzzle-loading musket had a 90cm barrel. Add the butt and you had a weapon that was so long that when the butt was on the

ground, the muzzle came up to the shoulder of the average man. To load it he had to pull out a paper cartridge, bite off the end (which contained the bullet), pour a little powder out of the cartridge into the flint-lock pan then pour the rest down the muzzle. Next he had to spit the bullet out of his mouth down into the barrel, squash the paper of the cartridge into a wad and push it into the muzzle. Lastly he had to pull out the ramrod from under the barrel, ram the powder wad and bullet down, pull out the ramrod, stow it back under the barrel, cock the flint-lock and he was ready to fire. No time to get down to a comfortable firing position, he fired directly from the shoulder and if you were good you could get off two shots per minute.

And don't forget you had to do all this elbow to elbow with the rest of your company while a yelling horde of cavalymen, murderous sabres uplifted, were charging down on you.

Yes, time and motion study must have started with infantry tactics around 1700.

`Well,' continued Dr Duluth, `Jan finally succeeded in making a practical breech-loader. And to make a breech-loader he must have invented a gas-tight breech. The record is not clear but he must have made a few prototypes which were sent to Paris as samples. Perhaps they were trying to sell the design to the French War Department. These prototypes ended up at the Battle of Waterloo and were actually used against the British. But in the aftermath of the French defeat and the occupation of France by the Allies all traces of the breech-loader have disappeared.'

`And Jan didn't make any more?' I asked, surprised.

`Apparently not.'

`So you want me to find Jan and discover his invention.' I paused. `Do you really think that he may have invented something that modern gunmakers with all the new materials available have not been able to do in 200 years?'

For answer he opened his drawer, rummaged around and pulled out the cartridge he had shown me before. He put it upright on his desk.

`It's the idea that is important. Do you realize that we could have had flying or at least gliding, in the time of the Pharaohs, if not earlier?'

I looked incredulous.

`But they didn't have the materials,' I protested, `nor the techniques to get the airfoils.'

`And what about hang-gliders?' he said.

Dammit. He was right. Bamboo and sail-cloth or even fine leather would have done it. The air over the wings formed them into the correct airfoil. Do your tests by running down a hill against the wind. `Why the hell hadn't they discovered it?' I thought irritably.

So Jan may have thought of something new, something that could be vastly improved using modern materials.

`All right,' I said. `I don't know why I'm fighting so hard. I'd go even if it was just to look around.'

`Well, we want you to do that too. So you are in agreement?'

`I am in agreement.'

*

I was told I had about a week to go before I could be Inserted and was advised to read up the period I was going to so I would be able to appreciate something of what was going on in the background. I was told I would be very lucky if I could immediately find what I was looking for and should think of a two week trip.

So I typed "1814" into the library terminal, followed by "France".

And, by God, it was a turbulent period. Something seemed to be happening every day. Napoleon had conquered most of Europe and had tried for Russia too.

But he had bitten off too much. Retreat from Moscow, Battle of Leipzig. Russians, Austrians, Germans and British invading France from every side. March 1814. Napoleon deposed by his generals and sent to a small island, Elba, between Italy and Corsica.

But a year later Napoleon escapes from Elba, sails for France, is acclaimed, raises an army (the Allies having all left France, thinking the danger was past) and decides on a battle against the British, Belgians, Dutch, Hanoverians and the Prussians who are strung out along the Belgian frontier. He has 120,000 men, the Allies the same. The Battle of Waterloo, the French defeated with 40,000 casualties. Napoleon recaptured and sent to another island, St. Helena, much further away and much more difficult to escape from. He dies there. End of story.

So much for the big picture. But I was going to Brest. I typed in "1815 Brest".

In Brest the Bretons were angry. They were Catholics and Royalists and the atheist regime of the Corsican Napoleon had deposed Louis 18. France was at war with the world again, conscripts had been recalled and the British had re-established their blockade of the port. Unemployment had risen. There was civil unrest and public executions. It should be fascinating to look around. There were several points on gun-making in the 19th Century that I would like to clear up. A quick visit to Jan's workshop should be very instructive and a glance at his breech-loader would sew up my Mission.

My last briefing was with Dr Duluth and AI.

They both looked pleased. Pete had told them they had just received definite information of Jan Le Foc and should be able to Insert me without difficulty. He had the habit of visiting his younger married sister every Sunday afternoon and walking back home along the cliffs. So he would be alone, as is required for an Insertion.

'Yes,' said Dr Duluth, 'we have a sigma of 0.95 for about two days and we are Inserting you in the middle of that period. But I must point out that after that period the sigma falls rapidly.' He was looking at some Timeline printouts on his desk.

'You mean you haven't the faintest idea of what Jan is doing after those two days and anything can happen,' I translated.

'There was a war on,' said AI, placatingly.

I was asked to give them a "code thought" for my return and was shown the Timelines leading back to Napoleonic France. I was given a list to memorize of miscellaneous information to collect if I could, (odd things like the name of the inhabitant of 14, rue Principale, and did anything special happen on the night of the 23 May 1815). Also a lot of questions on military technology which I would probably try to find answers for anyway.

'Right, well your Insertion is programmed for 10h tomorrow. Pete will be present. Good luck.'

Chapter 10

I was sitting in the egg-shaped cage of the main Inserter dressed in white coveralls and it was cold. I had had a quick medical check-up and had then been wheeled out to the cage on a stretcher. It was an unpleasant feeling - like going into an operation.

'Well, you'll be going on intravenous feeding as soon as you leave and the medics don't want to have to undress you,' Pete had said reasonably.

I could see him now looking through the window of the Mission Control room, way down on the right. There was a soothing voice in my ear.

'Repeat and think - mother, red-hot poker -..'

The familiar drone of the electro-narcosis, drowsiness then suddenly moving very fast. The white ten-year Markers went past in a blur then the yellow flash of a century Marker. I had never been so fast. Now another yellow Marker, slowing down, the white Markers visible. A female voice, "prepare to turn", the green Marker, I turned ...nothing ... nothing ... yes, that must be him...a complex swirl...I Merged.

*

He was striding along the cliff-edge path, his collar pulled up against a fine warm rain. There was a smell of gorse and sea. Below him at the foot of the cliffs he heard the slow rhythmic rustle of waves breaking. The sea was covered with a white mist and somewhere sea-gulls were crying.

A quick check showed his heart-beat and breathing were normal. My arrival was unnoticed.

This was fantastic! Here I was, a man from 2021, walking along a cliff-top in the year 1815. Nothing seemed to have changed. The gleaming wet stones on the path looked exactly like wet stones on a path should. When Jan looked up the sheep were moving their jaws exactly like the damp sheep I had seen in South Wales last year ..er..206 years in the future. It was mind boggling! It was incredible enough to be in someone's head... but this was two centuries ago!

A lot of data was coming in but he was on auto-pilot, talking to himself and ignoring most of it. However I could use it. A quick scan showed water was leaking through the right shoulder of his coat and a nail was beginning to come through the sole of his left boot.

I had been told I should do all these tests as soon as possible after the Merge. Next thing was to do a "Withdraw".

Ah, yes. Quite easy. It was like switching all data off. But not completely. In the far, far background I could hear the drone of the electro-narcosis and felt my right knee flexing. I must be one of those zombies by now. I had a quick check of myself - everything seemed to be OK memory-wise.

I returned to Jan. To Jan? I'd have to check on that first priority, otherwise I was wasting my time. I tuned in to this thoughts.

As he strode along he was breathing in with pleasure and thinking of the excellent meal his newly-wedded sister had just given him.

`Marriage ... it might be good for her but I've got lots of time yet and with all these young girls coming back into Brest as the Arsenal reopens ... but she's 25'

`She just made it,' I said.

`Right. Another couple of years and she would have been on the shelf. She'd been living with Didier since she was twenty and had been pressing him to marry her. But he was 28 and had other fish to fry.'

`Like you.'

`Right again.' A lecherous glow suffused his body. `Didier left her, saying he didn't want to stand in her way if she wanted marriage. Preventive strike.'

`Very ingenious.' (I was in France, all right.)

`Yes, she couldn't say a thing. So she had the choice of Michel who is 28 but a prick, or Major Sale who is a nice guy but 42. I think she chose right: and it's always useful to have a Customs officer in the family.'

Great; the Empathy seemed to working too. But it was like making conversation with a stranger so I decided I would just sit back and listen for a while.

A flat boom way out to sea. That would be the batteries guarding the Gullet, the narrow entrance to the Brest Roads. Probably firing at some damned British frigate nosing in too close. Napoleon hardly escaped from Elba and the British blockade back in place like they had never left.

Descending the cliff into the town he passed the guard post where a young soldier, musket grounded and shoulders hunched against the fine rain, was looking out to sea. He looked professionally at the musket. My God, more than 20 years old, it could have been used in the taking of the Bastille. Now if they would only let him design their weapons.... He thought about the visit tomorrow, Monday, arranged by his brother Jacques. 'Our big chance,' Jacques had said. 'Convince the Duke and we will get into the big time.'

Head down he strode through the deserted streets, windows tightly shuttered. He was just about to turn into Powder-mill Street where he lived when he saw the lights on in 'The Last Penny' at the next corner. 'Just a tot before bed,' he thought.

He leaned on the long zinc counter and looked towards a group sitting heads together at the back of the bar. 'Royalist plots,' he thought contemptuously.

'I'll have a strong liquor distilled from the residue of pressed grapes,' he said to the man behind the bar, who then passed over a small glass of clear liquid without comment.

(Now actually he didn't ask for that. I had been getting a translated version of everything. Powder-mill Street must have been...er...rue du Moulin...-Poudre and we were in "Le dernier Sou". A "marc", that was what he had ordered. I had learnt my French a long time ago, well, 185 years in the future to be exact. It was confusing at first or maybe it was the marc).

Politically Jan was a bit confused too. As a good Catholic Breton he was a Royalist, but he would have preferred any other King than fat gouty Louis 18. On the other hand gunsmiths undoubtedly had more to do in war than in peace-time. He waved to one of the plotters and left.

He turned into Powder-mill Street and walked down it to where a hanging sign said "Le Foc Brothers - Gun-makers to the Nobility".

Before going up to his room he thought he would just glance in the workshop and check that everything was ready for the demonstrations in the morning.

He pulled a big key out of his pocket and opened the side door. A small oil lamp was burning. He unhooked it and turned up the wick. Holding it in one hand he wandered slowly past the benches and the cold forge, extinguished over the weekend. On racks against the wall, glittering faintly in the lamplight were several long metal tubes, barrels for the justly famous Le Foc Brothers shot-guns. Nearby was the complicated machine for drilling them out.

At the end of the long room, mounted against the wall was his pride and joy a milling machine "liberated" from Nürnberg in Germany. He opened the wooden box containing the beautifully made cutting tools and ran his fingers over them caressingly.

And here was a bench where two girls worked, assembling the flint-lock mechanisms. 'Girls in a workshop,' he thought wonderingly; what would his father have thought? But the wars had swept the young men away long ago. Wars as long as he could remember. He had been six when the Bastille had been taken and he could remember the dancing in the streets. Then victories everywhere, all of Europe French.

Except at sea. The damned English; they seemed invincible at sea. Always active, stirring up trouble everywhere, treacherously landing troops behind your back and taking them off as soon as you were able to concentrate enough force to confront them. It was an English frigate that had carried the Emperor to imprisonment on the island of Elba.

But he had met some English sailors during the short peace following the Emperor's banishment and had been disconcerted to find he rather liked them. One

Lord had even come to his shop and ordered a gun, complimenting him on the quality of his workmanship in his terrible French. He had told him his guns were well known in England. There it was, completed in its mahogany box. He wondered if the Lord would ever come back to claim it.

Hearing shuffling feet he turned round to see old Jean who cleaned up the workshop and acted as night-watchman. 'Old,' he thought, 'five years older than me but with his single eye and powder-burnt face looking fifty years older. Thank God gunmaking is a reserved occupation or I would have been called up seven years ago and could have come back, if I ever did come back, looking like Jean.'

'I thought it was you,' said Jean.

'Just having a look round,' answered Jan. 'Tomorrow is an important day for us all. Make sure you light the forge a bit earlier; we don't want the fine gentlemen from Paris to catch cold.'

He bid good-night to Jean, turned down the wick and hung the lamp up again. Then he mounted the stairs to his own rooms over the workshops and went to bed.

*

First impressions? Well, fantastic. All doubts were set at rest. I really had been in an early 19th Century gunshop and my mouth had watered over the guns I had seen, particularly that one in the wooden box. If only I could get them to the shop in Maxburg Strasse, Munich in the year 2021!

Technically it was interesting that he was drilling his barrels out of open-hearth steel and not using the pretty but tediously complicated Damascus process where strips of steel and iron are braided and then wrapped around a mandrel and welded. By the time you've hammered all the strips together and drilled out the mandrel, you've seen a day pass.

But hats off to Mission Control. They had placed me exactly when and where I should be and now it was up to me. Contact with Jan seemed good and I could Empathize if the need arose. But I was in no hurry so I decided to keep in the background, Observing only. It was rather like watching a play except that I was seeing everything through the eyes of one of the actors and could also hear his internal thoughts.

It was a fascinating experience and I could hardly wait for Jan to wake up. I Withdrew.

Chapter 11

When Jan was woken by the cock-crow I was there waiting. I was with him as he strode down the wide stairs and greeted his brother in the breakfast room. He looked out at the cloudless sky and then went over to the buffet to help himself to breakfast - warm bread, butter, cheese and coffee. He felt quite cheerful as he spoke to his brother but Jacques was not a morning person and just answered in grunts. Jacques finished first and stood up. He was a few years older than Jan and much more elegantly dressed. He was the business partner, I remembered.

'Everything all right?' he asked his brother.

'No problems,' said Jan 'We did all the demonstrations on Saturday and everything should go on rollers. I got Jean to light the forge earlier than usual so the workshop should be warm.'

Jacques grunted.

'I'll be picking up the Duke and his party at their hotel around 10,' he said. 'then I'll bring them quickly through the works into the big office. I'll give them the introductory blah-blah then some waffle about patent rights for the Mk III. Then the

usual hype about Le Foc which should take us up to 11. You can do your stuff until 1230 then we'll go eat. After lunch I'll bring them all back. The Duke to discuss business: the others for you if they want anymore info. Agreed?'

Jan nodded, his mouth was full. There was no need to answer. They always worked that way.

I could hardly believe my ears! Had nothing changed? I could have been listening to a divisional manager of IBM briefing his troops before a sales presentation.

Jacques paused before the door.

'One other thing. That gun for the English Lord. Is it completed?'

Jan nodded and Jacques left without further comment.

Breakfast finished, Jan went down the narrow stairs to the workshop feeling the heat from the forge. He had to supervise the preparations for the demonstration.

Everyone was at work in specially cleaned working clothes. Two old men were drilling out a gun barrel, others were shaping shot-gun stocks and two girls mounting flint-locks and doing final assembly. One of the girls, she couldn't have been more than sixteen, glanced quickly up at Jan, then carried on working with lowered eyes as he passed. Jan experienced a sudden glow of lust.

He walked round and personally greeted everyone, shaking them by the hand and asking if they had had a pleasant week-end. They all seemed pleased to see him and he was evidently well-liked.

He then continued out into a sort of yard behind the workshop. In a small hut a small fresh-faced young man was laying out big sheets of paper and assembling wooden stands. On the bench were carefully separated packages of black gunpowder and small heaps of grey lead pellets, together with a ramrod and spare flints.

Jan greeted him casually then rubbed his hands together briskly. The hut was cold.

'Everything all right, Pierre?' he asked.

'No problem, sir. With a good dry day like this everything should go well.'

Jan nodded and went back into the workshop and was looking through some accounts when he heard the clatter of hooves outside. The door opened and Jacques entered followed by his three visitors. All the workers tugged off their caps stood up respectfully. The Duke of Berri looked round superciliously.

Jan was presented to the Duke and greeted him deferentially. The Duke was small and dark with a round spoilt face and Jan did not especially take to him. He was accompanied by an impassive and discreetly dressed manservant. The third member of the party was introduced as Colonel Laurier. Tall and handsome, he was wearing the uniform of an infantryman and looked quick and intelligent, glancing around the workshops with interest.

Jacques then politely ushered them all into the large office. As soon as they were seated he opened the meeting by telling them something of Le Foc Brothers and how they had been manufacturing shotguns for many years, but had always concentrated on the luxury market. He waved his hand at the wall where some of the firm's products were mounted.

But recently they had decided to somewhat change their policy and were intending to bring out a less expensive more utilitarian model which, with some new manufacturing techniques developed by Jan, should have a very competitive price.

The Duke brushed a speck of dust off his impeccable breeches and looked bored. The Colonel was listening intently and glanced across at Jan when his name was mentioned.

Jacques then went on to say that the utilitarian model was something they were not interested in manufacturing themselves - they were too small. Their interest lay in selling the patent to the Government, with a small royalty on each unit produced.

Jan looked across at Jacques admiringly. He knew they had never tried to sell a design before and here was Jacques talking glibly of patent law, royalties, first refusals... as though it were their everyday business.

For the first time the Duke looked faintly interested at the mention of the word 'royalties' and Jan could guess why. All transactions to do with supplying the foot-soldiers went through his department, which meant he would be paying the royalties to the Le Foc Brothers. Jan guessed there would be 'handling charges' or some such euphemism so that Le Foc Brothers always received something under what had been agreed. But he could trust Jacques to have thought of that and to have adjusted the pricing accordingly.

'And remember, my Lord,' continued Jacques, 'you will be buying a gun designed by the Le Foc Brothers, one of the oldest gunsmiths in France and patronized by many well-known sportsmen. They have perfect balance and finish, including fine engraving on locks, plates, backs of action etc. and a gold oval inlay flush in the stock for the owner's initials. Furthermore...'

Jan grinned to himself. At this point Jacques was supposed to go over the top a bit making fantastic claims for the Le Foc guns, all the better to underline the non-sense qualities of Jan the dour Breton gunsmith who was next on stage. But Jacques seemed to have forgotten they were trying to sell a utilitarian gun to the Army for foraging. He tried to imagine Corporal Dupont showing off his personalized engraved shot-gun with his initials on the walnut butt.

The Duke was moving restively.

'Yes, yes,' he said, interrupting Jacques in full flow, 'I'm sure your manufacture of commercial shot-guns is adequate but can you show me you can design a rugged simple gun for use by the spastics in the Infantry?'

The Colonel frowned.

(Spastics? It must be a translation error. I'm sure cerebral palsy wasn't discovered until the middle of the 20th Century.)

Jacques looked suitably contrite.

'As to that, my Lord, I had better hand you over to my brother who is responsible for the design of all our guns.'

Jan stood up.

'We make a good gun,' he said flatly, 'but the Duke has asked an excellent question: "How can we design a rugged simple gun for the ..er.. (he glanced at the Colonel) Infantry?"'

The Duke looked pleased and stretched out his legs.

'Well, the best way to show you can do something is to do it.'

He walked to the door, opened it and called to Jean. He returned with a sturdy looking shot-gun and stood with it in front of the desk.

'We call this the Mk III because it's our third prototype. It's sturdy,' (he slammed the butt on the floor) 'and it's simple.' He pulled the hammer back and showed his audience the solid-looking flint-lock mechanism. 'As regards other specifications, we have chosen a 12 bore as the best all-round calibre, using a 74mm barrel. Shoots a 35gm charge using 8gm of powder.' He handed it butt foremost to the Colonel.

The Colonel took it then looked up in surprise.

'Yes,' said Jan, 'the new steel we are getting from Lille means we can make the barrel about a third lighter.'

The Colonel put the gun to his shoulder and swung it round.

`A nice balance,' he said. He admired the flint-lock and then glancing up at the barrel noticed two small holes at the end.

`Hullo,' he said, `what's this'?

Jan smiled.

`Ah, that's one of our new ideas. It's a removable choke.'

He pulled out the iron ramrod, pushed it through the two holes and twisted. The last 10cm of the barrel slowly unscrewed. He handed it to the Colonel.

`The idea of tapering the muzzle slightly to reduce the spread of shot is not new. But the effect of the discharge and the corrosion of the powder gradually open it out again. In this way you can replace just the damaged part.'

The Colonel and the Duke spoke together quietly. In the ensuing pause Jacques suggested they take a break and go to the local hostel which, although certainly not up to the standards the gentlemen were accustomed to in Paris, was nevertheless...

Chapter 12

Jan left the restaurant earlier than the others after eating things I would rather not think about and returned to the workshop to be ready for the practical demonstrations.

Everything was ready when the rest of the party arrived. They were conducted out into the yard behind the workshop and Jan took charge.

`Well, the Duke asked us if we could design a reliable shot-gun. You have seen we can design a simple shot-gun. You now want to see it in operation. But first I would like to show you how safe our gun really is. Perhaps the Colonel could help us?'

`Of course.'

`A proof test,' said Jan.

On a bench in the hut were lying four standard military musket barrels and four Le Foc shot-gun barrels, together with several standard paper military cartridges.

`Could you please pick one of each, Colonel?'

`Now if you could please load them with twice the usual charge.'

The Colonel winced but complied, breaking open four paper cartridges and pouring the black gunpowder into the ends of the barrels.

`With ball?'

`Of course.'

The Colonel dropped a musket ball into each barrel and then expertly rammed the squashed up paper cartridges down on top of each double charge. He handed the loaded barrels back gingerly to Jan.

Pierre took the two over-charged musket barrels and mounted them on two wooden stands at the far end of the test area, the muzzles pointing towards a grassy bank. Long strings were attached to the triggers. Pierre put some powder in the flint-locks, cocked them back with audible clicks and returned to us. He handed the two strings to Jan.

Jan politely handed one string to the Duke.

`Would you like to fire our musket, my Lord?'

The Duke took the string in his gloved hand. He tugged.

There was a loud report and the barrel leapt back off the wooden stand and lay on the ground. A cloud of black smoke hung over the grassy bank. The Duke laughed scornfully.

`So much for the famous Le Foc barrels.'

`Now if you please, the standard military musket,' said Jan undisturbed, handing the Duke the second string.

The Colonel turned his back to the stand. The Duke pulled.

There was a red flash, a tremendous crash and something whirred past and hit the wooden door behind us. Another large black cloud hung over the test stand. Pierre walked forward and returned with a musket barrel in one hand and something looking like a trumpet in the other.

`Holy Mother of Christ!' said the Duke.

`I've never seen one quite so bad,' said the Colonel, interested.

`We were using English powder: we find it more powerful,' said Jan. It was indeed. The barrel of the standard army musket had been blown completely open. Pierre was trying to show the Duke the "J le F" mark on the breech of the undamaged barrel but he appeared shocked and was less than interested. Jacques was unobtrusively prising a piece of flint-lock mechanism out of the wooden door behind us. He dropped it into his pocket and grinned at Jan.

`Well, now some dispersal tests,' said Jan, coming out of the hut with two shot guns.

Noting the Duke's face, Jacques turned to him.

`These are just routine tests, my Lord. I'm sure the Colonel here is perfectly capable of ...'

`Yes,' said the Duke, shaken. `Carry on, Colonel. I will be inside, discussing some legal points.'

Jacques disappeared inside with the Duke and his Manservant who appeared equally shocked. Jan and Pierre started setting up large meter-square pieces of paper at 5m spacings on wooden stands.

Jan was explaining what I had already guessed. They were going to shoot pellets at the paper and see how they spread out with distance.

Now they were banging away, using different combinations of powder and shot and soon the Colonel had an armful of punctured paper sheets. It seemed quite a workmanlike demonstration.

They moved into the office and started making graphs, plotting out shot dispersion with distance. After a while the Colonel decided he wanted a few more points on one of the graphs but when they looked out of the window it was too dark. Jan suggested they continue in the morning and the Colonel said `no problem' as they had to visit the Arsenal anyway. Jan then pulled a bottle of marc out of his desk and was just about to fill two glasses when they heard steps on the stairs and the Duke and Jacques appeared. Jan filled up two more glasses and handed them out.

While the Duke and the Colonel conferred in one corner of Jan's office, the two brothers spoke together quietly in the other. Jacques was quite pleased.

`Providing the Colonel is satisfied, we will get the equivalent of one year's profit for the design of the Mk III and the delivery of 10 prototypes. Fifty percent in gold on signature and the rest on delivery of the prototypes. They will be sending a guy down here from Paris for a week's course and they may want you to go to Paris for a visit to the factory there. Expenses paid. Delivery in 6 months.'

`Gold!' said Jan admiringly. `That's a good deal. How did you screw gold out of a Duke?'

`He's not very bright. I told him our sub-contractors wouldn't take scrip and if he wanted the guns on time ... Have you got that Milord's gun handy?'

`I'll put it in your room,' said Jan.

Jacques and the Duke disappeared upstairs again and Jan refilled their glasses. Now that the tests were going all right, Jan and the Colonel were getting on famously and well into the fraternity and equality thing, telling each other jokes and drinking.

More steps on the stairs and Jacques, the Duke and the Duke's manservant reappeared. Jacques had a piece of paper in his hand and the manservant was carrying the long mahogany case containing the English Lord's gun. Everyone looked happy except the manservant who never seemed to have any expression. We all had another marc, even the manservant.

Jacques then suggested he take the visitors back to their hotel. He would not be able to dine with them that night but Jan and Pierre could and would meet up with the Colonel later. The Duke was dining with the Town Governor. But before they left Jacques came discreetly up to Jan.

'Take this to the Bank right-away,' he said giving Jan the piece of stiff paper with the heavy wax seal. 'And take Pierre with you. I want that gold here before anyone changes their mind.'

Jan went up to his rooms, selected a leather bag, buckled on a sword and went looking for Pierre. He found him in the shed outside standing at a work-bench. In a vice was the barrel of a musket. Through Jan's eyes I could see it was a standard musket but the rear-end of the barrel was open; it was a breech-loader! This was it - this was what I'd come for!

'Still at it, Pierre?' said Jan tolerantly. 'Leave it for the moment. We have to collect some gold. Get a pair of pistols and come with me.'

While Pierre was loading the pistols he told Jan that the breech-loader was coming on fine and not back-flashing any more. But Jan only listened absently: he was in a hurry to collect the gold.

They arrived at the Bank (or money changer) just before it closed and had a noisy argument with the owner before he would release the gold which was in the form of heavy coins. Jan and Pierre left the Bank by a small back door and returned quickly to the shop. Jan thankfully locked the heavy clinking bag up in a big iron safe.

'Oof,' he said.

Jan was now in his rooms taking off his sword, washing up and changing ready for the evening meal with the Colonel. I must try to complete my Mission.

'That's a very interesting job, that breech-loading musket,' I said.

'Yes, we've spent hours on it.'

'Wouldn't you like to have another look at it? Pierre says it's working well now.'

'If it's working well now, it'll be working just as well in the morning. I've got to get to the hotel with Pierre.'

'It would only take a moment.'

'Anyway I'm hungry.'

Damn the man. I wanted to force Jan to look at the gun but at the last moment decided against it. He stumbled, shook his head and muttered something about too much drink. He left his room, went down the stairs, picked up Pierre who was waiting and they both set off for the hotel where the Colonel was staying.

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I reminded myself that this was near the end of the second day. Jan's Timeline would begin to broaden out soon and the period of uncertainty would begin. I must see that gun soon.

It was a dark windy night with black clouds scudding across a rising full moon. Jan and Pierre turned their collars up against the blustery gusts and made their way south towards the old part of the town where they entered the luxurious Hotel Vauban. As they entered the foyer and handed in their coats Pierre looked round.

'I've never been here before,' he said nervously.

They spotted the Colonel sitting alone at a corner table and joined him, shaking hands all round. The waiter rapidly brought them aperitifs and three large menus in elaborately tooled leather folders.

'Salut,' and then heads down to study the menu with the concentration that other peoples reserve for engineering data sheets. Nothing had changed in two centuries I noted.

The food was chosen, the wine selected and soon a friendly little party was underway. The Colonel showed his missing frost-bitten finger and told of his experiences in the invasion of Russia. Reverently he related how he had once seen the Emperor Napoleon. Jan carefully refrained from comment and fearing the wine might loosen Pierre's tongue on the subject of Napoleon, steered the conversation to safer technical grounds. The Colonel revealed that he had had to curtail his visit to Brest but 'not to worry, my friends, I am convinced you have an excellent product and my report will make that clear.'

He complimented them a bit more and then, still on technical grounds told them of a wonderful new rapid-fire musket he had heard of, invented in America, which was loaded through the rear instead of through the muzzle. 'The bullet goes in one end and out the other,' he explained with a smile. 'But one hears so many exaggerated travellers' tales from America,' he added sadly.

Jan and Pierre glanced at one another.

'He's going tomorrow, have we anything we could show him tonight?' asked Jan rapidly.

'Yes, the new mod has helped a lot, but the guards...'

'What's all this?' said the Colonel.

'Well,' said Jan, a bit embarrassed, 'it so happens we are working on a breech-loading musket too. It's just a prototype. A blue-sky R and D project for us. Self-financed, you know.'

The Colonel was deeply interested and asked if they could take him back after the meal to show him.

'The guard, sir,' said Pierre.

'What?' said the Colonel. 'Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose you must inform the guard at the Arsenal if we want to do any test firing at night. Otherwise they might think the English are landing.' He smiled.

The two Bretons didn't smile.

The Colonel wrote a note which he gave to the waiter to pass on to the town military commander and we galloped through the meal (only two hours). We returned to the Le Foc factory in a coach, driving through the almost empty wind-blown streets.

Jan unlocked the door, greeted Jean who was sweeping up and lit some more oil lamps. Pierre went over to the bench and showed the Colonel the musket.

'A breech-loader,' he said reverently.

'Well, a prototype you know. Works quite well but still got a few bugs,' said Jan.'

Pierre showed him how the breech-mechanism worked. It was a screw breech with an interrupted thread which slid back in a metal guide. As the standard Army cartridge was pushed into the breech a little projection tore the paper at the side so

the flame from the vent could pass into the gunpowder charge. The flint-lock was standard and had to be filled with a pinch of powder from a separate powder horn.

I felt a sudden sick lurch of disappointment. Sure, an interrupted thread was quite advanced for 1815 and it must have taken ages to make it with the tools I had seen here but it would never be gas-tight enough to resist the pressure of the exploding gunpowder. And if it was gas-tight it would be impossibly stiff to operate. Shit, and I was just beginning to think they had something. What a waste of time and money sending me here!

The Colonel was clicking it back and forth.

'Can we fire it?' he asked pleadingly.

Jan looked doubtful.

'What do you think, Pierre?'

'I think we could but I must get some wet rags first.'

'Wet rags?' said the Colonel puzzled.

'Yes - that's one of the bugs,' said Jan sadly, 'around 6 shots per minute it gets too hot to hold.'

'Six shots a minute!' gasped the Colonel. 'That's three times the rate of fire of a muzzle loader!'

Jan winked at Pierre who grinned back. My spirits revived slightly and I began to think that maybe they had something. But then I reflected that Chondisp wouldn't have sent me here on a wild goose chase.

All three of them went out into the now dark firing range where we had been that afternoon and lit some storm lanterns. Pierre put a box of standard Army cartridges on the table. He then loaded the musket and confidently raised it to his shoulder, sighting along the barrel. Jan raised his hand and was about to say something when Pierre fired.

The musket kicked back but there was no dangerous flashback into Pierre's face, as would be expected if the breech were not gas-tight. Just the usual spurt of fire from the side-vent.

He quickly loaded, pushing a paper cartridge into the breach, and fired again. Still no flash-back.

'Hey, that's good,' said Jan. 'What did you do?'

(I waited with intense interest. For this I had come 2000 miles and two centuries).

Pierre lowered his musket, smiled, and was about to answer when the Colonel, who had put his watch on the table took the musket from Pierre and started loading and firing as quickly as he could, pushing in one cartridge after the other. The whole range was soon in a thick cloud of smoke lit by the yellow beams of the oil lamps and the red flashes from the musket.

After about twenty shots the Colonel hastily removed his left hand from the barrel and Pierre took the musket from him, holding it in a wet rag.

'C'est incroyable, fantastique, ca va changer l'histoire!!' (a bit of translator overload there), 'I have just fired the Musket of the Future! Twenty shots in two minutes! When the Emperor sees it! On va massacrer les Anglais!'

It had started to rain now so we all went inside into Jan's office, the Colonel clutching the musket as though someone would take it from him. He was right; I wanted to do just that. Jan and Pierre were grinning at each other - they had not realized how important their advance was. So we all had a drink and another drink.

'You know,' said the Colonel 'I must take this to Paris and you must come with me, ole friend. We will see the Emperor and he will make you a General in charge of R 'n D, an' you will make me a Brigadier..'

`No, no, I will make you a General too,' protested Jan - "General Marcel Laurier."
They were on first name terms now.

`It has a ring to it,' admitted the Colonel.

`Present arms for the General!' said Jan, holding the musket in front of him.

`No, no,' said the Colonel, `thash not the way, stand up straight..'

`You shtand up straight...!' They fell over giggling.

`Dear God,' I thought, as the room swung round through Jan's eyes.

There was the sound of stumbling foot-steps outside and the door crashed open.
It was Jean.

`The English, an attack!' he shouted.

`Nonsense!' cried the Colonel who had just found he could operate the musket lying down, `the English are miles away.'

But Jan and Pierre were instantly sober. Just the sort of night the buggers would choose to try and cut-out some ships. They dashed out of the office, through the workshop and out into the street. A blue rocket roaring up in the sky to the south and a series of rolling booms confirmed Jean's words.

The whole town was waking up. People were shouting in the street and down in the castle drums were beating. More rockets were rising into the sky and the under-surfaces of the low-lying clouds were reflecting the red flashes of cannons. The cannonade was almost continuous now, rattling windows and shaking doors.

Jan and Pierre stood in the road a while, looking indecisively towards the port and then turned to re-enter the workshop.

Something caught Jan's eye as they turned. About ten sailors were silently double-timing down the hill towards us in a compact group, led by a young officer with white patches on his lapels and a dirk at his side. Jan looked at them dully then suddenly realized they were not French! It was a Royal Navy raiding party!

The officer was looking at the house numbers as they passed and it was now too late to escape. The party stopped grouped around the two half-drunken Frenchmen, the sailors fingering their cutlasses.

The midshipman, a double-barrelled pistol in his hand, motioned us inside the workshop. He said something to those outside then closed the door on them. He turned to Jan and Pierre and in a rather forced accent said:

`Where is the loading-breech gun?'

No one moved. He clicked back the hammers of his pistol, raised it and shot Pierre through the head. Pierre fell limply to the floor in front of us. Through the cloud of powder-smoke Jan stared at the body in horrified disbelief.

I saw the pistol barrels turn towards me and reacted without thinking. Jan grabbed the outstretched right wrist with his right hand, his left hand to the officer's elbow. He stepped back, pulled and pivoted on his right foot and dropped. The officer had to follow or have his arm broken. He fell flat on his face stunned. He pulled himself up again groaning, head hanging and blood pouring from his nose. Jan stepped quickly over him, raised his right arm and hit the back of his exposed neck as hard as he could with the edge of his hand. The officer dropped and lay still.

There was a cry from the office behind us and Jan turned and saw the scared face of Jean.

`The English are after the gun!' Jan shouted. `Take it and the Colonel out of the back and put him in the coach we came in. It should still be there waiting. Tell the driver to take him to the Arsenal and to drive like the wind!'

The door to the street crashed open. A seaman burst in and seeing his officer lying on the floor raised his cutlass and was about to strike Jan when he was

restrained by another. Jan raised his hands. Behind him he heard a door close as the drunken Colonel was helped out of the office.

The two seamen, one must have been a petty-officer, conferred together then holding up the lamp looked at Pierre and the officer. They tried to pick up their officer but his head lolled back. Broken neck. They spoke together agitatedly.

'Jesus! What happened?' said Jan to himself.

'The officer shot Pierre and was about to shoot you but he tripped over. As they might get the wrong idea I think you should mime what happened,' I said.

'Yes.'

This he did very effectively, holding up his hands as Pierre and then falling when the officer shot him. Then changing roles he became the officer, stepping forward to shoot again but tripping on some angle iron and falling so his neck hit the edge of the bench.

The two seamen watched carefully and seemed to understand. But they weren't about to leave Jan there. Two of them were called in to pick up the officer's body and Jan was pushed out into the street. They closed round him and at a brisk jog-trot the whole party moved back up the hill and out of the town.

As we moved away Jan heard the clatter of horses hooves from behind the Le Foc factory. At least the Colonel and the gun were safe.

Chapter 14

I Withdrew temporarily from Jan in order to think things over. A lot had happened in the last hour. Jan's Time-line had really widened out.

What a mess! But where were we anyway?

First - there did seem to be a workable breech-loading musket. It was loaded with a standard paper cartridge holding the powder and a musket bullet. The paper of the cartridge would never make the breech gas-tight in the way a modern metal cartridge does by expanding against the breech wall during the explosion. In fact, I had seen Pierre showing it was even possible to load the musket using loose gunpowder.

So Pierre must really have found a way of making the breech gas-tight in some other way.

Second - Pierre, the person who had actually invented the critical improvement, the obturator, was dead.

Third - the musket itself, the working model, had last been seen disappearing towards Brest Arsenal in the hands of a drunken Colonel of Infantry.

What to do?

The logical step would be to return to Chrondisp, report I had seen the musket but hadn't actually been able to see the obturation method and then be re-Inserted into Pierre (before he was killed, of course) or even into the Colonel. In other words, report I had screwed up and request another try.

Alternatively I could stay in Jan and try to find the musket. This seemed to be the best solution because:

1. It had been impressed on me at Chrondisp that an Insertion was very expensive in terms of energy.

2. I illogically felt I was somehow obligated to Jan. I had got him into this mess: I should get him out of it.

3. I should be able to find the musket and even if I didn't it would be fun trying.

4. (in very small letters) I was damned if I was going to creep back admitting defeat on my first Mission.

Briefly then, I knew the thing existed and couldn't be very far away so I was going to have another stab at finding it. Therefore back to Jan.

Chapter 15

I returned to Jan who was now sitting in a farm cart with about twenty other prisoners. We were rattling and bumping along in the dark on a rocky coastal road surrounded by sailors on horseback and others running alongside. One of the prisoners was holding his arm and groaning. In the cart were also two large sailors armed with short clubs.

Through the slats of the rocking cart Jan could see the full moon shining on the sea below and over a headland the yellow flashes of cannon way out to sea. In the distance was a steady red glow. The two sailors were talking to each other jubilantly so the raid must have been a success.

Every now and then an officer would ride down the line shouting and waving his hand - obviously urging more speed. A prisoner stood up to look around but a menacing growl from one of the sailors made him lie down again.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'I'm not sure. One of the other prisoners thinks they are taking us across country to Kerfily - it's about 12km down the coast.'

'But what was it all about?'

'A raid. There were several big explosions in the Roads. The English may have smashed through the boom or come overland through Camaret Bay like they did last time. They've burnt at least three ships and there's a big fire in one of the ship-building yards.' He looked back bitterly through the slats of the jolting farm-cart.

'But why have they taken you prisoner?'

'This party was probably just a small overland diversionary attack. They always try to take a few prisoners on the way back.'

Behind us there was a flurry of musket shots and shouts. The cart driver looked over his shoulder and then turned to whip the horse up furiously. But now the path was descending, narrowing and becoming even more craggy. The cart came to an abrupt sliding stop, hesitated a moment then tipped over sideways.

Amid curses and shouts we scrambled out, avoiding the kicking hooves of the horse that was lying on the path in a tangle of harness. The group of prisoners was immediately surrounded by the rest of the sailors and under the orders of an officer we descended the steep path on foot.

The path led down to a bay where seven or eight small boats were waiting, their sails loosely flapping. Behind the sea wall a line of marines was standing motionlessly, bayonets gleaming in the moonlight. I could now see that the raiding party was about a hundred strong, half sailors; the rest marines. The prisoners were divided up into small groups and pushed into the waiting boats.

There were shouts and flashes from the top of the cliffs above us and musket bullets ricocheted off the stone pier. Here and there a sailor dropped or clutched a limb cursing.

Jan was now lying in the bottom of one of the boats. He couldn't see what was happening on the quay but on the cliffs above he could see one French officer spreading his men out along the cliff top and another scrambling down the path followed by about fifty infantrymen. There was a crash
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and a long tongue of flame from the gun mounted in the bows of the boat next to ours, which then slid away from the quay, sail filling.

We too were about to move off and a sailor was preparing the gun in the bows when there was a shout and two marines ran up carrying the body of the midshipman who had shot Pierre. It was bundled into our boat and fell amongst the prisoners. Some more orders, our sail was set and then a tremendous crash from the bows as our gun was fired. The recoil jerked the small boat back, causing the sail to flap but then the wind caught it again and we heeled over and headed for the open sea.

The tension visibly relaxed as more orders were given and the sailors moved around in the boat, changing places to adjust the trim, sheathing cutlasses, uncocking pistols and coiling ropes. Someone said something and there was a roar of laughter, quickly stilled by a ferociously angry voice from the stern. Damn, they were speaking in English but because Jan didn't understand, neither did I.

Behind us there were more crashes as the other boats fired their bow cannons and pulled away from the quay.

The voice from the stern spoke briefly again. Our boat slightly changed course and there was the squeal of a pulley as the sail was let out.

By Jan's feet there was a still figure with white patches on the shoulders.

'He shot Pierre just like that. I'm glad he's dead,' he thought.

'But remember he fell over, just as he was about to shoot you.'

'Yes, the pig, he was going to shoot me. I don't know what happened after but I'm glad he's dead. Oh God, I've known Pierre since he was a little boy. I was at his christening.'

His eyes filled with tears and a feeling of great sadness swept over him. Truth to tell I was moved by the death of Pierre too, though I couldn't think why. So far everything had been like watching a strange sort of holo, extra realistic in most ways but unrealistic in the way the camera swung round and only looked through Jan's eyes.

Nevertheless I had liked the little I had seen of Pierre. He had actually been the modest genius who had casually invented something that my contemporaries, 200 years in the future and immeasurably advanced (at least technically) had thought it worth while sending me back for. What wonders would Pierre have done if only he had had a more formal education?

'The best thing you can do for Pierre now is to recover his invention,' I said.

'You've got to get out of here.'

He looked round hopelessly.

'This boat has the wind and tide with it and in an hour we will be at the mouth of the Gullet. The English ships will be waiting to pick us up and once on board I will never be able to escape. The Royal Navy is plagued with deserters and they take all sorts of precautions.'

'What have you got in your pockets?' I asked, to change the subject.

He rummaged in one pocket after another.

'Some Company visiting cards, a tinder box, a pen-knife, my watch and some money.'

Hm. He would be searched as soon as he boarded the English ship.

'What's a tinder box?'

'It's a small metal box containing dry rotten wood and a built-in flint and steel. It's used to make fire.'

Fire on a ship! They certainly wouldn't let him keep that.

'Can you pull the flint out and hide it some-where?'

He opened the tinder box, unscrewed the flint and hid it in his shoe. The rest of the box he dropped inconspicuously over the side of the boat.

We were now clear of Bertheaume Bay. In the fresh wind the boat heeled over and lying on the floorboards Jan and the other prisoners were soon soaked in the spray coming over the bows. In the east it was getting perceptibly brighter and we could now see the sails of the other boats of the raiding party following us.

But others could see us too. There was a tearing sound overhead and three fountains of water appeared magically about 100m to our left. There was a fluster of apprehension amongst the other prisoners.

'That's the battery at Point Minou!' said one, 'they've got 32 pounders and we'll be in range for another half hour at this speed!'

Jan silently agreed.

But the rising sun revealed that someone had thought about that too. A large ship was sliding through the water about a kilometer away. As Jan watched a cloud of smoke erupted from its side and it heeled over. A few seconds later we heard the roar of its broadside. Counter-battery fire.

We had changed course slightly again, to put as much distance as possible between us and the shore batteries. Jan was watching the sails of the rest of the raiding party. They were still under fire from the big battery but they were not shooting very well and after a while transferred their aim to the ship firing at them.

Most of the raiding party had been successfully embarked; it seemed to have been quite a competent operation. We were out of range now, sailing towards three large ships anchored and with furled sails.

Another sharp command and we turned towards the one on the right. It looked like something out of an old sailing print.

'Janine, 64,' said Jan bitterly. 'Cut-out from Le Havre in '98.'

It was a tub-shaped ship with black and yellow checkered sides. Men in tri-corn hats with long telescopes under their arms were looking down at us and sailors were leaning over the side cheering. Our crew waved back elatedly. The sun was rising and the sky was golden behind us as we came to under the stern of the big ship.

Our boat was held by boat hooks at bow and stern and the seamen climbed aboard. There was a lot of consternation when the officer's body was swung up. Jan jumped on to the deck without any difficulty, ignoring the hand held out to him and I looked around with interest. So this was the famous Royal Navy!

My first impression was of a completely brutal masculine squalor. Poverty and patching. The ship seemed to be absolutely filled with sailors, most of them wearing a sloppy sort of coarse canvas shirt and trousers. They were barefoot, bearded and most of them had their hair in stiffly tarred pig-tails.

A nearby group of them was in a line throwing white sand on the decks, scrubbing it and then swabbing it away with buckets of sea water. They all had mean cunning faces. Brutal though the majority seemed, there were others bigger and if anything more brutal-looking, who were swaggering around supervising, carrying canes or pieces of knotted rope which they frequently applied. Everywhere people seemed to be doing something, splicing ropes, pumping water, moving buckets around and all the time keeping an eye on the overseers with the canes.

Apart from a row of large long cannons mounted on gun-carriages along each side of the main deck, there was hardly any metal in view. The whole technology was rope and wood. Through Jan's eyes I looked at the sails, masts and rigging. What a fantastic complicated tangle!

The masts themselves were about a meter thick at the base and about 30m high, towering above us. The sails, grey worn canvas and mostly furled now, were attached to long horizontal spars, looped up with ropes. How much time and ingenuity had been spent on designing that complicated rigging! And all done by trial

and error over the centuries. Ropes in parallel to support the mainmast which with the help of spars, struts, and myriad's of ropes held up the enormous pyramid-shaped cage of the rigging. And knowing my fellow humans I was sure each damn piece of rope and wood had a special name, probably a word that had nothing to do with the normal language.

The sides of the ship, the decks and the sails on view had all been patched and repaired many times over. There were scars on the gun-carriages, and in the bulwark against which Jan and the other prisoners had been left I could see a musket ball embedded.

One of the sailors cleaning the decks moved closer, all the while busily scrubbing.

`You are French?' he said out of the corner of his mouth.

`Yes,' said Jan, not looking at him.

A supervisor shouted something at him and he hastily moved away.

`French on a English ship?' I asked.

`They use anyone,' he said. `I doubt if half the crew are English. They steal seamen from any ship, even from their own merchantmen.'

`But why don't they revolt or at least desert?'

`They do sometimes but it's a terrible risk because if they're caught it's the "cat".' His eyes strayed to a wooden triangle mounted over a grating between the two steps leading up to the quarter deck. The grating and the triangle were stained brown.

A young officer, he couldn't have been more than 16, came down the steps and spoke to one of the overseers. They walked across the deck together and looked over the sitting prisoners. The officer said something sharply to Jan, perhaps because he was the best dressed. Jan stood up and the officer said the same thing again.

`Give him your card,' I said.

The officer took the card curiously and read it out pronouncing Jan as `Djan'. Jan nodded. The officer made some joke about `Le Foc' which was easy enough to guess and the overseer laughed sycophantically. The officer said `captain' and hooked his thumb towards the stern.

Jan followed him up the steps to the quarter deck which contained five officers dressed in shabby blue uniforms made of some coarse fabric and badly cut so the lapels sagged. They were all looking out to sea with telescopes except a small one wearing two gold epaulettes. The young officer saluted and handed him Jan's card. He looked at the card and then sharply at Jan. He had very blue eyes and a beaky nose. Like all the other faces on the quarter deck, it was unmistakably English.

His eyes wandered over Jan's clothes and he said something over his shoulder. One of the young officers detached himself from the group looking out to sea and touched his hat to the captain who spoke a few words to him.

The officer turned to Jan and speaking almost without accent said:

`Is this you? You are Jan Le Foc, the gunsmith?'

`Yes,' said Jan.

The two officers talked together. The French-speaking one turned to Jan again.

`We do not know why Midshipman ... why the officer who is dead especially wanted to capture you.'

The rest of the raiding party must have reported by now.

`What happened?' he asked.

Jan explained, miming with his finger the death of Pierre. The officer made him repeat that part, then translated it for the Captain.

The officer turned again and said:

`It is very strange and we understand neither why you are here nor why your friend was killed. We do not know what to do with you. I'm afraid I must ask you to turn out your pockets.'

Jan did so, handing over his watch, his writing lead, a penknife, some coins and a soggy wad of visiting cards.

The Captain was looking at the coins and obviously making some remark about Napoleon who now had his head on the French coinage, when suddenly the other officer who had been peeling the wet visiting cards carefully apart, exclaimed and showed one to the Captain.

He turned to Jan, holding up the card.

`Why do you have the card of Lord Cornwallis?' he asked.

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`Because he is a customer,' said Jan `I am building a gun for him. A shot-gun.' He wondered briefly where that gun was now.

There was more conversation between the translating officer and the Captain until a decision was reached. The Captain was holding the card and pointing out to sea. He then pointed down into the well of the ship. The translating officer collected his thoughts:

`We are going to send you to Lord Cornwallis who is the Admiral of this squadron. But we have something to do and cannot spare a boat until tomorrow. I'm afraid we must restrain you until, er ...until the operation is finished. It will not be for long.'

Passing the buck, an old military tradition.

`You didn't tell me about that card,' I said.

`I didn't know I'd still got it.'

`I think it better we guard your possessions until you leave,' continued the officer. He looked a little embarrassed. `They will be safer.'

He called down some instructions to one of the overseers and indicated that Jan should go with him.

With one hand on his shoulder Jan was conducted down into the ship, through a hatchway, between decks so low he had to crouch, down another hatchway and finally to a small door. The door was opened and he was pushed in, the door slammed and there was the sound of it being wedged.

Chapter 16

`The sail locker,' said Jan.

We were in a long narrow space filled with furled sails and bolts of canvas. There was a smell of tar and it was cold. Apparently we were under a deck because a faint light filtered through some cracks and we could hear voices. At the end of the locker was a small hole, leading upwards.

`Ventilation against mildew,' said Jan. There was a slight draught.

Now I knew that Napoleon, surely on a Main Timeline, was going to be defeated at the battle of Waterloo in about three weeks, so if Jan got sent to Lord Cornwallis's ship he would probably be released then. But if I let this Branch Line continue I would never find the musket which would be lost in the chaos following the French defeat.

I had to get back to the mainland quickly and follow the Colonel. Otherwise someone else from Chrondisp would have to be sent to repeat the job I hadn't been able to do. Ugh.

But there was no chance of escaping from this ship in broad daylight: we must wait until nightfall.

Jan looked around the sail locker, tried the door and finally sat down on a roll of sail. Time passed.

From above we heard distant shouted orders, the slap of many bare feet on the deck above us then silence. The ship heeled and we seemed to be underway judging by the movement and the creaking of the timbers all around us. The draught through the sail locker increased.

We sailed for about an hour and then hove to. Some coarse food was sent down to Jan who ate it then composed himself to sleep. The day passed, marked by the strokes of a distant bell.

It was getting darker. Jan had spread his clothes out in front of the ventilator and now they were dry so he put them on again. As he put his hands in his pockets I felt some gritty powder.

'What's that?' I asked. He rubbed it between his fingers tentatively.

'Probably gunpowder; I often have cartridges in my pockets.'

Good.

'I think you should get out of here,' I said. 'If you don't you will be sent to the Admiral who is miles out to sea. He will be polite to you but he won't know what to do with you anymore than the captain of this ship. He'll probably send you back to England at the first opportunity. You'll end up in an English prison and not be released until the end of the war. How long was the last one?'

'Twenty years.' Pause. 'But how can I escape?'

'I don't know yet. Have you any more cards?'

'Er...three.'

'Well, let's dry them; also all this fluff and powder you have in your pockets.'

'Why not,' he said indifferently, but he laid them out to dry.

It had got quite dark now and the ship was underway again.

'We're going back,' said Jan suddenly. Well, he was a Breton and knew about ships. We sailed for about an hour then we could hear the anchor running out. There was a lot of excited chatter from the deck above followed by silence - there seemed no one there.

After a while Jan heard a tapping on the sail-locker door and a voice said quietly:

'Do you hear me?'

Jan went to the door and whispered:

'Yes. Who are you?'

'There are two of us, we want to escape tonight and we want you to escape with us.'

'Why?'

'The French police will shoot us as traitors because we served on an English ship. Mr Le Foc, you are a gentleman and are known in Brest - you could vouch for us.'

Good, this was it. Two helpers who knew their way around the ship and presumably had an escape plan. There was a squeaking sound as wedges were removed and then the sail-locker door was pulled open. The breeze increased.

'What is happening?' asked Jan of the two shadowy faces outside.

'We are about 1km south of Penhir Point. Most of the crew have gone in the ship's boats into Dinan Bay to burn the coastal shipping.'

Another raid! The English were certainly active in this part of the war. And this two had not been sent because they would try to escape once on French soil.

'How many are left on the ship?'

'The First Lieutenant, a Midshipman, a bo'sun's mate and ten men. There are also the three other prisoners who came aboard with you.'

`Where are the other French?'

`In another sail locker on the starboard side.'

`And what is your plan of escape?' asked Jan.

`Down a rope from one of the lower-deck gun-ports and swim for it. At 3am the flood tide will take us towards Penhir Point.'

`Pathetic,' thought Jan. `They'll be caught by the guard boat that rows round the ship and they'll both be screaming at the triangle in the morning.'

`It would work if we had a distraction,' I said.

`What time is it now?' asked Jan.

`10 o'clock,' said one sailor.

`Very well,' said Jan, after a moment, `go about your duties but come back here at 2:45am.'

`And close the door,' I said.

`And close the door,' said Jan.

The door to the sail locker squeaked closed and the wedges were replaced with a thump.

Under my internal prompting Jan now sought the contents of his pockets which were drying. Working entirely by feel - it was pitch black - he placed a part of the fluffy powder on a bolt of cotton and pulled across one of the spars which had a metal tip. He reached carefully into his shoe and pulled out the flint which he had unscrewed from the tinder-box.

Holding the flint in one hand, he struck it against the metal. There was a blinding flash but the hot spark missed the fluff. After a few more tries one hot grain fell onto the fluff. There was a small puff of flame, a few glowing embers and that was all. He tried to keep the embers glowing by blowing on them but they went out.

Darkness fell again.

`Next time it will catch,' I said. `We don't want a fire now anyway. The smell would give us away.'

`I'm surprised it worked at all,' he said, his spirits rising and he started to shred up the remaining cards he had in his pocket. Then he pulled some fine threads from his clothes and added them to the heap. Feeling carefully around, small dry splinters were pulled from the floor and put on too.

Around midnight the wedges were pulled out and the door opened. A lantern dazzled him and two brawny shapes entered. One seized him whilst the other expertly ran his hands through his pockets, one after the other.

The one holding the lamp said something impatiently but the other replied with curses. Jan was thrown to the floor. The lantern was withdrawn, the door slammed and rewedged.

`Animals,' said Jan, feeling for the incendiary heap that had been scattered. He carefully collected it.

We waited.

A bell sounded in the distance and Jan said `2:30.'

Shortly afterwards there was a quiet squeaking noise as the door wedges were cautiously withdrawn and a faint shadow appeared in the doorway.

`Come in and hold the door closed,' whispered Jan.

Jan now started striking his flint and the sailor made a sound of admiration. He had a bad moment when the flint dropped in the heap but finally a spark fell in the right spot and he was rewarded with a small spurt of flame. There was one little hissing spurt after another as pockets of powder ignited and now the wooden splinters were catching, helped by the frayed cards. Gradually Jan fed in more splinters, blowing on the glowing heap as flames appeared.

The sailor was helping now as they carried the bolt of cotton holding the flaming mass over to some tarred rope in a corner. The tiny flames licked the tar for a while without effect but then some of it melted and the rope flared up. They carefully pulled more rope and also spars around the fire and stood back. It was crackling now and they could feel the heat.

With one accord they turned and opened the door and as they did a rush of air entered. Looking back I could see the end of the sail-locker in a mass of roaring yellow flames.

We slipped along between the deserted decks until we met the other sailor with the three prisoners from the starboard sail locker. His friend was excitedly telling him what Jan had done but Jan silenced him. There was a shout of alarm from the bows followed by a rush of feet and more shouting. Then a bump underneath us as the guard-boat, obeying the First Lieutenant's shout hooked on and its four occupants climbed hastily aboard. Everyone is needed when a fire breaks out as ships in those days were built of the most inflammable materials imaginable - wood, tar, rope and paint.

Waiting until the sailors from the guard-boat had disappeared for'ard, Jan, the two sailors and the three prisoners climbed cautiously out of a hatchway onto the main deck. We slipped across the deck and down the ship's side into the empty guard-boat. Without a word the painter was cast off and the boat pushed out. The current of the flood tide caught it immediately and we swirled away. The two sailors unshipped the oars, steered the boat's bow towards the shore and began to pull in long strokes.

As we distanced ourselves from the ship we could hear more shouts and the clanking of pumps. The current was carrying us towards the headland but Jan whispered fiercely at them to row faster.

'There must be at least 5 tons of gunpowder in the magazine!'

We slid away quickly, pulling desperately, the rowers panting and changing every few minutes. Suddenly one of the sailors said:

'She's burning!'

Jan looked over his shoulder. We were about 1500m away and he could see a red glow over the bow of the ship. It quickly changed to yellow and then a long tongue of yellow flame licked up the rigging. In an instant the whole of the rigging was alight, looking like a Christmas tree and we heard the sound of distant crackling.

There were also faint shouts and figures were jumping into the sea. The two rowers stopped and we drifted slowly, broadside on. We had a grandstand view of the doomed English frigate, the burning rigging reflected in the quiet sea.

But the flames were also spreading internally. Even from here we could hear the roaring of the fire and see it feeding on itself as one by one the gun-ports became yellow squares. Now and then there was a thump and a cloud of sparks as a cannon crashed through the burning decks.

We had almost reached the headland when an enormous yellow flash lit up the undersurface of the clouds. A second later there was a loud rap as the sound pulse through the water struck the hull of our boat. Three and a half seconds later came the roar of the explosion, echoed and re-echoed from the clouds and the near-by cliffs.

Where the ship had been there was nothing but a great column of smoke rising high into the sky, white in the pale moonlight.

'My God!' said one of the sailors and crossed himself.

'Good riddance!' said the other viciously. The three other Frenchmen just stared dumbly.

We carried on rowing and a few minutes later the boat grounded on a small beach near Penhir Point and in spite of voluble protests we were all dragged from our boat and arrested by soldiers who had been watching the fire and had seen us arrive. Their officer sent us with an escort to Crozon, a small nearby village. Here Jan was known and was able to secure the release of the others.

The gendarmerie officer was trying to write everything down as the excited sailors, drinking wine supplied by the villagers, related what had happened and how Mr Le Foc had started the fire. He was frequently slapped on the back and I saw the making of a legend.

But for me it was really just back to square one. I still had to find Colonel Laurier.

And no doubt the Chronodisp programmers were even now bitterly complaining at how much computer time would be needed to sort out all the Branch Timelines I had mangled.

Tough.

Chapter 17

Jan slept at a fisherman's cottage but the two French sailors who were from Toulon sat up drinking and talking all night; Jan found out later that they had not set foot on land for two years. The civilian prisoners had disappeared - glad to get back to their families, he supposed.

Jan woke up in the morning to find himself a hero. He quickly ran over in his head what he had actually done and judging his previous night's activities as 'competent' but in no way heroic, refused to have his head turned. In fact his principal feeling seemed to be satisfaction that the Le Foc company was getting some free publicity.

There had been a lot of naval activity in Dinan Bay during the night. Encouraged by the destruction of the frigate 'Janine', a number of small boats had put out from Camaret to attack the now defenceless raiding party. But it had turned out to be not so defenceless and had in fact captured two of the attacking boats. Then another English frigate had moved in, driven off the rest of the attackers and picked up the raiding party.

Jan returned to Brest in triumph, the crowds lining the quayside as he stepped off the ferry bringing him from Spaniard's Point. To his annoyance there was a carriage waiting for him and an improvised banquet with the Mayor in his tricolour sash making a long speech. There were many other speeches, often in Breton and not all complimentary to the Emperor. I supposed police informers couldn't speak Breton. There were of course lots of toasts and it wasn't until late in the evening that Jan and Jacques (who had met him at the banquet) were able to get away and return to their shop in Powdermill Street. They went straight to bed.

*

In the morning over breakfast Jan related everything that had happened. When he came to the bit where the officer had shot Pierre, he choked and Jacques was sympathetically silent.

'We will take care of Pierre's mother, of course,' he said.

Jan then explained how the officer was about to shoot him too but he had hit him first and broken his neck.

'You broke his neck! How did you do that?' asked Jacques, putting down his coffee cup in surprise.

`It was all rather confused,' said Jan, rubbing the still sore edge of his hand, `I don't really know what happened.'(I could have told him: he would find it in `The Infantry Handbook': Chapter 7 - Close Combat)

Then they talked about the new breech-loading musket and Jacques told him the Colonel had been back to the factory to ask him if he could take it to Paris with him to show it to some General.

`Of course, I said "yes"' said Jacques.

As Jan buttered a roll he explained with some embarrassment that he didn't actually know how Pierre had modified the musket. He had test-fired the other prototype, unmodified by Pierre, but the powerful back-flash proved that Pierre's modification was really needed.

Jacques put down his knife and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

`The situation is that you will not be needed here for a while,' he said. `We are just ordering parts for the ten shot-gun prototypes we must build. But before we finalize our design we should really examine the manufacturing methods they use in Paris to check they can make our gun with the minimum of retooling.'

He looked up at Jan and continued:

`Now I think you could probably re-discover Pierre's mod to the breech-loader but if you went to Paris you should be able to find the Colonel and the musket without too much trouble - and that would save time.'

I privately thought he also wanted to get his younger brother away from the factory for a while to let him forget the painful recent events.

`Paris,' said Jan, awed. He'd never been there. Paris to Jan was a wicked Godless city of shameless women, brilliant men, theatres, generals, the Emperor's Court...

`By the post coach it will take a week. Say a week there, a week back - three weeks altogether. When could you leave?' asked Jacques.

`In a couple of days, I suppose.'

*

Jan went for a walk along the cliffs; the same cliffs on which I had first met him about three days ago. Today the weather was better. There were big piled-up white clouds moving fast inland and gaps of intense blue sky. Bright patches of sunlight raced over the wet gorse. The sea was empty and so was the sky.

No white trails of jets sliding down into London Airport. And further up, no satellites, no space stations. If I had a radio I knew I would be able to tune over all bands and just hear the rush of static as man had not yet discovered radio waves. All this lay more than a hundred years in the future.

Jan was thinking of his trip to Paris. It was a long way in these troubled times and you never knew what you might meet en route. Brittany and Normandy were traditionally Catholic and therefore Royalist. But they were in the front line in the war with the English who had sewn up all the ports as tight as a drum and could generally be relied on to make landings now and then, just to keep their hand in it seemed. So Brittany and Normandy would reluctantly support Napoleon so long as he kept the English at arm's length. `Christ!' he thought, `my route to Paris is damn near the coast, I hope they don't take it into their heads to pay us a visit while I'm passing through. I must be high-up on the Royal Navy's hit-list.'

Then he wondered how he was going to explain his visit to the Wicked City to Geneviève, his `little friend'. She also had heard of the shameless women. He must remember to bring her back a present.

Veering, he started thinking of the breech-loader and how the wad would now have to be in the cartridge just behind the musket-ball, to ensure a good fit. Or better,

instead of a simple round musket ball why not one shaped more like an acorn but with the rear hollowed out so the pressure of the explosion would open out the soft lead and press it against the barrel wall, making a good gas-tight fit? This would mean the barrel could be rifled also! He knew all about rifles but they were slow to load because the ball had to be hammered all the way down the rifling, unlike smoothbore muskets where you could just drop the ball in. How the hell had Pierre solved that problem of making the breech-loader gas-tight? It must be something quite simple; he hadn't had the time to do anything elaborate.

By now Jan had arrived at the cottage of his married sister. He looked at the whitewashed stones on each side of the path and the small vegetable garden, sheltered by bushes all bent over from the almost continuous wind.

They saw him coming through the front-room window and the door was opened before he could knock. His younger sister Martine greeted him, kissed him on both cheeks and looked at him admiringly.

'The hero of Dinan Bay,' she said with only a trace of mockery.

Her elder husband entered smiling, shook his hand and congratulated him. And of course he had to relate everything that had happened on the night of the English raid. Bertrand the husband said it was just the sort of attack the English made whenever the wind and weather were right and in the old days they would have been beaten off. What he couldn't understand was why a detachment of English troops had penetrated so far inside the town, into Powdermill Street, so far from the Arsenal the obvious target.

Jan then told them a bit about the new musket they had built and Bertrand saw the advantages immediately.

'If you can fire three times as quickly, it's like you have three times as many soldiers. But how can the English sailor have known about it?'

I was wondering about that too but Jan had apparently not given it much thought.

'English spies,' he said vaguely. 'They're supposed to be everywhere.'

They went back to questioning him about the English ship, what the officers were like, how he had been treated, what the food was like. Bertrand was surprised that no one in the Navy at Brest had asked him these questions before.

'Brittany has always been a forgotten corner of France,' he continued bitterly, 'with her seaports and her fish the only interest. And since the English blockade even that interest has evaporated.'

There was a silence.

'How is Genevieve?' asked Martine, who was tired of this talk.

Jan knew the conversation was now going to turn to his prospects, the future of the factory and how he should be thinking of 'settling down'.

'She's all right,' he said non-committally.

'She's a nice girl and comes from a good family. You could do a lot worse,' went on his sister.

'Any girl fool enough to marry me is too much of a fool for me,' I said.

Jan repeated it, then laughed.

'He's got a million like that,' said his sister. 'What did he say last week? "A wife is a person who looks after you, cares for you and protects you from all the troubles you wouldn't have if you weren't married!"'

Bertrand grinned sickly. He wasn't allowed to make jokes like that anymore.

'No, but seriously,' she continued, 'I'm sure you know all about the bed part of marriage but there's the family side too.' She exchanged a glance with her husband.

Now Jan didn't entirely disagree with her there. His brother Jacques had two children and the little girl who was four used to sit on Jan's knee, put her arms around his neck and say, 'I love my Uncle Jan and I'm going to marry him when I'm grown up.' He had looked at her serious little face and found it strangely moving. The little boy on the other hand, well, perhaps they appeared different if they were your own.

'But what's all this about family?' said Jan. 'Do you mean...?'

She blushed. 'Well, you're the first to know. It should be in January.'

Jan held up his hands and went through an elaborate pantomime of counting on his fingers.

'It works out,' said Bertrand, a trifle coldly I thought. Martine giggled.

'Now if Jan is to eat before he leaves...'

A meal was then served, Martine carrying it in from the kitchen. Wine, a vegetable soup, another wine, braised veal with melted cheese and lots of delicious warm bread. And last a sort of open apple pie, with the inevitable marc. I must visit Brittany; I hope it hasn't changed too much.

Finally the meal came to an end and Jan replete, took his leave. He pulled on his overcoat in the little hallway as it was raining again. More kisses, another handshake, promises to visit again soon and then he was walking along the cliff path back to Brest.

He suddenly stopped - he had forgotten to tell them about the visit he was going to take to Paris! But they would be at Pierre's funeral tomorrow and he could tell them then. He carried on walking.

*

The funeral was supposed to have been a quiet affair taking place in a little grey slate-roofed church overlooking the Roads. But in the event more than a thousand people turned up, apparently attracted by the chance of seeing Jan. The local paper had brought out a special edition headlined 'Young Breton destroys English Ship to avenge Friend!' Inside was a very overwritten account attributing all sorts of patriotic and vainglorious dialogue to Jan and the two sailors. The crowd cheered as Jan and Jacques entered and again as they left, this time in a coach ordered by Jacques who had typically foreseen difficulties in getting away.

As they drove back to their factory Jacques explained that he had spoken to a few friends who had been to Paris and had given him some tips.

At the shop he came into Jan's room carrying a pair of boots. He sat on the bed.

'Money,' he said. 'I have taken the liberty of having the shoe-maker build a secret pocket into your boots.' Jan watched in admiration as Jacques put his fingers inside the lining and pulled it aside to show a leather strap in which twenty gold coins were fixed.

'As regards clothes, I am told it's better to travel in some inconspicuous dress and buy the fancy stuff when you get to Paris. In any case the mode here is way out of date.'

'I have written down the address of Colonel Laurier.' He smiled. 'You seem to have made a good impression; he wants to see you again. Let me know how the demonstration of the breech-loader goes and don't sign anything. If it's as good as it seems we should be able to turn a profit on it somehow.'

'Now as regards your business in Paris - you know that better than I. But just in case you have any problems, here is a copy of the contract we have for the delivery of the ten prototype shot-guns.'

Wonderful. A typical 'Jacques' briefing.

'You seem to have thought of everything,' said Jan.

`There's just one last thing,' said Jacques, pulling out another list with a trace of embarrassment. `It's from my wife. When she found you were going to Paris ...' he shrugged apologetically. `Only if you have time, of course.'

Jan looked at it.

`But I don't know anything about women's clothes...'

At the bottom of the list was scratched `Josephine dolly' in a childish hand. He grinned.

`But I'll do my best.'

Chapter 18

Jacques was at the Post Inn to see Jan off. He stowed his bag in the boot with the other passengers' luggage and the mail sacks. His sword he put on the rack above him in the coach, together with a bag containing a pair of small pistols, food for the journey and some books.

There was another man in the coach similarly armed. I was surprised at this casual handling of weapons - it had a Wild West air about it.

The two other passengers were an elderly lady and a rather plain young girl who was apparently her daughter. Jan took a quick look at her and decided there would be no need for excessive charm on his part. He nodded to the other passengers and sat down.

The coach moved off and the small crowd that had gathered gave a meaningless cheer. He waved goodbye to Jacques.

He looked out of the window as the coach climbed out of the town and the sea came into view. Hm, about 500km to Paris, average speed 10km per hour. Say 8 hours travelling per day. Just over 6 days with 5 overnight stops. National Route 12 to the first stopover at St Brieuc.

He stood up and pulled a book out of his luggage and then sat down again, discouraging conversation.

Jan knew this part of the route having often been to St Brieuc, so was only occasionally glancing out of the window. We had the wind behind us and were galloping along at a good speed. Outside sat the coachman and a guard, armed with a ferocious-looking bell-mouthed blunderbuss that had excited Jan's amusement.

Travelling was fairly comfortable, the coach body being suspended on leather slings from four large vertical C-springs. But it also swung back and forth which must have made it an uneven load for the horses to pull.

The book Jan was reading had been lent him by Genevieve, his girl-friend. It was called `The Game of Love and Chance,' by someone called Marivaux.

`Oh, it's beautiful,' Genevieve had sighed. `Three times I have read it and it made me cry.'

`Made you cry each time?' asked Jan, who liked to get these things right.

`Oh, Jan!' she had said. `Why do I love you so? You are so unromantic, all you love are your silly guns which go "pan", "pan"!'`

She had looked at him with her big velvet brown eyes. `Promise me you will read it!' she had said. When she really wanted to know what he was thinking she had a way of putting her face right up to his and then looking into his eyes, left, right, flick, flick, one after the other. It always made his knees weak. `It will make you nicer.'

He had reluctantly taken the book.

`But I won't be able to read it three times,' he had protested.

`You will really read it?' Flick, flick.

`Very well. I promise. But I don't promise to cry.'

She had giggled and the rest of the evening had passed very satisfactorily.

He grinned to himself and turned the page. As he had thought. It was the story of a boy and a girl whose parents had decided over their heads that they should marry each other. The famous French 'arranged marriage'. He put it to one side with a sigh, remembering his promise to read it. I had nothing else to do.

'Would it worry you if your parents found a wife for you?'

'Both my parents are dead,' he said practically.

'Yes, but if...?'

'I've never thought of it for myself but lots of my friends have had arranged marriages. They seem to work out just as well as the others.' Pause. 'Better in fact, because they have something solid joining them.'

'Such as?'

'Well, take the Bessons. Old man Besson has a big dairy herd and old man Le Dren sells milk all around Brest. When Henri Besson marries Danielle Le Dren, Le Dren sells Besson milk. Joins production and distribution under the same roof. A good economic principle.'

'Vertical integration,' I said.

'That too,' he said with a snigger.

'But suppose they don't love each other?' I persisted.

'That never lasts long anyway and then it's back to the usual "a wife for children, a mistress for friendship and the brothel for sex".'

'Division of labour,' I said.

'Another good economic principle,' he said and sighing picked up the book again.

During the overnight stop the other three passengers had become acquainted and apparently the man was some sort of commercial traveller. He had a large volume filled with pictures showing womens' and mens' clothes. Also a book filled with samples of different types of material. Jan wondered how he had been able to avoid military service then remembered rich people were able to purchase a replacement.

With his book on his knees he was going on about the Parisian mode.

'One day all the world will look to Paris. Not only because of the originality and the artistic quality of the clothes but also because of the Parisiennes who wear them. Such elegance, such style, such ...' He looked at Jan seeking inspiration but receiving just a cold stare in return, turned back to the ladies. 'Such knowledge of living that is the birthright of every Frenchwoman,' he finished triumphantly.

The two women simpered. Jan opened his book out. Dear God, could he really be dredging the two women? The older one was 45 if she was a day and the younger, with her spotty face...Or did he just like going into his act?

He continued reading. The boy who was about to be married ..er..(he turned back a few pages) - Dorante that was it, had dressed himself up in the coat of his valet. Thus heavily disguised he would be able to observe, unobserved, his intended.

Meanwhile the girl Silvie, no Silvia, had decided, by a coincidence, to also disguise herself in the clothes of her servant and observe Dorante. There was a lot of rather cruel humour on how a lady tries to behave like a servant who is trying to imitate a lady. A play strictly for the servant-owning classes I thought.

Jan was unfamiliar with the snobberies of Parisien society and rather bored. Then he had an idea and turned to the last few pages where the pair, although disguised as servants have fallen in love with each other. But each thinking they have fallen in love with the other's servant realize their passion is hopeless. However,

in the last scene they discover their mutual disguises and find they can marry after all. Holding up these pages to the light Jan could see tear stains.

He didn't know what to feel. On the one hand the whole story was unhealthily preoccupied with marriage and on the other hand he felt oddly moved, as though he had caught out a little girl secretly crying over a trashy love story. Genevieve and marriage, how easy it would be to make her happy. He'd have to decide soon.

That night they stopped at Rennes. He had never been so far from Brest. Already the people were better and more modishly dressed. In the hotel where they stayed there was a couple sitting at a corner table making supercilious jokes to each other about the other guests in a sort of rapid throw-away French that he recognized as the Parisien accent. Jan felt lonely.

At a neighbouring table the salesman was undoubtedly having it off with the old lady and stap-me if the young one wasn't looking invitingly at him. He left the table as soon as he had finished eating and went for a walk around the city.

The days were passing quicker now with shorter stages at Laval, Le Mans, Chartres. The roads were straight, poplar lined and much busier. Often there would be columns of troops all looking very young and all marching to the north or to Paris. The countryside was flat and more populated than in Brittany. They clopped along on National Route 10 to a little cross-roads at Ablis and then north, still on the NR 10.

When we arrived at Trappes it was 9pm and quite dark.

Chapter 19

In the morning Jan rose early and after speaking to the coachman found a stable that would supply him with a horse to take him the last stage to Paris. Versailles was only 10km and Paris itself a further 15k

It was with a great sense of freedom that he set off into the rising sun. June the 1st, 1815 - it felt great to be alive and was he glad to get out of that coach!

The road to Versailles was dead straight and lined with poplars. There was a lot of traffic, mostly peasants on heavily-laden carts bringing their farm produce into Paris. The news was everywhere that France was at war again!

Napoleon had escaped from Elba a month ago and landing near Cannes had moved up France, gathering an army on the way! He was a soldier of the Revolution and had returned from exile to deliver France from the nobles and priests who wished to enslave her again. He had been a week in Paris now and had taken over all the pomp of government but the average Parisian was either opposed or indifferent.

Jan trotted past the great Chateau at Versailles but there wasn't much to see. The big courtyard was empty, grass growing between the cobblestones and there were barriers round the main gates. It appeared to be disused.

Galloping ever east and following the signs to Paris, he finally arrived at the first loop of the river Seine, crossing it at the Serves bridge. And then about 3km further on the Seine reappeared and there was Paris!

He joined a long line of horsemen, pedestrians, carts and carriages waiting to go through the St Cloud Gate. Most were just waved through and some in carriages with crests painted on the doors, just drove through.

But Jan, almost certainly because of his grey old-fashioned country clothes, was stopped and diverted to another line. There were lots of gendarmes standing around as he was approached by two sallow, rat-faced civilians.

Looking at his sword which showed his rank as a gentleman, one said:

`What have we here? A country bumpkin disguised as a Lord! Be careful or your fine clothes will earn you a date with Madame! (Madame? Ah, Madame la Guillotine)

The other snickered sarcastically.

'And why is an able-bodied man like you not serving La France? Your papers.' He held out his hand and Jan unfolded his wallet and handed them over. The policeman rapidly riffled through them then looked up sharply.

'Where is your Military Service Exemption Certificate?'

Jan swallowed nervously.

'I am here to visit a Colonel in the Ministry of Supply. In Brest I am known and need no certificates.'

The policeman smiled with satisfaction.

'You'll have plenty of time to see Colonels,' he said. 'It's about time you peasants realized there's a war on.'

He waved to the gendarmes and two of them escorted an unwilling Jan to the corner of a building where some other civilians were waiting. A farm cart filled with more civilians was just pulling away.

'Draft dodgers,' said one of the gendarmes contemptuously.

'But my papers?' said Jan.

'Don't worry, where you're going you won't need any papers.' The two gendarmes chuckled.

Jan stood bewildered. No one had told him about Military Service Exemption Certificates and he suspected it was something new. But here he was, standing by the St Cloud Gate guardhouse under the watchful eyes of several armed gendarmes, waiting to be carted off to barracks as cannon fodder.

The traffic streamed into Paris and now and then someone was picked out, papers confiscated and added complaining loudly to the group waiting for the returning farm cart.

Here was the cart now and the gendarmes started to shepherd the 'draftees' towards it, holding their muskets across their chests.

Bloody power-crazy police. We'd got to get out of here.

Looking desperately around, Jan saw a blue coach decorated with white pipe-clayed ropes coming through the gate. Two sailors were sitting up in front and it was escorted by a troop of cavalry.

'That's Navy isn't it?' I said 'Why don't you try to stop them - they may help you.'

When the coach was level with the farm-cart Jan suddenly shouted in Breton:

'Avast there!'

The coachman automatically reined-in the horses and the coach stopped. The window immediately crashed open and a red face was pushed out.

'What the hell are you doing by stopping, you lubbers?' bawled the red face.

The coachman looked down in surprise.

'Because you told us to stop, sir.'

'Rubbish, get your hairy ears washed out. Get on, get on!' said the Admiral, for that is what he was.

'I told him to stop!' shouted Jan.

'You? And who the hell are you?'

'My name is Jan Le Foc. I am a gunsmith from Brest. I have to visit the Ministry of Supply but I have been arrested because I don't have a Certificate of Exemption from Military Service.'

'What! You are the Le Foc who blew up that English frigate?'

'Yes.'

The whole procession had stopped and the crusty old Admiral slowly climbed down. The two civilian policemen came over and started to protest. The Admiral switched back to French and blasted them:

`Fouch,'s secret police! I might have known! This man has single-handedly sunk an English ship, something the whole lot of you rabble could never do in a hundred years. Give him his papers back!

Sullenly Jan was handed back his papers and the Admiral told him to get in the coach. A trooper took the reins of his horse.

`Secret police swine,' grunted the Admiral, climbing back into his coach. I warned to him.

The cavalcade moved off again and as they slowly threaded through the dense traffic the Admiral made Jan tell him the story of his adventure. He grinned with fierce pleasure and banged a fist into his palm as he heard of the fire being lit in the sail-locker. He was furious that no one from the Navy at Brest had interviewed him.

`Dammit, they could have at least said "thank- you". Now you must come and see me before you go,' he said and he dictated a short note to the aide sitting next to him.

`This will get you in to see me anytime,' he said signing it, `and I have put you temporarily on my staff which should keep you out of the hands of the soldiers.' He held out the sheet of paper to Jan who folded it and stowed it carefully inside his wallet.

They had stopped outside an impressive white stone building with `Ministry of the Marine' chiselled into the facade above the high doors. Jan thanked him and they parted. He recovered his horse from the trooper and after asking directions walked it off in the direction of the Seine. He looked at a map to get his bearings and ended up at the hotel he had been recommended, Hotel Bourdonnais, in rue Bourdonnais. After he had stabled his horse and gone up to his room he heard military music and looking out of his window found the road outside blocked with a marching military column in dress uniforms, very smart.

Apparently there was a big parade somewhere nearby and the Emperor Napoleon would be present. The hotel receptionist assured him that all the government offices would be closed that day so after washing up he left the hotel to look at Paris on foot.

He walked round curiously in the sunny afternoon. The soldiers had left now but the streets were still filled with hundreds of well-dressed pedestrians. The men were all rather small and dark and gesticulated a lot. The fashion seemed to be white tights tucked into top-boots and a cut-away jacket with a top hat.

As for the women! Ah. They were also small, but slim-waisted and with small piquant triangular shaped faces. They had straight dark hair, large brown eyes and creamy matt skin. And the way they walked! They mostly wore long dresses with very low bodices, a sort of shawl over the shoulders and flower decorated poke-bonnets. They spoke and gestured vivaciously and Jan thought them quite delightful.

Apart from some older people and children, almost all the pedestrians seemed to be couples. Nowhere did he see men together. When he asked directions of a couple the man answered shortly but he was conscious of a discreet but unmistakably coquettish glance from under the long eyelashes of his pretty companion.

After walking around for a while he sat down at one of the small bistros and ordered a coffee. These bistros were everywhere, at almost every street corner and they were full of people sitting on the terraces reading, drinking coffee, looking into the distance or talking earnestly to their female companions. The tables were very small and would only seat two people.

Occasionally a young girl could be seen walking quickly on her own and men would stand in front of her and try to engage her in conversation. Or they would walk alongside her for 200m or so, all the while smiling and gesticulating. But the girl

would carry straight on, ignoring him, face stony. Finally with a resigned shrug he would leave her.

It was incredible! There were young girls everywhere and the men seemed crazy about them. They sat watching them for hours in the street and would all put their papers down and look up as soon as the click of their heels approached.

Whilst Jan was being amazed by his first experience of a large Latin city, I was looking round trying to see where we were. I had of course studied old maps of Paris before I was inserted and I estimated we were inside the loop of the Seine, on the south side or Left Bank, as they called it.

As was to be expected, Jan was only really seeing differences with Brest but I was seeing the whole thing. The main streets were cobbled and the horses' hooves and the iron-rimmed wheels of the carriages made a tremendous noise, reflected as it was from the sides of the houses. They were driven with a sort of muted hysteria and cross-roads were chaotic with the drivers cracking their whips and shouting at each other.

And everywhere the smell of horse manure and clouds of flies. I remembered another fifty years or so would have to pass before Paris was to be rebuilt using a system of long straight boulevards joined together with roundabouts. All we could see now was a medieval town that had 'just grown'.

As darkness fell Jan returned to his hotel and prepared to go out for an evening meal. He had noticed that the civilians were not wearing swords, nor did they seem to be armed, but to be sure he pocketed one of his pistols and slid a sailor's knife into the top of his boot.

It was a warm summer evening and Jan walked north to the Seine river. It was difficult to believe that France was at war with the rest of the world. Couples were wandering along hand-in-hand or standing and kissing. Floating in the Seine and moored to the bank, a barge had been converted into a luxury restaurant. Through the windows could be seen the glow of many candles shining on the glittering uniforms of the men and the soft rounded shoulders of the women. The entrance to the barge was by a small gangway with white guide-ropes guarded by two pseudo-naval uniformed flunkies. From the entrance drifted the strains of a string orchestra.

Jan walked by feeling very lonely and wishing Genevieve were with him. He suddenly remembered and started looking carefully at the dresses the women were wearing - he knew he would be interrogated at length on them.

He finally chose a small restaurant overlooking where the Eiffel Tower was going to be built (as near as I could estimate) and sitting alone had an excellent meal. One or two young ladies looked across at him speculatively but I kept suggesting 'business first' and so managed to get him out of the restaurant without entanglements.

On the way back through the gas-lit streets Jan got somewhat lost - and I hadn't been paying attention. He found himself in a different 'quartier' mostly inhabited by young people, noisy and oddly dressed. There were also lots of gendarmes around, in pairs with muskets slung over their shoulders. Jan stopped for a coffee at a small corner bistro.

It was dimly lit and two couples were dancing close together to a sentimental tune played on an accordion. This is really Paris I thought, exactly as expected, a whole different culture. In Germany the words to the tune would be about "coming home to the mountains and lakes I loved in my youth" but here the words were about a girl looking in a pool, watching the rings formed by the falling rain-drops and thinking of her youth that was passing. The melody was sentimental yet complex, in a minor key and exactly matched the mood of the words.

Jan was saved from crying into his coffee by the arrival of two gendarmes who brusquely demanded everyone's papers. There were lots of complaints and abuse which didn't appear to move the gendarmes. Jan showed his papers and received a surprised salute when they saw the letter from the Admiral.

`You are new to Paris perhaps, sir?' Jan admitted it.

`Well, sir, I would advise you not to visit this quarter, at least not after dark. It's the Latin Quarter, the students you know. They are young and ..er.. high spirited and give us a lot of trouble.'

He then directed Jan back to his hotel.

`"High spirited!" he heard the other gendarme say sardonically as they moved off.

He found his hotel without any difficulty and turned in.

Chapter 20

Jan was up early next morning and after coffee and lots of warm croissants in the bistro opposite the hotel, walked the short distance to the Ministry of Defence, in which somewhere was the Ministry of Supply.

He presented his papers to a slovenly soldier on duty who pointed out the porter's lodge. Again he showed his papers, to be told the Ministry of Supply was on the other side of Paris. Jan insisted it was here and pulled out his copy of the contract signed by the Duke of Berri.

`Oh, the Ministry of Supply in the Ministry of Defence. They are closed.' The porter, a little man with a Charlie Chaplin moustache and thick glasses turned away to another visitor and started chatting about the parade yesterday.

I started to feel impatient and it must have got through to Jan.

`And when does the Ministry of Supply open?' interrupted Jan.

The porter looked at Jan as though seeing him for the first time.

`The Ministry of Supply? I don't run the Ministry of Supply!' He looked at the other visitor with a smile, (we get these peasants here all the time)

`I want to see Colonel Laurier of the Ministry of Supply and I'm going to wait here until I do see him.'

`Then you're going to be here all day. There's no Colonel Laurier here,' said the porter triumphantly.

Jan put his finger on the contract where it was countersigned by Colonel Laurier and pushed it under the porter's nose. The porter glanced at it and then turned away with a sigh of exasperation.

`Ah, you mean Colonel Laurier - Laurier,' he repeated, as though speaking to a child. (There might have been some minute difference in the way he pronounced it, but Jan couldn't detect it). He turned back to his other visitor.

`Shall I kick him?' Jan asked himself.

`Not just yet,' I answered, `he may actually know where the Colonel is.'

`All right, one last try.'

`But you don't know where Colonel Laurier (exaggerated pronunciation) is?'

The porter looked at him pityingly.

`I've been here 20 years, I know where everyone is.'

Silence.

The silence lengthened while Jan looked at him.

`He's got an office down there,' he said at last grudgingly, and pointed vaguely. Jan breathed heavily. The other visitor signed a book then left.

`It may be part of their security precautions,' I suggested.

Jan slowly folded his papers away. The porter watched him interestedly.

Jan then briskly swung up the counter-top and grabbed the porter by the front of his tunic. In his other hand was his sailor's knife, glittering unpleasantly. The porter squeaked.

'Let's go find the Colonel together,' said Jan, conversationally, 'and I should point out that if you are thinking of calling for help, I am very nervous and loud noises make my arm jump.'

'Boo,' he demonstrated, and the knife jerked forward convincingly.

Holding the porter's arm and chatting brightly we went through a complicated network of corridors and stairways, finally arriving in front of a green baize-covered door marked 'Ministry of Supply, Footsoldier Weapons, Colonel M. Laurier'. Jan knocked and they entered. The Colonel looked up from his desk.

'Jan Le Foc!' he said with pleasure. There was a crash as the green baize-covered door was banged shut behind the departing porter.

'How did you get old Remus to bring you here? You must have held a knife against him!' He laughed.

'I told him it was urgent and he got the point,' said Jan.

'That was terrible,' I said.

'And now Marcel ... Marcel?'

'Of course, my friend,' said the Colonel, clapping him on the shoulder. (Ah, yes. It's a big deal when Frenchmen start calling each other by their first names).

The Colonel pulled out a bottle of Cognac and as they toasted each other he suddenly remembered there had been something in the paper about a English ship sunk in Brest by a Breton called Jan Le...!'

'By you!' He scabbled on his desk for a copy of the 'Monitor'. He looked at Jan wide-eyed and Jan had to repeat it all again.

Now Jan, to do him justice, was getting bored with this theme. It had been exhilarating at the time but now he was having regrets. Because sailors have to fight against a common enemy, the elements, they often feel closer to each other than they do to their own people who are landsmen. He had seen sailors jump from the English frigate just before it had exploded but some had certainly left it too late. Sailors like him who had survived countless dangers at sea only to be killed by a piece of flint. There something unjust about it. So when I started nudging him about 'the gun' he was quite ready to change the subject.

Jan explained that he was in Paris for two reasons. First he wanted to see how the Army made their guns so he could possibly modify his shot-gun for easier manufacture. Second, he wanted to see the breech-loading musket the Colonel had brought back from Brest as a small but vital modification had been made by Pierre. (He had already explained how Pierre had died.)

The Colonel seemed to have something on his mind.

'Jan,' he said finally 'you have seen what is happening in France and I am not betraying any great military secret when I tell you that the Allies are closing in on France from the north. There is going to be a big, a very big and a very decisive battle. Every able-bodied man is being pressed into service and the arsenals are working flat-out to equip them.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Whether your shot-gun will ever be built depends on the outcome of the next three or four weeks. (Jacques was right to have cashed that money order, thought Jan.) 'As regards the breech-loading musket, it is really fantastic and the Ministry of Supply is very impressed; but it won't be ready in time. If only you had invented it six months earlier!'

Jan digested this for a moment.

'And where is the breech-loader now?'

`I'm not sure. I made a demonstration to the Duke and some Army people as soon as I got back to Paris and they wanted 50,000 immediately! But we had to tell them it would take at least 3 months to tool up and in the meantime the production of standard muskets would be severely reduced. All we could promise to do was to make a few copies by hand. I left the original musket with the Duke.' He went into the next room then returned.

`Yes,' he said, `as I thought, it has been sent to Puteaux, that's our R and D section, about 6km from here. I have to go there anyway this afternoon.' He looked at his watch. `We can leave now.'

We retraced the rabbits' warren of corridors and stairways until we arrived at the porter's lodge. Jan waved cheerily to the glowering porter as they passed.

We took a coach and headed west. After about an hour we crossed a guarded bridge onto a long thin island in the middle of the Seine, covered with lots of low wooden sheds from some of which steam was jetting. There was a tall shot-tower and the hum of activity. In the distance, muted, were sharp regular explosions. The Colonel showed his papers and we were conducted to the only two-story building.

Here we met a Captain Lardy, a keen-faced young man who entered the office rubbing gunpowder stains off his hands. Jan was introduced and the Colonel said they had come to see a breech-loader that had been sent here and..

`Breech-loaders!' exclaimed the Captain as soon as Jan had uttered the word. Obviously a triggered reaction.

`Do you know that everyone and his wife are inventing breech-loaders - pistols, muskets, even cannons? Anyone who has a back-yard workshop can run up a breech-loader, patent it and oblige us to test it.'

`But this one really works,' protested the Colonel, `I shot it in front of General Mangin and he wanted 50,000 immediately.'

`They all work after a fashion,' said the Captain unimpressed. `The question is for how long will they continue to work under battle conditions, how safe are they, what do they cost to produce, how easy are they to operate?'

`Believe me,' he went on, before the Colonel could interrupt `we are convinced the French Army needs one, if only to keep up with every other nation who we are told is also trying to develop one. We are working intensively on it. In fact..' he paused and looked secretive `I'm not sure how much I should be telling you.' He glanced aside apologetically at Jan. `After all, Mr Le Foc is a civilian.'

`Well, I'm not,' said the Colonel irritably, `and I'll speak for Mr Le Foc who is the inventor of the only working breech-loader musket I've seen so far.'

`All right then. I'm sorry. You can get carried away by security. The section you want is at the other end of the island. I'll take you through the assembly sheds and on the way you can see something of how we work.'

We followed him into the first shed. This was obviously the stores. There were racks and racks of finished and unfinished barrels of all calibres and lengths. Barrels for muskets, for cavalry carbines, for blunderbusses, for pistols and even one for what looked like a 30mm duck-gun. Most of them were in a deplorably rusty state.

There were boxes and boxes of metal parts for many types of flint-locks, springs, triggers, hammers, pans, washers, nuts, screws, all meticulously numbered.

There were lots of different sacks, all filled with different sizes of lead bullets, all identified.

In the corner two people were sawing at a large steel billet and a woman was cutting strips from a piece of sheet metal using a big steam-operated guillotine. The steam-engine was primitive in the extreme - the steam raising the blade by means of

a leather-packed piston in a wooden cylinder. It hissed up and the girl unhooked the blade which then fell by its own weight.

It looked ominously similar to a structure that not-so-long-ago had been much used in Place de la Concorde in the middle of Paris to decapitate unwanted nobles. To avoid a similar fate befalling the hands of the girl operator, ropes were attached to her wrists so that they were pulled aside as the blade ascended.

We watched for a while in gruesome fascination. Colonel Laurier ran his finger around his collar and grimaced at Jan.

The next shed was Manufacturing where about fifty workmen were drilling out musket barrels. Most of them were smooth-bore but there were two machines working slowly, rifling some of the barrels. Jan knew the rifled musket had been used for a long time in the French Army by sharpshooters and skirmishers but it was too expensive and too slow in its rate of fire to supersede the smooth-bore musket for general use.

Jan was particularly interested in the steel used and was obviously asking the right questions, judging by the animated face of Captain Lardy.

'That's what's limiting us now - the quality and the hardness of the steel. Better steel means better cutters, more accuracy, higher breech pressure. It's coming and part of our job here is to have the designs ready for when it comes in quantity.'

Now we moved into the last shed, of a more recent and more solid construction than the others. The interior was also a lot newer than the other sheds. There were benches and racks covered with what looked like oily rags.

The Captain picked up one bundle and unwrapped it. It was a short carbine and beautifully engraved.

'A breech-loading carbine,' he said 'made by..' he looked at the label attached 'Mr Nodier of Besancon.' He studied it a moment.

'Ah, yes. You unfold this lever then pull it over from left to right. That unlocks the first 10cm of the barrel, just the breech, which tips upward, so. Now you load it in the usual way, powder wad then bullet, with a pinch of powder in the pan of the flint-lock as usual. No ramrod, you just tamp it down with your finger. Then you push the loaded breech so it lines up with the rest of the barrel and move the locking lever over from right to left.' He looked at the label again.

'Time to load 10 seconds. Can only be used with 2/3 of standard load or there is a severe gas leak from the junction between breech and barrel. Estimated unit cost: 150% of the standard musket.' He rewrapped it.

'Nicely engraved,' said the Colonel.

'Now this is a rifle,' said the Captain, unwrapping a long bundle. 'Actually it's a standard military rifle modified which shows the designer is at least practically minded. Van Veen Brothers of Leyden, Holland. Now let me see. A screw breech. You pull this flap out at the back of the butt, turn it three times to unscrew the breech and pull it open. Then you get your standard paper military cartridge, tear a little hole on this point (a nice idea that), pour some powder in the pan and then push the cartridge into the breech, making sure the tear is to the right, opposite the vent. Then push forward the lever in the butt and turn it three times. Works fine, except that the thread on the breech gets crossed if you're careless. About three shots per minute which is 50% better than a standard musket. Furthermore this is a rifle so it's about twice as fast as a standard rifle. We estimate manufacturing costs about 25% more than a standard rifle once we're tooled up.' He re-wrapped it and put it back.

'There are many others,' he continued. 'Some close the breech with a hinged block, others with a rotating or sliding flap - but they all flash back, some so much

they would be more dangerous to the shooter than to the enemy.' He waved his hand over the bench.

`Yet others have not apparently been fired and we have not dared to fire them either. Young Michel here thinks they have been specially made and sent to us by the English.'

We smiled politely.

`So briefly, the screw breeches are all right but slow and everything else is unsafe,' he concluded.

`The one I fired wasn't unsafe,' said the Colonel impatiently, `what have you done with it?'

`Interrupted-screw breech,' added Jan.

`Interrupted-screw breech!' said the Captain surprised. `That's an idea. I haven't seen one like that. What was the Application Number?'

`Application Number?' said the Colonel blankly.

`Yes, everything we test here comes from Colonel Smit's Acceptance Committee and is given an Application Number. We don't test anything unless its got a number. Proper channels, you know.'

`I gave it personally to Smit,' said the Colonel, annoyed, `so it can't be far and we'd better bloody-well find it.'

`There was a gun in the Colonel's office this morning,' interposed a young man hastily.

`Thank you, Michel,' said the Captain, relieved. `Bring it here, will you.'

There was a pause, then the Captain said:

`While we are waiting perhaps I can show you our own breech-loader. It's high-tech, expensive and very much for the future but we are convinced that it is the way all muskets and in fact all hand fire-arms are going to be built one day.'

Another young man handed him a musket. Holding it in front of us he pushed a catch on the side and pushed the barrel down. It hinged away or "broke" like a modern shot-gun. We could see the open end of the barrel, the breech end.

`Open the breech and.. "click" close the breech.' He swung the barrel up and it locked in place.

`Ingenious,' said Jan admiringly, `but how do you make a good gas-tight seal?' I listened intently. Maybe this is what I'd come for and not Jan's (sorry, Pierre's) invention.

`The secret lies in the cartridge,' said the Captain. The young man handed him a small copper cylinder. `We put the powder and the bullet in a small copper cylinder - copper, not paper as in the standard cartridges. You can see the bullet crimped in the end here. Now, and here is the trick, when the powder explodes it expands the soft copper against the wall of the breech and makes a gas-tight joint.'

Well, damn-me if he wasn't explaining how guns were going to be made for the next 200 years! (and maybe longer if I couldn't see Jan's gun!). I hadn't realized that metal cartridges had been invented so early.

Jan was evidently fascinated as the Captain showed how they had built a percussion cap in the side of the copper case which was struck by a small rod which was in turn struck by a small hammer in place of the usual flint-lock.

`No more misfires and the barrel will last much longer because there is no vent to blow-out,' said Jan.

`And waterproof - fire anywhere,' said the Captain.

`Brilliant!'

Just then Michel returned with what Jan recognized as his breech-loader musket, and laid it on the bench. The Colonel walked over and picked it up.

`What you have there may well be the musket of the future,' he said, `but even I can see that it's going to be years before you can get it into production. I have seen percussion caps that you can buy from England and I know they cost an arm and a leg. You are not going to be able to make them cheaper. Right, Jan?'

`They are not easy to make,' said Jan reluctantly.

`And copper cartridges! Copper is expensive. Are you going to have the soldiers pick up all the empty cartridge cases and return them for filling?'

`Yes, copper is expensive at the moment,' said the Captain, `but new refining techniques are coming along all the time and one day...'

`One day, yes. But what I'm interested in and what the rest of the Army is interested in, is something that can be made now. And this is it.' He held Jan's musket across his chest. `Basically a standard musket, firing standard ammunition but at 10 rounds per minute. I know. I've tested it. And all it needs is this fancy breech opening.' He clicked the breech open and closed.

`It sounds too loose to be gas-tight,' said the Captain doubtfully.

`Well, it's got this little gizmo inside,' explained the Colonel.

`It would be nice to see how Pierre did it,' I said restrainedly.

`Yes, I wonder how he did it?' said Jan walking over to the Colonel and taking the musket from him.

At last! I was finally going to complete my Mission! Jan's hands closed on it and he expertly flipped open the bolt. As he looked down my eyes followed his expectantly and at that moment something ceased. Something that had been going on in the background, so faint and so constant that I no longer noticed it.

The buzz of the electro-narcosis! It had stopped!

The scene blurred, faded and disappeared. Everything became black. I opened my eyes and found myself lying on my back looking at a faintly illuminated white ceiling.

I was back at Chrodisp!

Chapter 21

I lay there stunned, looking at the ceiling and part of a dim glow-lamp. Why the hell was I back in Chrodisp? A sudden guilty stab. Had I done something wrong? I was sure I hadn't said my Return code or anything like it. It was last thing I would have done at that moment as I was just about to discover Pierre's secret and complete my Mission.

I lay there awhile listening to the whisper of the air-conditioning. Perhaps it was a phenomenon I hadn't heard of yet and I would soon flip back into 19th Century France, in the same way you can sometimes return to a dream after you have been woken up.

But no, nothing changed.

I could move my eyes and just see part of another glow lamp. I moved my foot and felt the weight of a bed-sheet against it. I was back at Chrodisp all right - I was back in myself and I felt lonely.

Sensations were now coming in from all over my body, from my weight on the bed, from my chest expanding and contracting as I breathed,

`How about sitting up?' I suggested. No reaction, of course; I was alone. I'd have to do it myself. I contracted my stomach muscles, the view changed and I was looking at a blank glass window. There was a weight on my head. The Helmet. I would need to pull it off with my hands.

I raised my hands but only one would rise. The left arm would not move and it hurt if I pulled on it. I lay down again.

Think. No pain in the left arm now, only pain when I sit up and try to move the arm. Therefore something must be attached to my left arm. I remembered - the drip tube. I tried to look to the left to see it, but the Helmet was in the way.

`Try your right hand?'

Nothing happened. I consciously sent a signal to my right arm and flinched as it swung up in front of my face. Something touched my left arm and I flinched again. Idiot, it was my right hand. I grasped with my right hand and was pleased to receive stronger signals from my left arm.

Fascinating. I could feel my left arm through my right fingers and at the same time feel my left arm being felt by my right hand. I squeezed a bit to confirm.

Now why was I doing all this? The drip tube, of course.

I moved my right fingers up until I felt something hard. I pressed it but no corresponding signal from the left arm so that must be the drip tube. I pulled at it and immediately got plenty of signals from my left arm! Damn, that's not the way to get the needle out; you have to slide it up. That's right.

I sat up again. Both hands came up to the Helmet and I lifted it off smoothly. I put it on the bed beside me and swung my feet onto the floor.

The contrast was incredible. A few minutes ago I had been standing in a long wooden shed on an island in the middle of the river Seine near Paris. The sun had been shining through the open windows, the birds had been singing and I could hear the clang of someone banging on an anvil in the distance. I could still see the Colonel with his dark mobile face, holding Jan's musket across his chest and hear him telling the Captain what the French Army really wanted.

And now I was in a long dimly-lit room filled with beds, their white frames lined up as far as I could see. Just a faint medical smell and the whispering of air conditioning. Each bed had its occupant wearing a Helmet, name stencilled on the front - Zeitner, Carlos, Molden, Bailey ... Their eyes were closed; they were all somewhere else. Motionless except for those slight synchronous movements.

I was back in the 21st Century.

God, I felt depressed. What had happened to Jacques, to Jan, to his `little friend', had he married her? To the Colonel, to the clever Captain Lardy? All dead, dead hundreds of years ago.

And what was left of their lives? There would be green lichen-covered headstones in the graveyard of that little weather-beaten church I had seen overlooking the Brest Roads. Perhaps someone living today would have a faint recollection of what a grandparent had said to them long ago about their great-, great-, grand-father. Maybe there would be an old musket hung in a museum somewhere marked `J le F.'

Apart from that, nothing. They had all lived on Branch Lines. I looked round dully and stood up unsteadily. The room tipped towards the right.

`Watch out!' I said but I carried on falling and fell against the bed. I climbed up again clumsily, giving individual orders to arms and legs. There was nothing wrong with me; I had just got out of the habit of using my own body.

I did a few exercises, touching my toes, knee-bends, push-ups. No, there was nothing wrong, in fact I was very fit, not panting at all.

But where was everybody? Could I just return unannounced like that? Shouldn't there be someone waiting by the bedside to debrief me? I looked at my wrist-watch but I wasn't wearing it; I remembered we had to take off our watches because they

would be damaged by the Insertion pulse. There was a little locker by my bed; I opened it and found my clothes. In one pocket was my watch - 03:52. Early morning.

I unzipped my white coverall and pulled on my normal clothes. There was a dim red glow at one end of the ward so I walked quietly towards it, feeling unreal.

I had visited Brest in the early 19th Century, been captured by the Royal Navy, escaped and burnt a frigate, travelled across France by coach and visited Paris in the time of Napoleon.

And here I was walking down a quiet hospital ward in the 21st Century, strapping on my wrist-watch. It seemed a very mundane return.

After walking past about 50 beds mostly occupied, I reached the door with the red panel above it. As I approached it hissed open and a small man in a white coat sitting in front of a semicircular bank of displays turned round. His mouth dropped open.

'Who are you?' he stammered.

I thought.

'Digby.'

'Who are you?' he repeated loudly, 'and what the hell are you doing here?' His hand was on a small button.

Oh God, voice not working either.

'My name is Digby,' I said carefully. I searched in my pockets for my Chronodisp card and he took it at arm's length. I sat down uninvited on a small stool.

Still keeping an eye on me he slid my card into a slot in his desk and some letters, too small for me to read, appeared on the screen. He stabbed at the screen with a fingertip. It cleared and a pattern of circles appeared. He touched one of the circles and another pattern appeared. He touched it again. The screen filled with data and he scrolled rapidly through it by repeatedly touching the bottom corner of the screen. He stopped.

'Brest, Jan Le Foc, 21 May 1815,' he read out. 'Return on demand or 15 July 2016 latest'. He looked at me then touched the screen again. One of the panels which had up to now shown ten slowly moving EEG signals flickered and then stabilized. On it were ten slowly moving straight lines.

'Hm, that's Digby's station. You're back all right.'

He touched the screen again and a keyboard appeared on it which he used like a typewriter. The screen cleared and several lines of print appeared. He turned to me.

'Strange. According to this you requested return but no signal has been given to the BRD team.'

He pulled a phone out of his pocket and spoke into it. After a while the door opened and two men appeared yawning and pulling on white coats.

'Mr Digby?' said the taller 'No, please don't get up. I know how it feels. I'm Dan Smith and this is Joe Closter. Can we get you something, coffee, tea?'

Tea! My God, that's what I wanted. Nothing else, a big warm comforting cup of tea with lots of milk and sugar.

'Tea,' I said.

Joe went out through the door and came back pushing a small trolley.

'We normally do all this by the bedside,' he apologized.

I sat there drinking my wonderful cup of tea, holding my hands around the cup. The other two had coffee. The man at the desk was telephoning again.

'Is there anything else we can get you?' asked Dan. He looked at his trolley. 'We have rolls, cereals, toast and marmalade, ...'

'Stop, that's it, toast and marmalade.'

We all moved over to a small table in the corner. The operator took some print-outs off it and smilingly joined us drinking his coffee out of a mug labelled "Hans".

It made a change to be eating myself instead of watching others do it. Delicious crunchy hot toast, thick-cut marmalade mixing with the melted butter. I held out my cup again to be refilled and received another plateful of hot toast. My spirits were rising,

In a greasy hand I held up a piece of toast and pausing only to lick up some marmalade in imminent danger of falling off said:

`Do you realize that I have here in my hand the perfectly balanced meal, invented by the Brits at the dawn of time. Hand-churned farm butter stuffed with energy-giving hydrocarbons and delicious fruity marmalade loaded with healthy vitamins such as A, B, C and the nitro-amide D complex. All mounted on a handy slice of fresh-baked absorbent bread which provides essential bone-forming carbohydrates and cleverly toasted to stiffen it and produce a small amount of charcoal to aid digestion.'

`Text-book reaction,' grinned Joe.

I was about to go into the life-reviving properties of tea but Dan had produced a small recorder which he placed on the table between us.

`Fifth of July 2016, 0415. First debrief of Mr Digby trip reference 234 slash E,' he said into the recorder. Then he looked up at me.

`First - did you arrive all right?'

`Perfect. Right on the nose. Exactly as expected. I arrived just at the right speed and slid in. He never even noticed.'

`Now, when you were in the Host, were you comfortable, did the electro-narcosis bug you, was it too strong?'

`No, it was fine. I could just hear it in the background.'

`And no dizziness? You felt physically comfortable?'

`Oh, sure. I just didn't think of myself, you know. There was a lot going on most of the time.'

There were a series of questions about closeness of contact with the Host, was I able to "read" his senses etc.

`And you were able to "Withdraw" all right?'

`Absolutely no problem. Apart from the fact that I came back too soon everything was perfect.'

Dan glanced at Hans who shrugged and pointed to a display.

`The computer says that you requested return,' he said.

`For the record I didn't,' I said, `and furthermore another few minutes and I would have been able to complete my Mission; I was just about to look...'

Dan held up his hands.

`No details about the Mission, please. That's between you and your Coordinator, Dr Duluth. We don't want to know. Bedside reception and debrief is just to check on the routine Insertion data.' He cleared my plate and cup away and then turned to me. `Well, that's really all from us: Dr Duluth is on his way down and he will take over from now on and do the Mission Debrief. You seem to be all right and as...'

The door opened and Dr Duluth entered looking as though he had just stepped out from an important meeting. Incongruously he had a paper coffee cup in his hand.

`It seems that everything you touch becomes unconventional, Mr. Digby', he said, staring at me.

I shrugged.

`How is he anyway?' he asked Dan.

`Fine. And apart from the premature return it seems like it was a faultless Insertion.'

Chapter 22

`Well, if you're feeling all right I'd like to continue this down the corridor,' said Dr Duluth. I stood up, nodded to them all and left.

We entered a medium-sized, pastel-coloured room with indirect lighting. There were four microphones mounted at head height on the walls and two cameras. There was also a long couch and an armchair.

Dr Duluth sat at a small desk and switched on the flush-mounted screen.

`Some like to lie on the couch, some sit on the chair. Others like to walk around.'

I sat on the couch. I was supposed to be unconventional.

`The only records we have of your Insertion,' he began, `are your EEG traces and they don't show much apart from indicating any emotional high points. What we now have to do is slowly go through your trip in as much detail as possible. My job is to help you remember any incidents that we may consider important and to filter out the rest.' He tapped on the desk screen and looked up at me. `But to go to the nub - did you find it?'

`No, but I found it really does exist and saw it working. And if I had been allowed to stay another minute I would have got it.'

`Well, well,' he said, surprised. `And you almost got it too. As close as that.'

`As close as that.'

He changed the subject.

`Can you remember anything special about the way you returned?'

I thought.

`No, I just woke up. I got dressed and walked into the control room at the end. The operator, Hans, seemed surprised to see me.'

`And you didn't use your code return, even by accident?'

`My code return was that verse that starts,

"In Xanada did Khubla Khan..."

Nothing could have been further from my thoughts at the time.'

`And there was no BRD - no Bedside Reception and Debriefing?'

`No.'

He thought for a while, twisting his watch-strap round his wrist. `Well, we might as well go on,' he said finally.

We then started to go through the Mission in detail, Dr Duluth stopping me every now and then to ask supplementary questions. When I came to the British raid on Brest and the British officer who had shot Pierre, he sat up straight.

`You say he asked about the breech-loader? He was the first to mention it?'

`Yes. He had a pistol and pushed us both off the street into the workshop. He asked Pierre where the breech-loader was and as Pierre didn't answer immediately, he shot him. He then turned his pistol towards Jan but Jan jumped him before he could say anything else. If he was going to say anything else.'

`You mean you "jumped" him,' he said.

`Well, he had just shot Pierre with one barrel and he was pointing the other at me, so it seemed a good idea at the time.'

`Can you remember anything special about the encounter; did the officer appear quite natural or was he perhaps stiff?'

`It was all over very quickly but there was something odd about it. He looked a normal sort of chap - not the sort of person you would expect to cold-bloodedly shoot

you. And it's funny you should say "stiff". When Jan grabbed him he went over like a board. At the time I put it down to unfamiliarity with Judo but he was stiff even for a beginner.'

`And his voice?'

`Yes, there was something ...strained... about it too.'

He pulled his flexible watch strap and let it snap back. `I see.' Eyes down he was examining EEGs on his screen. Presumably mine. `Yes, the incident is quite visible on your EEG.'

He touched the screen then looked up again.

`And then you saw the breech-loader musket disappearing in one direction and Jan being taken forcibly in the other. Why didn't you just say your bit of poetry, return to Chronosp and get Inserted into Pierre?'

`Well, I did think about that for a while,' I replied, `but your people had always impressed on me how much an Insertion cost, so I thought I would hang in awhile and see if I could retrieve the situation.'

`By influencing his actions which you could do because you could Empathize with him.'

`Yes. Look, I'm sorry about all the reprogramming of Branch Lines that you must have done but I felt I just couldn't leave Jan in the lurch like that.'

He looked at me in surprise.

`Well, Mr Digby apologizes for something,' he said ironically. `I'll take a rain-check on that because this time there's no need to apologize. You blew up a ship, made Jan a local hero and gave him a foot-note in the history books. Which is what we used when we were programming the Brest Branchline about two years ago.'

`Oh. So I modified a Timeline way back there in 1815 and everything in our present changed accordingly.' I said.

`Hardly everything,' he said. `It was strictly Branchline stuff. You have to look hard in the history books to find anything at all about it. If you had got near a Main Timeline you would have had much less freedom of action.'

The Debriefing continued but he was not particularly interested in anything else except for the bit just before I woke up. I explained again how the electro-narcosis went off at the critical moment but he made no more comments and merely sat looking into the distance, twisting his watch-strap.

`But I was actually there, in Paris in June 1815! Is no one interested in the way they lived, the way they dressed, the food?' I was amazed.

`Yes, of course. But we send people back just for that. We have more data than we can handle already.' He looked up. `Write a book.'

`I will,' I said. (This is it.)

Well, that about wrapped up the Debriefing. Dr Duluth asked me if I was prepared to go back and I said `Yes'.

`It won't be for a few days,' he said `we have to run some computer diagnostics first. I shouldn't like to see you brought back prematurely again. So I'm going to suggest some R and R. Your kit has already been moved to your new quarters.'

As requested I handed over my card and he slid it into his viewer and tapped a few buttons.

`This will see you through the next few days or so,' he said and handed it back.

We parted and I took the rubber-wheeled train, not knowing where it was going to lead me but the trip was quite short. The light came on by the card slot, I climbed out onto the platform and the train hissed away down the tunnel. There had been several people on the train but no one I knew. I used the card to open the usual steel door, this time stencilled `R & R'. Into a lift and my card took me to the 3rd floor.

Ah, but this was better. Long thickly carpeted corridors with sun slanting across from high windows. Cool and dry. Rest and Recuperation must be a luxury hotel. There were people going in and out of their rooms as I walked down the corridors.

Room 33, there it was. Card in slot, nudge door open, pause, walk in.

Very nice. A big room filled with sunlight but rather cold. I walked over to the window which formed all of one wall and looked down. Third floor and beneath me was a large outdoor swimming pool with some people splashing about or lying in deck-chairs.

So that must be south. There was the reactor cooling tower, there was the Recreation Centre and yes, over there to the west by that dome was where we had met the dog.

We. I must see if Jim was free, I'd like to meet him again. I glanced at my watch - 11:32.

But business first. I was going to sleep in this room for the next six or seven nights and when you are asleep you are quite helpless. Old army training dies hard. So I checked out the room carefully, examining under the bed, pulling out the drawers, looking on top of and under the clothes closet. I had no idea what I was looking for and I had no equipment to detect bugs.

Thinking of bugs there were two damned flies buzzing around and I just knew they would be walking over my face next morning while I was sleeping.

I lay on the bed a moment listening to the air conditioning. Then I got up, opened my case which was lying on a slatted rack by the door and lifted out my computer. Actually it was one of those combined devices that did everything - radio, TV, computer, clock, recorder, terminal, reader etc. I unwound the lead and then looked round the room for the socket. I plugged it in, switched on and tapped in my number in Munich to see if I had any mail.

I had some bank statements (they send you a new one every time you make a transfer in Germany), two invitations to parties (both in the past now), an invoice for some book chips and a long message from Dieter in German. There seemed to be no danger words: (Verlust=loss, bankrott=bankrupt, tot=dead) so I put it aside to decode later.

I paid the invoice and said thank-you for the invitations but unfortunately...

I started to unpack my bag when suddenly I began to think of food. My God! I was hungry. Now I had thought of it I was ravenous! I looked round the room but there was nothing to eat. No matter, I didn't want a snack anyway. I wanted to sink my teeth into a juicy steak and for that I would have to go to the restaurant. I remembered there had been a sign in the lift marked 'Restaurant'.

I lined up a few of my possessions, brushed the pile of the carpet all in one direction so it would show footprints in my absence and left the room, pausing only to reset the thermo-stat by the door to 22 instead of 18 degrees. The last occupant must have been an Eskimo.

In the lift was the sign I had remembered, 'Restaurant: Floor -3. Very scientific. I pressed button '-3' and down we sank. There was a buzzing near the glow-lamp where two flies were having a meaningful ongoing relationship. They seemed to have a fly problem here. Or maybe I had lived too long in Germany where flies were 'not allowed'. Then the doors opened and a heavenly odour of cooking drifted in.

After the meal I felt suddenly sleepy and realized I had been up since 3 o'clock that morning.

On the way back to my room I wondered how I could feel sleepy after two weeks of electro-narcosis. I entered my room as usual, checked the carpet pile etc. No visitors in my absence. Also a bit warmer, thank God.

Chapter 23

I lay on my bed looking up at the ceiling. If I was going to record my experiences in Napoleonic France, I suppose it should be done as soon as possible while the memories were still fresh. I could dictate it all here but I didn't have enough memory capacity to hold it all - several hours of talking I guessed. The best way would be to fill up my memory here and then down-load it, using high-speed transmission to my computer in Munich which had plenty of capacity. Then I could record the next section.

Another thing. I really should read up a bit more on history before I went back. I'm afraid History had always been a boring subject for me at school. But having walked through Paris in June 1815 put a different complexion on the whole thing. Those people were real. I must read up more about the period and find out what had motivated them.

The sun was slanting in now and it was very quiet. Something was tugging at the edge of my mind.

It's funny to find you have a gift, something that no one, or very few other people have. At school I had always admired fellow pupils who were gifted. I remembered there had been one who when confronted with a piece of non-working electronic equipment would actually lay his hands on it, make one or at most two tests and discover the fault. The rest of us would be poking around all day trying to find the fault logically - but he just put his finger right on it. He used to come up with some pretty weird circuits too, I remembered. They worked fine but he could never explain in words how they worked. He didn't think in words - I'm sure he somehow felt the electrons moving around.

It was quiet here.

But how nice it was to find I have a gift myself now - to be able to do something that not many other people could do. Empathizing. An odd sort of gift though; you couldn't amaze anyone at a party with it. Like any gift, you just had it, no work required. In some ways not so satisfying as something you had worked for. That new serve at tennis I had been learning, for example. First it's terrible, then it gets a little better, then you do a perfect one. You never see it again for a week and then you do it again and again. Two out of three now. Somehow it's more mine because I've made it myself. My Secret Weapon was going to slaughter Dieter next time we played.

But I must say I had been completely unconscious of any special ability to Empathize with people in "real life". On the contrary, in fact. Ingrid, for instance. Why did she go off with that wet violinist? Quick, think of something less painful...

It really was quiet here.

Why did I keep thinking of that? Ah, yes, when I first entered the room the air conditioner had been going on and off all the time as the Eskimo had the temperature down so low. But I had set the thermo-stat to 22 degrees and the room temperature hadn't reached that yet.

But there was something else.

The flies of course. They had stopped buzzing so now I would have to look for the little buggers. Ah, there was one now - it was slowly walking down the wall about 30cm above the carpet. Tired out I supposed. I wondered what there was for a fly to live on in this sterile room.

That was odd. The fly just fell off the wall and there it was lying on its back, looking as graceless as an airplane I had seen once that had turned over on landing. And there was its mate on the other wall looking sorry for himself too. Did the higher temperature slow them down? The one on the carpet was slowed right down, all right - it was dead. I would have thought a higher temperature would make them perkier. That's how it was in Pakistan anyway but maybe this was a different model.

The one still on the wall was cleaning his antenna system now but in a rather relaxed manner. He paused and then he too just fell off the wall. He lay there on the carpet, unmoving.

The hairs at the back of my neck started to rise as I noticed that it had fallen off the wall also 30cm above the carpet. I looked from one to the other, feeling cold shivers running up and down my back.

I was beginning to have an idea. I had heard of something like this on a half-remembered course, a long time ago. Should I call Duluth? If I was wrong I would look like a paranoid fool but not making sure could be bloody dangerous.

I walked slowly over to the thermo-stat and turned it up to 28 degrees, as high as it would go. Just in time - the thermometer showed the room temperature was almost the 22 degrees I had set it to.

Now to prove my theory I needed live flies, or at least one live fly. But I only had two flies and there they were lying on the floor, dead.

The lift; there would probably be a family there by now. I walked slowly into the bathroom and reaching out picked up a plastic cup from the shelf under the mirror. I returned to the door still walking very slowly and stood there a moment. Then I swiftly opened the door and stepped out, closing it carefully behind me.

I walked along the corridor holding my tooth-glass inconspicuously and rang for the lift. I got in with two other people talking to each other in German. They pressed '-3' and we descended. Four flies, up there in the corner. The lift stopped and the two Germans stepped out, one looking back at me over his shoulder. I shook my head.

I quickly jammed the toothglass over the four flies and slid a piece of paper under it. The lift mounted to '+3'. I got out and walked down the corridor to my room.

I paused outside the door. This was it, paranoid or dead. I looked at my watch and found I had only been away three minutes. Card into slot, close door but don't push it to lock - I might want to exit quickly. Room temperature +26 degrees and still rising as the sun was shining in. I didn't have much time. God, I was sweating and it wasn't just the temperature.

Now, how could I lower a fly to 30cm above the ground and still observe it? Ideally I needed a cage of some sort. I had nothing in my kit that was suitable. I looked round the room, still nothing. What about the bathroom? There were a number of gadgets there like plastic shower caps. Could I do something with one of those? No, ... but there was something better. Hair nets.

A quick glance at the thermometer at 26.5 degrees and long slow steps into the bathroom. There they were, in little plastic envelopes. I picked up one at arm's length and stepped out of the bathroom.

First the tricky part. I tore open one of the envelopes and pulled out the hairnet. Good, a fine mesh. Now to persuade a fly to enter. I picked up my glass with one hand and held the net open with the other. Then with my thumb I slowly eased back the piece of paper sealing the glass. The flies were still buzzing about energetically inside and seemed more interested in their own company than in the freedom I was offering. I shook the glass in annoyance. One was crawling up the side of the glass towards the opening. Go on! But then it perversely turned round and walked back.

I looked at the thermometer: 27 degrees. Christ! I couldn't stay here much longer. I turned my attention to the odd combination of objects in my hand. At last! Two of the flies had crawled into the hairnet. I closed the opening to the net with one hand, and put the empty tooth-glass on a shelf.

Now I had the two flies in the hairnet. I took a few turns round the hairnet to close it securely and then let it out on the rest of the string, about 20cm long. I held them up to eye level. The flies were happily buzzing. Ready then.

I looked around the hot quiet room. Where? Right here would do fine. I slowly lowered the net on the end of its string, pausing every now and then. Buzz, buzz.

Down another few centimeters. Still happily buzzing.

Down to waist level. Silence.

I jerked them back up again and looked at them unbelievably. Still and dead. That's more than a meter above the floor! Proof enough. I must get out of this quiet sunny deadly room. I dropped the hairnet and turned towards the door.

At that moment the room temperature reached 28 degrees and the air conditioning came on with a thump. I felt a breeze on my face, grabbed my nose and leapt for the door. I wrenched it open, feeling consciousness slipping. There were two people talking in the corridor outside. They turned and looked at me with frozen amazement. I pushed at them.

'Get away!' I croaked 'Gas - poison gas!'

Then I passed out.

Chapter 24

There was something cold and hard pressing down on my face. I struggled and tried to sit up.

'Lie down a minute. You'll be all right now,' said a voice with an American accent.

I could see the blue ceiling of the corridor with the sun slanting down from the high windows. I looked in panic towards the nearest door but it was not my room. There was a rope barrier across the corridor further down and lots of people moving around and talking. Two were wearing plastic overalls and face masks. I lay back - God what a filthy headache.

'We've heard of it, of course,' said another American voice behind me, conversationally, 'but it's the first time I've actually seen it in action.'

I could see the legs of more people walking past me and hear the rustle of anti-gas clothing. Then a familiar voice.

'How is he?' - Dr Duluth. He came round and looked down at me.

'He looks all right to me,' he continued. It would have been nice to have heard a bit more sympathy.

'Yes, he's probably all right now. Must have got him in the eyes because he had his hand over his nose - difficult to pull it off to give him oxygen, in fact. It can enter by any mucous membrane, you know.'

Two white-clad medical orderlies arrived, loaded me onto a stretcher, carried me down the corridor and stopped outside the lift. I sat up.

'That's all right. I'm fine now,' I said. They tried to restrain me but I pushed their arms aside and slid off the stretcher. I stood up, holding on to it and feeling my head swim.

'I'll be better in a minute.'

I started to walk unsteadily up the corridor and already felt better. Blood circulation or something. I turned back to the orderlies who were folding up their

stretcher and asked them if they had anything against a headache. One gave me some pills and they disappeared into the lift with slightly reproachful looks.

I returned up the corridor,

Dr Duluth didn't seem particularly surprised to see me. He pulled out a phone and spoke a few words, closed it and put it back in his pocket.

'We can go in here,' he said opening the door to Room 39. I walked in cautiously but it was laid out quite differently to Room 33. I went into the bathroom to get some water and swallowed two of the pills I had been given. When I returned there was another man in the room with Dr Duluth. He was introduced as Dr Bright and was wearing a white smock. I sat down in a chair in the corner of the room and they both looked at me.

'That was number two,' I said, 'if not number three.' My voice sounded hoarse.

Dr Duluth said nothing. Dr Bright cleared his throat.

'Perhaps you could tell us what happened,' he suggested. I recognized the American voice I had heard on recovering consciousness. 'The first we heard was an emergency call from two guys who happened to be in the corridor. One fortunately had a telephone.'

I coughed, swallowed and told them the story of the flies on the walls and how I had vaguely heard of DSG on a course on nerve gases and remembered it was a very heavy gas.

'Why didn't you just leave the room immediately?' asked Dr Duluth.

'I could hardly scream for help just because I'd seen two flies fall off the wall. Also I'd set some intruder traps in my room when I left to eat and they hadn't been disturbed, so I couldn't see how any gas could have got in anyway.'

I went on to describe how I had imagined the room filled with the deadly gas to a height of 30cm and so long as I walked slowly and didn't create any turbulence I would be safe.

'And that is why you advanced the air conditioning thermo-stat?' asked Dr Bright.

'Right. As soon as that came on it would stir up all the air in the room and mix it with the gas.' My headache was receding.

The door to the room opened and one of the technicians in protective coveralls entered with his mask loosely round his neck. He had a sealed plastic bag in his hands.

'This is how it was done,' he said, pointing to a piece of hardly-visible transparent plastic in his bag. 'It's either a solid form of the gas or something impregnated with it - either way it slowly releases DSG. It was by the door and being transparent would not have been seen. Must have been pushed in next to the hinge so it would be behind the door when it was opened.'

'Just a piece of plastic pushed under the door,' said Dr Bright admiringly. 'Most ingenious.'

I stirred restively and Dr Duluth looked across at me.

'But how did you confirm that there was poison gas in your room?'

I told him of the flies I had caught in the lift and lowered into the 'pool' of gas and how the level was higher than I had expected as they had died about a meter above the ground.

'Like miners used to check a mine-shaft with canaries,' said Dr Bright with a smile.

Dr Duluth had been looking at me all this time with faint surprise - probably because he was expecting me to blow-up and quit. And why hadn't I? A lot of odd things had been happening since I had joined Chrodisp. Two and possibly three direct attacks on my life and a sabotaged Mission. Sure I was worried but somehow

the attacks seemed to be against the Chrondisp Institute and not against me personally. No, that was garbage -against me all right but against me as a member of Chrondisp.

I was feeling myself to be a member of Chrondisp.

Dr Bright and his technician had left now, talking animatedly about vapour pressure and adsorption coefficients and every now and then holding the plastic bag up to the light.

'Once can happen to anyone, twice is a coincidence but three times is enemy action,' I said.

Dr Duluth looked at me speculatively.

'I think we should have a little talk,' I continued. 'I'm not used to being an ignorant foot soldier in the front line; I want to know what the General knows too.'

'We'll go to my office.'

We took the train, both sitting in silence. Arriving at his office, he opened the door with his card and motioned me to the visitor's chair. He sat behind the desk, phoned someone briefly and then looked up at me.

To start him off I began:

'According to the Media, Westblock and Asiablock are both using chronological displacement to further their aims in the Cold War. We are both rummaging through the Databank of History, as they put it.'

'That is quite correct,' carried on Dr Duluth, 'and of course anything that Asiablock can do to reduce the efficiency of our search or increase the efficiency of theirs is to their advantage. "Efficiency" is a very "in" word at Asiablock at the moment.'

'"Efficiency"!' I said, surprised. 'I would have thought they would immediately and drastically improve their efficiency if they stopped looking for the supposed "Roots of Confucism", "The Historical Justification of Communism" and all that junk,' I said.

'We in the West consistently underestimate the effect of a Faith,' said Dr Duluth pedantically. 'They have created a new religion out of a mixture of an old Chinese belief and an old Russian doctrine. They think the Yellow Peoples, armed with Communism and Tao are Evolution's next step. How does it go? "Single-cell life forms united to become multicell life forms with each cell having a specialized function - muscle, brain etc. The next step is for the multi-celled organisms, us, to unite into a super organism". It's a nice idea and it's logically impossible to prove that something will never work.'

'Even though the Russians tried Communism for 70 years before their Empire just fell apart? I seem to remember that at the end they had to build a wall around the country to keep their reluctant citizens in.'

'Asiablock says Russian Communism was driven by envy. Their version is refined by an old Chinese ethical system. And it certainly has raised the living standard of millions.'

'And led to a caste system where most of them are at the bottom of the heap with no say at all in their future.'

'They don't miss what they've never had.'

'Well, I've lived all my life in a free society and I sure would miss it.'

'And you risked your life so you could continue to live in this free society,' he said raising an eye-brow. 'I wonder what motivated you, Captain Digby, when you volunteered for Pakistan. Was it something to do with Defending the Crown or the Honour of the Regiment? Or did you just want to keep the world free for property speculators?'

I was silent. I didn't know. It had seemed the obvious thing to do at the time. It was just assumed that I would go back to the Regiment as my father and his father before him had done in times of national stress. We were even supposed to have had a relation in the Battle of Waterloo - his sword still hung over the staircase at home. There was an idea! If I ever got back to Napoleonic France I might hear something of the King's Own who... But we seemed to be drifting away from what I wanted to talk about.

'Yes. OK. Perhaps,' I said. 'But what interests me most now is that it seems as though someone has their sights on me and not only here in Chondisp.'

'You mean back in time too? That's quite impossible. The chance of any of our people meeting any of Asiablock people back in time is remote in the extreme, firstly because the past is so long and so detailed and secondly because neither they nor we can afford to send many people back. Furthermore, almost all the people we and they use are only Observers, being carried around passively by their Hosts. Even the very rare Empathizers can only suggest courses of action to their Host. If I remember rightly your Mission could have been wrapped-up on the first day if you had only been able to persuade your Host to look at the modified musket.'

'That British naval officer seemed to have had a very definite course of action suggested to him,' I said. 'Asiablock could have Inserted someone into him if they had known about my Mission in advance.'

Dr Duluth smiled tolerantly.

'That would require a spy in Chondisp with direct access to the Main Computer and also a rapid link with Asiablock. Either alone is very difficult to imagine: both together is inconceivable. That is not to say that we don't have minor Asiablock agents in Chondisp; we do uncover one every now and then. You were probably attacked because your ability as an Empathizer had leaked out. But we have redoubled our security precautions so I doubt if you will be attacked again.'

Head down he lined a pen up carefully with the edge of his desk-screen and looked up again.

'However, if you feel uncertain about your safety at Chondisp, I must ask if you wish to continue your employment here. But before you answer I should say that I would be sorry if you did leave and so as a small encouragement we can agree to raise your salary to Scale 5.'

Ah. More money. But too eager an acceptance would not be fitting, especially after that 'encouraging the nervous employee' bit.

'It's not an easy decision,' I said slowly. 'I'd like to stay on of course, but it was only by a stroke of luck that I escaped that last time. Your 'redoubled precautions' don't seem to be very effective. Of course Scale 5 is a 10% increase on my present salary Scale 6, but if I'm not alive to spend it...' I bit my thumb pensively.

'I can go to Scale 4, a 20% increase but that's the limit,' he said finally.

'Very well then,' I said. We stood up and parted.

As I walked down the corridor I felt pleased. 20% salary increase and just for the asking! But was it my imagination or did he look relieved when I accepted? Should I have held out for more?

Chapter 25

Well, apart from this bit of excitement my personal program was unchanged: I was still staying at the Rest and Recuperation centre and it would be another week before I could be Inserted again.

I spent the next two days just finishing dictating my experiences into the memory bank in Munich. There were lots of asides and references to look up such as: What was all that fuss about on the 1st of June 1815, when Jan arrived in Paris? Was there any trace of that 'high-tech' gun that Captain Lardy had shown Jan? If I could get hold of that for the Munich shop! There had obviously been a lot going on in the development of firearms in the 18th and 19th Centuries that I hadn't heard of.

I only left my room to eat at the restaurant.

At breakfast on the third day I saw a familiar face sitting opposite the pretty Belgian girl who had been on our course.

I sat down with Jim and Yvette, for that was who they were.

All of us had apparently been successfully Inserted and were dying to talk about it but Security only allowed the most general discussion of our Missions. Jim was certainly going back again and Yvette was on stand-by.

There was some gossip about other members of the class and it appeared that something had gone wrong with the Insertion of Yvette's girl friend, Brigitte. She had returned prematurely and had been taken straight to the hospital where she still was. No one was allowed to visit her.

One activity that we all had in common was the recording of our experiences and we discussed different ways of doing this. And we all wanted to go back to the scene of our Insertion and see how it looked now.

*

Now that all my private notes were recorded, I was spending most of my time at the library or recovering from the library by playing squash with Jim and then loafing by the swimming pool.

Dr Duluth was right in that I was not attacked again but remembering the ingenuity of the last attempt, I continued the precautions in my room and tried never to be alone when out of it. Acting on Jim's suggestion I also stopped using my card unless it was absolutely necessary. I would always let someone else use theirs to enter the recreation centre, to order a meal etc. I left the door to my room open so that a push would open it. I used Jim's computer outlet, carrying my computer into his room when I wanted to check my mail in Munich or send off any letters. In this way the central computer and anyone who had access to it didn't always know where I was.

The three of us, Yvette, Jim and myself drifted into the habit of taking our breakfasts out on the balcony of the R and R centre restaurant.

Facing east we would have our coffee and croissants in the bright morning sunlight. The concrete of the balcony was still cool from the usually freezing night so the heat was quite bearable, at least until about 9 o'clock when we entered the cool air-conditioned centre and parted to our various tasks.

Jim seemed duty-bound to make a rather lethargic play for Yvette, which she rebuffed absent-mindedly. She was a tall, stately blond and although very pretty, rather too serious. Like me, Jim had been married once before, but unlike me was very keen to get married again.

Jean-Pierre, who had also been on our course, had made a more business-like approach to her in French, but he had quite coldly been put down, in English, so we could all hear. It had all been rather embarrassing. It turned out she had some sort of complex about France and Frenchmen and at home always spoke a terrible-sounding language half-way between German, English and Dutch. At least it sounded terrible to me after the clean sharpness of High German.

Yvette's main interest, outside whatever she did in her Chronosp role, was painting. She was usually the first to arrive on the balcony and would be painting a

picture of the desert just before or just after sunrise. By the time I arrived she would be applying the final touches to her morning's work, the sound of her airbrush whining up and down the scale in spurts.

Yvette and I had developed an act where I would lean over her picture, slurping coffee, and point out minute discrepancies with the scene before us. In retaliation she would be pushed into the role of the finely-perceptive artiste surrounded by clods.

'How could an Englishman know anything about painting? A race whose main contribution to painting consists of an endless succession of large vague seascapes or boringly detailed sea-battles.'

'Against the French,' I pointed out, 'And we always won. But now we have a thing called a "camera",' I went on rashly, 'and it can take a picture that is perfect, just by pressing a button - like that.' I tried to snap my buttery fingers. 'And the colours it takes are true too. See that shade by the big dune - you've shown it green and anyone can see it's blue.' I pointed it out to Jim but he said nothing.

'Ach,' she said, and added something guttural in her own language.

'You build things yourself, don't you? Fretwork book-ends perhaps? Things you could buy cheaper - like that.' She snapped her fingers and some blue paint went on my shirt. 'As for the colour, if you had been here at 7 o'clock when I painted it instead of snoring in your bed, you would have seen it was green.'

Jim snickered. I went back to my croissants.

The sun rose rapidly and soon there were no shadows at all on the distant dunes. The swimming pool beneath us was still empty and for once there were no Cushcars whistling around the perimeter fences, throwing up clouds of gently settling sand. The only sign of life was the slowly turning radar mounted on the reactor cooling-tower. It was 8:45 and the temperature was rising.

Jim was playing with his computer. He had brought it out onto the balcony because his dish antenna couldn't 'see' some particular satellite from his room as it was on the wrong side of the building. But he still had problems, judging by the way he kept fiddling with it.

'Kaput again?' I said sympathetically. 'I have a Japanese one, should I get it for you?'

'It's not the computer, it's not even the satellite,' he said irritably. 'I'm getting a good signal. It's an interference signal that occurs just during the sync pattern and stops me locking on.'

He pointed to a small 5cm screen on which was a pattern that looked like a little hill but with a fuzzy twinkling outline.

'That's the proper signal,' he said pointing 'and this spike here, to the side, that's what's giving the trouble. A big signal too. Could be local.'

There was a little green light on his computer, marked 'sync', that was going on and off irregularly.

He had picked up the dish-antenna and was slowly scanning the heavens with it, all the time looking at his computer. Instinctively and uselessly I was also scanning the heavens - the satellites were more than 35,000km away. The sun was bright now so I was peering through a small opening between my fingers when suddenly I saw it.

A small black dot, just to the left of the sun. Now it drifted slowly until it was centred exactly on the sun's disk and was growing gradually in size. The hairs at the back of my neck rose as I looked at it unbelievably.

'Christ! We're under attack! There's something coming at us out of the sun. We've got to get off this balcony.'

Yvette and Jim looked at me frozen and Yvette made some gesture indicating disbelief. I pointed wordlessly over her shoulder where two of the nearby domes were

opening like astronomical cupolas and the long slim barrels of quick-firing cannons were tilting skyward. There was a sudden rushing roar from the far side of the Chrondisp compound as a salvo of rockets leapt upwards on rapidly expanding pillars of white exhaust. A klaxon started sounding urgently and men were running between the domes, pulling the covers off Cushcars.

I looked towards the sliding glass doors leading in to the restaurant - too far. In another 10 seconds the Stuka would be on us. I signalled the others to put their hands over their ears and crouch behind the balcony. It was thick concrete but would not protect our ears from the sonic bang of a Stuka going past at Mach 2.

There was a tremendous noise now. The quick-firing cannon had opened up, firing frantically, the muzzle blasts raising clouds of sand around them and the echos blatting off the other buildings.

I peered upward through my fingers and now I could clearly see the wings and the tail like a slowly turning cross, as the bomber came straight down at us, diving directly out of the sun.

'The Stuka hasn't got a chance,' I thought, crouching against the balcony. 'What the hell are they up to?'

There was a white flash above us, brighter than the sunlight and reflected from the plate glass windows of the restaurant. The vertically plunging Stuka had met its expected end.

'Down! Down!' I shouted over the noise of the firing and we all pressed ourselves against the balcony.

Then came the powerful whip-crack of the Stuka's sonic shock wave. The thick glass window behind us disintegrated into a milk-white cloud. Thank God it had been pre-stressed glass - normal glass would have shattered into dagger-like shards.

There was a whistling roar of rising pitch followed by a heavy thump as some large part of the destroyed Stuka plummeted to earth near the cooling tower. Probably the engine. Several smaller pieces pattered down, some splashing into the swimming pool beneath us. The guns had stopped firing and I could hear shouts and clangs as empty shell-cases were hastily kicked out of the way. Then silence.

I lifted my head cautiously over the edge of the balcony and shivering with apprehension scanned the desert. 'Where is the second wave?' There had to be something else. In Pakistan it would have been the black arrow-shapes of those dreaded ground-hugging Jabos silently flicking towards us.

But here, nothing. We were stunned but unharmed.

Jim crawled across to his computer which lay where he had left it, miraculously unharmed. The little green light remained on steadily. Jim looked up at me.

'No disturbing signal,' he said.

Well, good. I'm glad he was happy, for I wasn't. That was a diversion if ever I'd seen one - and not a very good one either. The other part of the attack should have come in simultaneously.

I stood up scanning the desert and sky. Something else was going to happen. Where? Where? But the gun barrels had returned to the horizontal and the sun shone down peacefully. A Cushcar was hissing towards where the bomber's engine had crashed.

Where? How?

Jesus! There it was. A sand dune was moving - and there another, rolling towards us - there was a long line of them, like waves advancing towards the land. The whole desert was moving in on us - it was going to cover us! Yvette gasped and put her hands over her mouth. Jim dropped his computer and ran to look over the balcony with us.

`Holy shit!' he breathed.

We watched in fascinated horror as a wall of sand climbed up into the sky and slowly bore down on us. Now we could also hear a low muffled droning sound as from a swarm of angry hornets. Overpowering and menacing the yellow wall approached climbing higher and higher, the droning louder and louder, gut-resonating. I shivered with superstitious awe and felt sweat trickling down my back. God, what was it? It had to be something natural. Don't panic! Why the hell wasn't Chrodisp doing anything? The moving wall was going to bury us, to fill our mouths with sand, to choke us!

`Crabtanks!' said Jim suddenly and everything dropped into place. Of course, that's what they were. About a hundred of them. After the monstrous unnatural image of the moving wall of sand, they looked almost friendly as they scuttled towards us, throwing up the sand in their peculiar sideways motion. No, not friendly, but known. Remote controlled and armed with either a rocket launcher or more often simply packed with explosives, they had been a familiar sight in the rocky mountains of Pakistan.

Now Chrodisp defence was firing as fast as it could. The guns below us were hammering away and there were swooshing sounds as rockets passed overhead. The line of advancing Crabtanks was hidden with smoke, every now and then pierced with the white flash of a hit.

From the left, an aircraft appeared flying low and fast over the line of Crabtanks which simultaneously erupted in a glittering cloud of anti-radar chaff.

The aircraft continued its run to the end of the line then turned steeply, waiting for the chaff to settle. Another run, another cloud of chaff, this time thinner. The next run was slow, almost at stalling speed, distributing anti-tank munition - small armour-piercing bomblets guided during their fall by metal or heat. A series of sharp cracks as the hollow charges exploded against the tanks. One after another the Crabtanks were hit - some just stopped frozen in their frantic movement, others detonated with heavy explosions then burned brightly.

There were now only a few survivors and below us teams of soldiers were running forward with boxes which turned out to be fibre-guided missiles. They crouched down in the sand and I could see the brief puffs of smoke from the launchers.

One by one the remaining tanks were hit. All except one which had careened out of sight behind a crane and then exploded as it hit a parked truck.

The guns stopped and the launcher teams stood up. Silence descended.

All over. A very incompetent attack. I didn't know how they had managed to conceal the approach of all those tanks, but they had been completely wasted. The desert was littered with their smoking ruins.

I looked at my watch - 8:57. The whole thing had only lasted 12 minutes!

I turned round to see Jim with his arm around Yvette and one eye on his computer. He looked at me.

`Those tanks were guided by a satellite signal!' he said excitedly. `I could see the answering signals popping off one by one as the tanks were hit.'

Yvette climbed to her feet, brushing glass dust out of her hair and from her skirt. She looked round at the mess on the balcony and pulled out her picture. There was a big rip across it and she tried to pull the two pieces together. Suddenly she sat down and burst into tears.

We had both seen young soldiers behave very much the same after their first experience of war, when you realize that your fellow humans are actually trying to kill

you. After a while the sobs subsided and she wiped her eyes and stood up. She said something in her own language.

`I'm all right now,' she said. `I've only been here three weeks...'

`It's not like this very often,' said Jim, reassuringly. A small shadow of a smile appeared.

`You can renegotiate your contract and ask for danger money,' I added.

`Yes,' she said `I will.' She took a deep breath, dropped the painting on the floor and started to collect her painting kit. She looked at Jim's computer.

`It's still not working,' she said, picking up her airbrush pump.

Our eyes flew to the small screen. My God, she was right! There was still a small steady disturbing signal, way off to the left. Jim fell on his knees in front of it. I looked at him.

`It's the same sort of signal as the others. Perhaps there's a tank still being controlled' he said.

Unlikely. The Chrontisp defence would have the signature of the Crabtanks now and would have found any not yet destroyed.

So what could be still under control? Something, I was sure. The whole attack had been odd. First a spectacular but old-fashioned dive-bomber, then an ingenious but badly managed tank attack. There must be something else. Think!

`What is the most valuable part of Chrontisp?' I asked, but I already knew the answer.

`The computer,' he answered instantly.

`And the people sleeping there,' said Yvette.

`But it's 200m underground,' said Jim, `and you can only get there by the train tunnel, and that's easily defended.'

`It's the target,' I said definitely.

Chapter 26

We walked into the empty restaurant, the broken glass crunching under our feet. Jim tried the wall phone by the door but hung it up again. Affected by the blast wave that shattered the restaurant windows, I supposed. We went out into the corridor. It was empty too, but seemed otherwise normal.

`We must warn them,' said Yvette. Jim shook his head again when he tried another wall phone mounted near the lift. I put my hand on his arm.

`How would you attack the computer, Jim?'

He thought.

`They have a Multi-Cray. Destroy the hardware and you could have a replacement up and running in 6 months. Same for the operating system - they must have a copy of that somewhere outside Chrontisp. The Databank. That's the sensitive point. It's far too big to duplicate. It contains all the Timeline information and would probably take several years to reload,'

`And how would you destroy it?'

`It's all optical-film ROM, read only memory. Heat - a small nuke would be best. But I doubt if they would risk using a nuke.'

`I thought everything was molecular memories?'

`Coming. Not yet. The reason for the attack may be because Chrontisp are about to transfer all the Databank from optical to molecular. And molecular memories are so compact it will be possible to hold duplicates. Now may be the last time that the Chrontisp computer is vulnerable in this way.'

`So if they can't use a nuke to erase the optical memories?'

`Open the drums and laser them would be one way. Explosive would do it too, but you'd need lots of small charges each with its own delay if you didn't want to go up with the memories.'

`Domino detonators?' I suggested. (A domino detonator picked up the sound of a nearby explosion and used it to detonate its own charge. We had used them to destroy bridges - it saved wiring everything together. One you fire: the others go off like a row of dominos falling).

`Yes,' he said, `but you're still looking at about 150lbs of explosive and detonators whereas about two fully-charged military lasers should be enough the other way.'

`And something to murder the sleepers,' I thought grimly. Once they had broken in to the computer area they would want to do as much damage as possible.

We had arrived at the lift. Yvette pressed the `call' button.

But what should we do? Go up to another level and attempt to find someone who had a radiophone and then try to persuade someone of the danger, Dr Duluth or Al or Hans of the computer area? Too many `someones'.

Or go down to the train and travel to the computer area and try to stop the sabotage I was convinced was about to occur? Unarmed?

The problem was resolved for us when the lift door opened and we found ourselves looking at two soldiers - a young UNO infantry Corporal with a blue beret and an older barrel-chested, bull-necked Military Police sergeant.

Hand on electro-pistol he surveyed us.

`Why aren't you in your rooms?' he said. British, from Birmingham. My heart sank.

`We were on the restaurant balcony during the attack and couldn't leave until it was over,' I said.

He stiffened predictably. I had the wrong accent.

`My name is Captain Digby and I need your help to stop an attack on the computer centre. Come with me.'

His pistol was half out of his holster now.

`Show me your ID.' I passed over my card and he glanced at it.

`It just says "Digby".'

`Well put it in your bloody reader,' I snarled `this is an emergency.'

`The Commie attack is finished. My orders are to make sure all civilians remain in their rooms. And only officers carry card-readers.'

`Then use your phone, for Christ's sake!'

`Radiophones are temporarily out of order. I must ask you to accompany me to the residential floor.' He meant walk in front of him as he had his pistol out now. I could see he was enjoying himself. It was a dream situation for a MP - an officer who had no ID. He would probably get commended for it too. I could see him relating it to his mates in the Sergeants' Mess: `so I said to this toffee-nosed officer...'

`Perhaps you could check at the phone down the passage there,' said Jim.

The Sergeant transferred his gaze to Jim. This was different. An American accent didn't call up Class War reflexes. Be as well to check.

He turned to the young soldier who was holding a Mk 5 rifle.

`Keep an eye on these. They may be Commies,' He reached over and with a click put the Corporal's rifle on to `full automatic'. He pushed his pistol back into the holster and walked down the corridor to the phone. The young blond soldier, he couldn't have been more than 19, moved the muzzle of his deadly Mk 5 over us.

Jim and I exchanged glances and I was estimating the distance to the Corporal when help arrived from an unexpected quarter.

`The Sergeant wanted to see some ID,' said Yvette. `Can I show you mine?' Her hands were at her waist.

`Yes, I suppose so,' he answered in the precise accents of a foreigner. Danish or North German, I guessed. The muzzle swung towards her.

`Here you are then,' she said and pulled up her blouse, revealing a very fine pair of red-tipped breasts.

The young soldier's mouth dropped open and a deep blush rose up from his neck to cover his entire face. I walked over and lifted the rifle out of his hands,

Yvette unselfconsciously pulled her blouse down and tucked it into her skirt again. I walked back to my original position. Footsteps sounded down the corridor as the sergeant returned.

`Bloody thing's out of order,' he said, obviously not displeased.

He turned to look at us, set in the same tableau as when he had left us - but with one small difference. The Corporal no longer had the rifle. I had it.

The MP span round grabbing for his pistol, only to find the Mk 5 pointing at his stomach. I worked the action and a long thin SEATO cartridge jumped out and lay gleaming on the carpet.

`850 rounds per minute, muzzle velocity 1200 meters per second', I said. He froze.

Jim walked behind him, unbuckled his belt and unhooked the lanyard.

We backed into the lift, Yvette tugging the young Corporal with us. He seemed a little stunned.

There was no doubt where we were going now - downwards to the train. The lift doors slid closed on the hate-filled eyes of the MP. He wouldn't be telling any funny stories in the Sergeants' Mess. When he reported the loss of his pistol he would be lucky if he could eat there anymore, never mind tell funny stories.

Well, we had lost about five minutes but were much better off. Now we had a rifle, an electro-pistol and Jim was pulling a Chrodisp map from a pouch on the MP's belt. We had also increased our number by one. Ah, yes. I turned to the soldier.

`Corporal Wolfgang Freymann', I read over his breast pocket.

`We think there are saboteurs in the computer centre and we are going to stop them. Are you with us, Corporal?'

He bent down, picked up the rifle round, carefully wiped it clean and put it in his pouch. He looked at Jim, who had buckled on the MP's belt and was moving the holster from the cross-draw position to what he probably called the `Western Draw' and then at Yvette.

`Yes, sir,' he said finally.

I handed him his rifle back. He examined it and then slung it over his shoulder thankfully. He wouldn't have got any credits for losing that either.

We had now arrived at the train platform. I pressed the `Request stop' button. No one else was about. Yvette had taken the map and was studying it.

After a while a train hissed into the station and stopped. It was empty. We climbed in.

The train moved off but a light was winking over the card slot - `Insert Destination'. Jim had found something else in the MP's belt-pouch. It looked like a standard ID card but had an extension with push-buttons.

He slid it into the slot and Yvette read him numbers from the map which he typed in. The light stopped blinking.

Jim came over with the map.

`I suggest we get out here,' he pointed, `and take this service tunnel on foot. We pick up the train again here and the next stop is the computer centre,'

`Why not just sit in the train all the time?' I asked.

`Yvette says there are several trains circling around. The short cut through the service tunnel saves ..er..3 kilometers so we can hope to catch a train that is now in front of us. But if not we just catch this one again and lose nothing,'

It was nice to have people with initiative around. I had a thought.

`How long do you think it would take to destroy the computer Databank?' I asked Jim. He pulled out a pencil and looked around vaguely for a piece of paper. There was none, so he pushed it back.

`Hm, well, assuming two people, one to open the drums and the other to burn them .. say one drum every 30 seconds.. and I guess they must have at least 100 drums... About an hour, I would say,'

Christ, five years' work destroyed in an hour.

The train stopped and we got out. Yvette pointed to the end of the platform where the service tunnel began. We turned into it. It curved round to the right, was dimly lit and cool.

`Let's move,' I said and we started jogging. I looked at Yvette.

`I'm all right,' she said shortly. She had her skirt up around her waist and was running well, map case in one hand and her shoes in the other.

We rounded the corner and turned out of the tunnel onto another platform. Deserted. The diversion above had certainly cleared everyone out of the underground railway system. Civilians in their rooms; soldiers on the battlefield above.

It was cool and quiet. I pressed the `Request Stop' button.

`How far is it up this line to the next stop, the computer centre?' I asked Yvette.

She opened the map, turned it over to check the scale then put her fingers on it to estimate distance.

`A kilometer,' she said finally.

`Too far to walk,' said Jim.

`Let me see the map.' I said. Good. The track turned sharply to the left just before the computer centre platform and again sharply to the right after it.

`This is what we're going to do,'

I spoke for two minutes and there were objections from both Jim and the Corporal but I over-rode them.

`There must be at least 50 sleepers in here,' I said, tapping the map. `We must save them if we do nothing else.'

A train was approaching. We crouched back in the tunnel but it hissed into the platform empty. Yvette sat in the first coach and the rest of us went into the last. The train started off. I could just see Yvette's blond hair across the back of the intervening carriages.

Jim had the special card already in the slot and as we approached the curve just before the computer centre platform he pressed the red button on it. The train hissed rapidly to a stop. I saw Yvette climbing down on to the track, carrying her shoes.

Jim pressed some numbers and the train restarted. We passed Yvette, putting on her shoes, and a few seconds later slid rapidly through the station without stopping. As we passed the computer centre steel doors we all squeezed ourselves flat against the floor of the carriage.

Now we were out of the station. We sped rapidly round the corner and looking back, saw the computer centre disappearing round the curve in the tunnel. Jim pushed the special card into the slot and pressed the red button again. Again we hissed to a stop. Leaning over the card he pressed some more buttons and we all

jumped out quickly. The train picked up speed and disappeared into the distance. Silence descended.

`Leaving the lady alone is not good,' said the Corporal.

I looked at my watch.

`It won't be for long,' I replied.

Chapter 27

It was 9:25. The main diversionary attack had peaked at 8:55, about half an hour ago. The saboteurs must certainly be in the computer centre by now. I turned to the Corporal and touched his rifle.

`You any good with that thing?'

He looked a little surprised.

`Yes, I can shoot good,' he said calmly.

9:26. We walked quietly back along the track towards the computer centre platform until it appeared around the bend. With the darkness of the tunnel behind us, we should be invisible.

`Give me your rifle,' I said to the Corporal. Rather reluctantly he handed it over. I peered through the telescopic sight. The sliding steel door was down but was it my imagination or did it not quite fit into the seating? I handed the rifle back.

9:27. Where was Yvette? She should be ...

Now we could hear the tapping of her heels as she walked along the platform. The Corporal flipped his sling around his left arm and sank on one knee beside us, his rifle trained on the steel door. There were some tiny clicks as he minutely adjusted the sight. We froze.

Yvette was now in sight about 100m away, walking down the platform and brilliantly illuminated as though on a stage. She paused by the steel door then started banging on it with the flat of her hand. Nothing happened.

We could hear her shouting `Open up!', but still nothing. Now she had taken a shoe off and was banging its heel against the door and shouting too. She was making a hell of a racket and I could imagine the feelings of anyone inside: `Get that stupid bitch in here! She's making enough noise to raise the dead and the next train is sure to stop and investigate!'

A crack appeared at the bottom of the door and Yvette moved away, still screaming at the top of her voice. I had never realized human lungs could make so much noise.

A dark figure dressed as an Arab had appeared on his knees in the opening and was gesturing to her. But she had moved even further away from the opening, still screaming and waving her arms. The figure in the opening raised some weapon.

I was about to touch the Corporal's shoulder but it was not necessary. There was the crash of his rifle and the figure collapsed on its face. Yvette ran forward, scooped up the weapon and stood by the side of the opening. Jim and I ran forwards onto the brightly-lit platform. When we reached the door Yvette slid the weapon across the floor to me. A heavy automatic fitted with a long silencer.

I worked the action and then standing to one side so that the distant Corporal could cover me, pushed the door up: it was unpowered.

Apart from the body the entry port was empty. Jim and I entered. He turned over the body of the Arab. Yes, it was an Arab but it wasn't so easy to see. The head had opened up like a melon and there were brains all over the wall behind him. Not for the first time I reflected that the Mk. 5's 3.5gm bullet at nearly four times the speed of sound was overkill.

A small radio was hissing beside him. I put my heel on it.

Jim quickly searched the body, throwing me two extra magazines. Then he found three egg-sized grenades. Jesus! I hoped they hadn't been using those inside!

'Nothing else except these.' He showed me what appeared to be two glass marbles, the sort of things I used to collect when I was a child. He stuck them in his pocket. I looked round. Where the hell were the other two of our party?

I poked my head out onto the platform again and there were Yvette and the Corporal holding hands and looking into each others' eyes. I stared unbelievably.

'For Christ's sake,' I whispered fiercely, 'there'll be plenty of time for that later. We've got fifty sleeping people to save,'

They moved reluctantly towards the door.

'No. Not you, Yvette. I want you to stop the next train and get help,' The Corporal hesitated mutinously.

'Los, schnell,' I snapped at him.

'Zu Befehl,' he said and stiffened. With a last look at Yvette he turned and joined us.

I hurried him past the body. He was too young to have seen any action. It's one thing to put cross-hairs on someone and press a little lever and another to find you've killed him.

We looked round. The lights were still on and we could see two cameras pointing down at us. They had both been charred with a laser. That should have set off alarms from here to Big Ben but obviously hadn't.

Jim pointed silently to a blackened hole in the steel bulkhead low down, with some chalk marks still visible. A shaped charge to take out vital electronics, no doubt. And they had known exactly where to place it.

Now we were in the second section of the Security Barrier. And much good it had done. It looked like a grenade had been rolled in as the glass was starred and shattered. In the corner were two bundles, one still wearing a blue beret. Outside in the long corridor leading past the sleepers there were three more bodies, all lasered. There was an unpleasant smell of burnt flesh and explosive fumes.

Further down the corridor another grenade had exploded and the glass windows separating the corridor from the sleepers were starred but had apparently held. Behind the glass the rows of sleepers seemed undisturbed. There was a white coated figure lying in the doorway to the small room where I had met Hans. It was not Hans.

The three of us crouched at the end of the corridor listening. The Corporal said something in his own language and looked sick. I put my hand on his shoulder comfortingly.

'We'll get them,' I said.

Silence except for a buzzing sound from the small computer room. Jim was looking at the map and pointed to the left.

9:31. We must hurry.

We pulled open a door, the plastic melted and deformed by a laser. There was another body behind it; I pulled it aside. We saw a steel spiral staircase, leading downwards.

Jim was looking at the map.

'At the bottom of these stairs is a long corridor,' he whispered. 'To the right is the computer itself; to the left the Databank. The Databank drums are in a room off this left-hand corridor.'

They would certainly have a guard at the far end of the corridor, hiding behind something and able to shoot down the length of it. The others would be in the side room destroying the Databank files.

If we walked down the spiral steel staircase we would appear directly in the corridor so I indicated that we should climb over the banisters. I took my shoes off and the others followed suit.

Quietly and without difficulty Jim and I slid down the outside of the spiral staircase, the Corporal covering us from the top. Then he joined us.

Now we were at the bottom of the staircase, the corner of the corridor in front of us. I could hear the guard at the far end of it, saying some phrase over and over into his radio. Through the open doors of the side room we could hear the rending of metal and an impatient voice urging.

I got Corporal Freymann to lie prone, his rifle muzzle just behind the corner so that by slightly leaning forward he would be able to fire down the corridor.

Right, this was it.

'Give me the grenades,' I whispered. They were SEATO Type 47. I unscrewed the base-plug from one and pulled out the fuse then screwed the base-plug back. I pulled the pin from the doctored grenade and round-armed threw it down the corridor without exposing myself. I heard the lever ping off as it went rattling down the corridor to fetch up with a bump at the far end.

A sharp crack as a wildly aimed laser beam snapped down the corridor, scorching the walls. Then a shout and running feet.

The Corporal leaned out and fired one shot. There was the thud of a falling body and the tinkle of the ejected cartridge case striking the wall opposite.

Shouts from the side room, followed by silence.

The Corporal fired again. I heard the howl of a ricochet and a thump followed by a panic-stricken shout. Pause, then a tremendous explosion shook the corridor. Dust fell from the ceiling and my ears rang.

Fantastic! He must have actually hit the grenade someone was about to throw at us. We had a secret weapon here!

A quick look down the smoke-filled corridor showed the grenade had exploded just outside the Databank room and had shattered its door.

There was a burst of gun-fire from inside the Databank room and bullets could be seen striking the corridor wall opposite door. My God! They recovered quickly - expecting us to attack after the grenade blast.

But the surprise was now over. They had lost two men but there would be at least another two in the room. It was an unstable situation. They could easily roll more grenades down the corridor towards us and we would all be sitting ducks. And even if the Corporal by some miracle managed to hit all the grenades they would still be going off in the corridor and the blast could be doing nothing good to the delicate film memories.

There were shouts and redoubled metal-tearing sounds coming from the side room. That was their best move. We wouldn't dare to try to bomb them out of the Databank room as that would wreck the memories. And attacking them down the corridor would be very dicey.

So they were getting on with the job they had come for.

I motioned to Jim.

'What are they doing in that room?' I asked quietly.

He looked at me in surprise.

'They're destroying the computer Data...'

'No, no. What exactly are they doing? How are they destroying them?'

`Ah. The drums are about 30cm in diameter and 2 meters long. There are end caps which are held on by about 10 bolts. Judging by the noise they are making I would say they are unscrewing about 7 or 8 of the bolts and then bending the end-caps back to expose the film,'

`But no laser noises yet,' I said.

`Maybe the boss-man wants to burn them all himself spectacularly from the middle of the room. The guy by the door upstairs and the one in the corridor here are all Arabs. Maybe Asiablock are calling in a favour - for arms delivered to their sect, or something,'

It could well be so. The incredibly complicated Middle East political situation changed from week to week and no one knew anymore who supported who or why.

The only thing I was sure of was that these Arabs were well-trained, ruthless and fanatical. There would be no prisoners.

Damn. How could we stop them? Any minute now I imagined the leader kissing his laser pistol, holding it up to the East and then ceremonially directing its white-hot beam into one torn-open memory drum after another. There would be some incantation about the work of the Devil being destroyed by the holy fire of Allah.

Now just a minute. Opening drums - screws - screw-heads - screw driver...need light.

There it was, high up on the wall. I touched the Corporal on the shoulder and whispered.

`I am going to put the lights off. As soon as that happens I want you to run down the corridor to the right and hide in one of the side rooms because we are going to get a grenade. OK?' He nodded.

I turned to Jim.

`And we scarper back up the stairs here. From the top you can fire down the stairway with your electro-pistol if you hear anything, or now and then even if you don't. You won't be able to hit anything - the angles are wrong - but you'll illuminate the corridor for Davy Crockett here who will be waiting down the corridor with his musket,'

`I thought you wanted me to go down the corridor...' began the Corporal. I touched him apologetically on the shoulder.

`No, no. It's you I want. Just a joke, Davy Crockett was a famous American sharpshooter,'

Mollified he turned to topping up the magazine of his rifle with two cartridges from his pouch. A good soldier, that.

Jim then climbed up the side of the banisters, on to the stairs and disappeared. I also climbed up in order to reach the switchbox. A last look up the stairs I would have to climb in the darkness.

`Get ready,' I said to the Corporal and threw the switch.

Instant blackness.

What would the saboteurs do now?

They would have flashlights, but having to use them would slow them down. Also they would be expecting an attack under cover of the darkness and would feel very vulnerable holding flashlights.

I was now at the top of the stairs by the side of Jim and both of us were straining our ears.

Nothing.

Minutes passed.

Give the electro-pistol a flash in case someone was sneaking up on Corporal Freymann? No, they didn't know where he was and in any case he could hear anyone approaching better than us.

Silence.

Another minute passed.

Then suddenly the crack of a laser, the beam visible as a fine pale blue line across the bottom of the stairway. There was a brief glow at the end of the corridor but after a moment it died out. The plastic wall-covering was fireproof.

Clever. Start a fire at the far end of the corridor and they would be able to see us by our shadows if we tried to attack.

Again the crack of the laser but this time followed by the crash of Corporal Freymann's rifle. A yelp and the laser beam disappeared.

In the ringing silence we strained our ears again.

More silence.

There were faint voices from the Data Bank room then nothing. It was pitch black and very quiet. I imagined them creeping up the stairs towards us with knives and whispered to Jim to move to the other side of the stairway.

Absolute silence and I was on the point of asking Jim to fire his pistol down into the stairway when something heavy was thrown along the corridor, clanging against the foot of the stairway. We cowered down, fingers in ears.

Nothing happened. I took my fingers out. What the hell were they doing?

My God! That was it! I could hear it hissing now. Literally their last throw.

'Give me a flash when I tap on the stairs,' I whispered to Jim.

I crept down the stairs one at a time until I should be able to see the bottom step. With a coin I tapped gently on the metal stairway.

There was the buzz of the ionizer followed by the crack of the electro-pistol. In the ghostly blue flash I could see it, a small cylinder with a tap at one end, about 30cm long by 5cm thick. Gas! They had probably intended to open it in the wards above where the sleepers were and let them all die in their sleep.

I didn't know what gas it was but groups of people working together tend to stick to one effective method or weapon. The gas could well be DSG again and I imagined the corridor filling up with it, like a thick deadly liquid. Ultimately it would seep into the Databank room and the saboteurs would die. But in the meantime it would keep us out of the corridor. I must warn Corporal Freymann!

'Corporal Freymann!' I shouted.

'Yes?'

'There is a poison-gas cylinder at the bottom of these stairs. We will illuminate it for you in a minute. Shoot at it and move it along the corridor towards the Databank room. And then you must immediately get out of the corridor, close the door and climb onto something high to get your nose near the ceiling as the gas is heavy. Do you hear me?'

I said all this in my best German hoping he would understand and the Arabs not.

'Jawohl. Verstanden.'

I tapped on the stair again, and again the corridor was filled with the spectral flickering blue light from Jim's pistol.

The rifle slammed and the cylinder spun away to the left out of sight. There was a second shot and then I heard a door up the corridor to the right bang closed.

I scrambled back up the stairway. We could hear someone singing in the Databank room and I felt momentarily sorry for a brave man dying for his comrades, alone and underground far from the desert he loved.

But he had chosen to commit suicide. It was my job to stop him doing any damage before he died.

I pulled the pin from a grenade and after motioning the others to get back tossed it down into the corridor. We ran out of the door at the top of the stairs, pushed it closed and ran past the sleepers. Far below there was a distant thump.

There was nothing more we could do. We slowed to a walk and met the US Cavalry entering. We held up our hands. An officer appeared and suddenly I felt very tired.

Jim explained that the computer Databank had been attacked by saboteurs and was flooded with gas. Also one of our members was isolated in the computer room and they would need anti-gas equipment to get him out. But quick.

Yvette was waiting outside looking for Corporal Freymann. I assured her that he was all right and would be out soon as soon as he could be rescued. I hoped I was right.

Chapter 28

To rephrase an old joke about marriage,' said Al, 'Captain Digby saves us from all the dangers and perils we wouldn't have had if he hadn't been here.'

'Life has certainly been more ..er..animated since Captain Digby's arrival,' said a man who had been introduced as George.

'Do you remember how our biggest problem used to be pilfering from the canteen?' said another man named Art, looking into the distance almost nostalgically.

No one laughed.

'Except that we have a well-hidden mole,' said Dr Duluth sharply, 'and he is only now revealing himself.'

Dr Duluth and myself had just come down from a meeting with some high-up Director of the Chrondisp Institute where a lot of nice things had been said. I could see that Dr Duluth was especially pleased. He had spoken for a while with the Director, turning on all his charm, and had been given permission to 'have a chat with some of the Security chaps'.

We were in Dr Duluth's office and George and Art, the 'security chaps', had been pleasant enough to me but were a lot less friendly with Dr Duluth.

'Yes, now we know a lot more about him,' said Jim who was also present for some reason. 'We know he can tap into the Administration Computer, which also runs the satellite link. I am incidentally surprised you don't have a dedicated computer for the Security program alone.'

George and Art looked annoyed but said nothing. I knew how they must have felt: it's always easier to be wise after the event.

We were in a 'post-mortem' meeting.

The Arab saboteurs had died by their own gas before they had time to burn more than one film memory drum; the blast from the last grenade had blown the gas into the Databank room with plenty of turbulence.

Corporal Freymann had been rescued safely but he had had a fright because the door to the room where he was hiding had split open with the blast from the grenade. The nerve gas itself had however all gone up the corridor the other way.

Jim had produced the 'marbles' he had found in the Arab's pocket and Dr Duluth had matched them with eight more taken from the other dead Arabs. They could apparently be held up to an eyeret reader and appeared like human eyes, with the retina patterns of someone who was allowed access to the computer centre, of course.

George and Art had looked at them glumly.

There was now a lot of talk in computer jargon between Jim, George, Al and Dr Duluth. Jim had taken his coat off and was energetically doodling on a pad as he talked.

Gradually the computerese had slowed down and there were lots of reflective pauses. Dr Duluth had made some phone calls and several decisions seemed to have been reached. One decision was that my Insertion should go ahead as planned. If that was so I would be Inserted tomorrow. Great. No one had asked me, but I was finding the Chrodisp lifestyle wearing.

What was worrying me was the fact that the mole had still not been discovered, in spite of what to me seemed an excessive amount of evidence.

'One last thing,' said Dr Duluth. 'We are all intrigued as to how you managed to get hold of Corporal Freymann for your attack.'

I told them about the MP sergeant and Art groaned. I supposed he had to liaise with the police somewhere.

'But how did you know he was such a good shot?' he persisted.

I thought back.

'I asked him and he said he was,' I replied finally.

'He's the European Rifle Champion,' said Al.

'Well, there you are then.'

Chapter 29

It turned out that it was to be another two days before I could be Inserted. The Databank films had been almost all saved but dust had fallen on some of them and they had had to be cleaned. Also there had been some modifications in the way the various computers were interconnected. In particular the Administration Computer was disconnected from the satellite link facility. The minimum they could do, to my mind.

A further cause for the delay was because an Insertion has to be done when the Host (in my case Jan) is on his own and as far as possible from other humans. The time traveller, having been given a kick backwards by the Inserter gradually slows down as he goes back and doesn't have much time to look around to find his Host. So the Host should be an easily recognized target. Like I had found Jan walking alone along the cliff-tops in Brittany.

It turned out Jan had been near other people right up to the time I had left him so I couldn't be Inserted before I had left him, which was a pity as I would have liked to have seen if events exactly repeated themselves.

I was therefore to be Inserted some short time after I had left him.

*

The attack on Chrodisp had been a surprise for everyone but it had been possible to conceal it from the media. No one was more concerned with that than Chrodisp Security, who had really been caught with their pants down. I too thought silence was the best tactic. If everyone had really kept their mouths shut at Chrodisp there would be a lot of tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth in Asiablock. There's nothing so discouraging as sending in a warparty and then have it disappear without trace or effect.

*

I reported to the Insertion complex and went through the usual medical treatments, not all pleasant. Dressed finally in a white coverall I was wheeled out into the cold echoing Inserter hall.

The cage was lowered and shivering slightly I climbed in. On with the Helmet and a slight adjustment to the microphone position. Pete was doing my Insertion like the last time, and there he was in the brightly-lit Mission Control room. He was making circular motions with his hand. Ah, volume too low. I turned it up and spoke to him.

`This should be a normal Insertion,' he said.

He turned aside and spoke to someone. The cage rose until I was far above the floor, swinging slightly in my Faraday cage.

`It's bloody cold here,' I complained. `Can't you install some sort of heater?'

`You'll be warm soon enough,' said Pete's voice. I could see him grinning at me and making movements with his hands imitating the synchronous movements of the `sleepers'. Very witty.

Then the usual EEG `thought calibration' routine.

The count-down clock was behind me so I couldn't see it, but I could see the blue glow of ionized air building up on the voltage multiplier columns. The two big discharge spheres had taken up position and were tracking round me slowly, their servos humming. I looked at them nervously.

A bit like retro-chute jumping. The first time everyone helps you and it's easy. The next time you know what can go wrong and if you don't there are lots of people only too willing to tell you, with macabre illustrations. They should have some soothing music, gradually blending into the electro-narcosis buzz. As well as the heating of course. I must remember to ...

*

I was off. The white Markers fled past. One, two, yellow Century Markers. More white, now slowing down. `Prepare to turn', the green Marker, some more white and there was the complex swirl that represented Jan. I coasted to a stop and `Merged'.

He was walking slowly through woodland and it was raining. His shoulders were cold as water had leaked through, but he was not caring. He was talking to himself gloomily, repeating something over and over again. I tuned in:

`Oh, if only I'd said something else then Danielle mumble, mumble. What a fool I was! Why didn't I wear my ..mumble, mumble. If only I had more money then perhaps She would look at a Breton peasant like me .. mumble, mumble.'

Misery, depression, sadness. Jan was in love but She didn't love him.

Bloody hell. I take my eyes off him for five minutes ...

Not what I'd been hoping for. I had been looking forward to a fairly relaxing Insertion after all the excitement at Chrondisp. What I had in mind was a look round Paris, a chat with Jan, settle some interesting controversial points about cartridge development in the 19th Century and finally take in the French defeat at Waterloo. Not forgetting to pick up Pierre's breech-sealing idea along the line somewhere, of course.

But first I had to find out what the situation was. I was Empathizing with Jan all right, if anything too well. I was beginning to feel gloomy myself.

No, he had not seen the inside of the musket. At the last moment he had been distracted by Captain Lardy who had started to fire his `high tech' musket, the one using the copper-cased cartridges. So I hadn't missed anything.

`So what happened to the musket?'

`Oh, Colonel Laurier took it off with him. And if I can only go to the Ball tomorrow I am sure that if She saw me again...'

Patience.

`And why did the Colonel take it with him?'

'He was going to try to get some made, or something,' answered Jan indifferently. 'I could wear my new cravat, which She hasn't seen yet and she's bound to think that.'

He was in a bad state. And the problem of finding the musket had not got any easier in my brief absence. But first things first. I had to get Jan out of the rain or he would be in for a heavy cold, if not pneumonia.

'I think you had better get back to the hotel in case she has written you a note.'

'Written me a note!' He laughed hollowly. 'She's forgotten about me already.'

'Oh, you never know. She's written before. And it would be terrible if you missed it and she thought you didn't love her anymore.'

'Could she have really have sent me a note?' The question was asked with pathetic eagerness.

He stopped and started to slowly walk back along the woodland path. It was still raining.

'Well, she needs a partner for the Ball tomorrow and she knows what a good dancer you are.'

He started to walk quickly.

'Of course, if she doesn't receive your answer in time, she will have to find another partner. And it's getting late now, so...'

He picked up speed and was soon jogging through the wood. He came out of the wood and ran through a deserted suburb on the edge of Paris. There he was able to find a coach which took him back to his hotel - still the Hotel Bourdonnais in rue Bourdonnais.

He paid off the coach and dashed up to his room. Of course there was no note and his spirits sank but not to quite the same level they were at before. Nothing like a bit of exercise to stop the mind going round in circles.

He changed his clothes for something dry and decided to go out and get a coffee; the first thing he had had that day apparently. Poor Jan.

Reflecting that I had got this job because of my knowledge of firearms, I wondered how I could cure Jan of his love-sickness. I'd had some experience of unrequited love myself but had found there was no sure cure except time. 'Screw her or forget her,' was the Army's folk wisdom on this subject - which could be translated as 'never fall in love,' but the advice had come too late here. And in any case, for people of refinement like Jan and myself ...

I could certainly sympathize with him but we had to move on and the first thing to do was to collect data.

Her name was Danielle. She was blond, very beautiful and married to an old General who treated her badly. Jan had met her at a ball given by Colonel and Madame Laurier.

Since then Jan had been doing the night-spots with Danielle and his money had almost all run out. Yes, including the 'reserve' that his brother Jacques had hidden in his boot. Mostly his money had been lost at a gambling club She (Danielle) had introduced him to, called the 'Golden Fleece'.

'What's funny about that?' he had asked, somehow sensing my amusement.

'Nothing, nothing,' I had calmed him hastily. The name must have no other meaning in French.

The ball tomorrow was being given by the Duke of Something-or-Another (Another ball? This was the 10th of June 1815 and the Battle of Waterloo, a Mainline event by any reckoning, was coming up in just over a week. We were in a Nation at War but you could have fooled me)

We needed money. Hold up a bistro? Too many people and just loads of small change anyway. Rob a passer-by? Done before so no one carried more than the minimum. If they had more they had body-guards too.

`What happens at the Golden Fleece?' I asked.

`It's a gambling club. You can play cards or dice for money but mostly they play a small wheel under heavy objects, a castor.'

`They mostly play what?!'

`It's a game where they spin a wheel and it stops on a number. You put money on any number and if it stops on that number you win, otherwise you lose. Danielle likes it.'

Ah! Roulette. The French to English translator could give some confusing results if we used a French word too.

Roulette. Now there was a fitting game for the Golden Fleece.

I wondered in passing if some English-speaking visitor from the future had so named it as a joke for other visitors who might see it, like me. Graffiti on the Wall of Time I thought. But back to work.

`Might be an idea to drift along to the Golden Fleece tonight.'

`And lose the little money I have left. You must be out of your mind.'

`She might be there and you could invite her to the ball.'

He started to put on his fancy new pants and boots. I thought a moment. We needed money and there was surely money at the Golden Fleece but they might object to Jan leaving with it.

`A pistol perhaps?'

`Only barbarians carry pistols in Paris.' It sounded like a quote.

`Yeah. Well, you never know when you are going to meet barbarians, of course. If Danielle was with you and one held a pistol on you while the other raped her...'

He opened a drawer, pulled out a pistol and carefully reloaded it. He tried to put it in his waist-band but it didn't fit. Nor were the pockets big enough...

`The sleeve?' I suggested.

`My new jacket's sleeves are too narrow,' he said crossly.

`So you'll have to wear the old one,' I said.

`I couldn't let Her see me my old peasant coat!' he said appalled.

`You could take it off before you go into the gaming-rooms. But if you want to see her screaming on the trottoir while you stand helplessly by...'

He pulled out his old coat and even found a way of hanging the pistol inside the left arm with a slip-knot.

Taking almost all of the small sum of money he had left, we set off for the Golden Fleece.

I wondered what would have happened to Jan if he hadn't been associated with an important invention and I had not been sent back to protect him. `No one has ever been sent back to protect me,' I thought bitterly. `You have to have some special gift...'

But I had a special gift ...Empathizing was a gift .. Maybe someone from the future was watching over me. That odd incident on Hill 42. And those dead flies in my room at Chrondisp...

`Is anyone there?' I asked suddenly.

`Only me. Are you all right?' said Jan. `You've got me dressed up in this old peasant costume with a pistol hanging down my sleeve and now you're talking to yourself in the middle of the street. If you've got nothing better to do, I'd much rather go and get drunk in a bistro than lose the rest of my money.'

`I'm all right. Let's go.'

Chapter 30

We walked north until we came to a bridge over the Seine. In the middle of the bridge Jan looked down at the river flowing slowly towards the sea. The sun had just appeared at the end of a rainy day and was sinking in a spectacular sunset over a bend in the river. About where the Chaillot Palace was going to be built in 120 years.

Here we were, just on the other side of the river. The Golden Fleece was in a large building with tall ground-floor windows already blazing with light. Carriages were pulling up outside and expensively dressed couples descending, aided by two burly commissionaires. There were also lots of single men, mostly arriving on foot. We entered.

Inside all was glittering chandeliers, starched linen, scintillating colourful uniforms and white bare shoulders. Along the walls groups of pretty single women were standing talking amongst themselves and occasionally casting glances at the guests as they arrived. Somewhere a string orchestra was playing, barely audible over the buzz of conversation. And overall a warm fragrance compounded of perfume and burning candles.

To the left a wide luxuriously carpeted stair-case led to rooms upstairs but we went straight on, towards a tall narrow door leading to the main gaming room - it must have been the dining room once, before this large private house had been taken over and converted into a select gambling club.

And over the door hung a sheepskin dyed yellow - the Golden Fleece.

Two men were standing by the door running their eyes and occasionally their hands over the incoming guests. Those carrying swords were politely requested to deposit them at the guarderobe.

A tall thick-set man, who had been talking to a distinguished looking customer with a very young female companion, turned round and greeted Jan with annoyed surprise.

'Mr Le Foc! I didn't expect to see you here this evening.' He had hard black eyes and was looking intently at Jan. 'I don't think Madame Vaurier will be here this evening.'

'Madame Vaurier?' I said.

'Danielle,' he answered briefly.

'And who's this guy?'

'His name is Benoit. He's the owner of the club.'

'Would you care to join me for a drink?' asked Mr Benoit, snapping his fingers. A burly man standing by a door jerked to attention and opened it.

Jan automatically took a step forward.

'No,' I said. 'Tell him you think your luck has changed.' Jan passed on the message, to Benoit's visible irritation.

'Really, Mr Le Foc, I can't extend you any more credit until I've seen it. And even then... I really think you would be advised to give it a miss for tonight and relax in here with a drink and perhaps a little snack.' He put his hand on Jan's arm and tried to usher him in.

'No,' I said again.

'Perhaps later,' said Jan, stepping back and smiling nervously.

Benoit was a man accustomed to being obeyed. He looked at Jan in angry bewilderment.

'As you wish then,' he said shortly. He entered the room and the burly man closed the door, resuming his position outside it.

Jan was sweating.

`A tough cookie,' I commented.

`Yes. I once saw him break the arm of a guest who was caught cheating at cards. Snap, just like that, across his knee.' He shivered in recollection.

Jan then walked to the tall door and smilingly held his hands up but they had seen him talking with the boss and he was passed through without hindrance.

Now we were in a high ceilinged richly furnished room, even more hot and crowded than the entrance hall. There must have been a hundred people present. The centre-piece was a large green-baize table with a roulette wheel mounted at one end, brightly illuminated by an enormous chandelier suspended over it. Jan was looking round.

`As usual, mostly foreigners,' he said. Well, I couldn't tell one uniform from another of course, but certainly most of the men didn't look like Parisiens, although the women did. Jan lifted a drink from the platter of a passing flunkey and stood moodily sipping it in a corner of the room. He didn't seem to know what to do.

He was scanning the crowd and every now and then he would stop, his heart thumping, but it was only another blond, not Her.

`She's not here. Let's go.'

`It's only 8 o'clock. She wouldn't be here anyway yet. She's not expecting you - you're going to surprise her. Let's have a little talk while we're waiting.'

`A little talk?' he asked uneasily.

`Yes. Tell me about this credit Benoit has been extending. And especially about the "it" he wants to see.'

`Well, when I got a little low in cash, Mr Benoit offered to let me have a ..er.. bridging loan. Until my luck improved. And then I would pay it all back, of course.'

`And the "it"? That's the breech-loader isn't it?'

`Danielle wanted to know what I was doing in Paris so I couldn't avoid telling her, could I? And when the cash got low she thought Mr Benoit would be interested. She must have mentioned it to him. He was very interested.'

I bet he was.

`Interested in what way?' I asked. I'm always on the look-out for original lies.

`He said that as a patriotic Frenchman he wanted to see the French Army equipped with the best weapons available and if I could show him the musket, he knew a lot of people and would be able to push it for me.'

`Just out of disinterested patriotism, of course.'

`I explained that the prototype was here in Paris and I just had to find out where,' he said, ignoring the sarcasm.

`And he said that if you let him see the musket he would cancel all your debts as he always has had a fondness for the poor though brilliant inventor?'

Silence. It was answer enough.

`Let's have a look at this roulette,' I said.

He stopped scanning round the room for Her and reluctantly turned his eyes to the green baize table.

It was the centre-piece of the room because it was directly under the enormous chandelier which now I could see clearly for the first time. It was in the shape of an inverted pyramid about three meters across and must have contained at least a hundred candles, glitteringly reflected and reflected again from a myriad of small hanging cut-glass pendants. It was the biggest and most beautiful chandelier Jan had ever seen. He could feel the heat of it from where he stood.

Roulette it may have been called but it was mechanically a lot simpler than the roulette I knew. Instead of a ball bouncing around in a spinning wheel, this was just a

wheel spinning past a fixed pointer. The wheel had segments on it numbered from 0 to 12 and on the green-baize cloth beside it were marked squares from 1 to 12. No zero.

The rules were very simple. The wheel spun and stopped on a number. The person who had his stake on that number won the stakes on all the other numbers and got his own stake back too. All the stakes had to be the same. If the wheel stopped on 0, the house won.

Play was slow to start with but a group gathered around the table, and things started to liven up. They were betting heavily and animatedly until one rather seedy-looking character made a spectacular win. There was a gasp and everyone flooded towards the table. The man collected his winnings, the equivalent of Jan's salary for a year, lavishly tipped the croupier and ordered champagne for the other players. The orchestra played some special tune and they all sang.

It was a great act.

'He wins most nights,' said Jan morosely.

'And what happens now?' I asked curiously.

'They see him to the door, he calls a cab, tips all the flunkies and disappears with everyone waving goodbye.'

Dear God, how naive could they be!

On the face of it the house made its profit because there was no zero. One chance in 13. But after that last pantomime I was beginning to think that the Golden Fleece was perhaps winning more often than that.

How was it done?

By looking at the players and not at the wheel it was evident that some of the players were rather bored; they didn't care whether they won or lost. Working for the management?

But for any trick to work they had to put their money on the winning numbers which meant they either had to know which number was going to come up or they put their money anywhere and the wheel just "happened" to stop there. Either way someone would have to be able to control where the wheel stopped.

There seemed to be three 'shills' at the table, making bets just like the others. But I noticed that when they made their bets they always placed them next to each other ie. 3,4,5 or 9,10,11. And if one shill bet on his own he would always put his money on two or three contiguous numbers. I was beginning to suspect how it was done.

The croupier didn't seem to be doing anything - he just spun the wheel and pushed the money to the winners (or into a box if the house won). But there was an insignificant little man standing at one corner of the table apparently just watching the play and he hadn't moved since Jan had arrived.

'You think the guy in the corner has something to do with it?' asked Jan, interested in spite of himself.

'I'm sure of it,' I replied. 'Get behind him and drop something on the floor.'

He moved inconspicuously round the players and dropped a coin.

'He's got his foot against the table-leg but I can't see anything else.'

He repeated the coin dropping a few minutes later, from a different angle.

'My God, he's doing it! There's a sort of pedal sticking out from the bottom of the table-leg and I can see his leg flexing as he presses it. It must connect to a brake hidden in the table-top. The cheating swine! Lemme get my pistol.'

'What are you going to do?' I asked, alarmed.

'Expose the bastards. Show everyone how the brake works. They'll probably lynch them.'

`They probably will but I don't see how that's going to get your money back.'

He paused.

`My money. No. That's true. But what can I do?'

`Let's think a minute. There must be a way.'

I could now see the reason for the grouping of numbers. It couldn't be very easy to stop the wheel exactly on any one number, or not without stopping it so suddenly that someone would notice. It would be much easier to make it stop on a group - it didn't matter where, all those numbers were backed by shills.

So we started by putting some money near the numbers chosen by one of the shills and sometimes the man on the brake stopped the wheel too early or too late and Jan won. His exuberance on winning amused the other more serious players.

Jan was acting more and more drunk now. He had his arm around the shoulders of one shill, a small unobtrusive man wearing glasses.

`Lesh shtich together matey, and we'll beat 'em together.'

The shill was trying to squirm away but Jan held him firmly.

`You bring me luck. Now, lemme see, tell you what. I put my money on 6 and you put yours on 5. We gotta win.'

The shill looked despairingly at the man in the corner on the brake but the other shill had disappeared for the moment and so the wheel had to be stopped on zero or 6. He tried for 6 but didn't quite make it and the wheel stopped on 5. Jan was jubilant.

`Fantashtic! Shee whata mean? Can't fail. What'll we do now?'

By my calculation we needed one more good win and Jan would have most of his money back. He had a heap of paper money in front of him but the little shill had disappeared to be replaced by a much bulkier man with a beard. And worse - She had entered the gaming room, in company with a richly dressed but simple-looking young man.

Jan stuffed his winnings into his pockets and pushed his way through the crowd.

`Danielle,' he said softly, all drunkenness gone.

So this was Her. Yes, she was indeed beautiful. A perfect blond Madonna. Ash blond hair softly curling around a heart-shaped face, full red lips and big wide-apart violet-blue eyes. A soft slim figure subtly revealed by a daringly low-cut close-fitting sheath of pale green silk. What was an exquisite creature like this doing here? Why wasn't she presiding over some elegant `salon', the toast of men of fashion and intellect? In my time she would have been a holo star. What quirk of character or fate had turned her into bait for hooking tourists into a crooked gambling club? She looked up at Jan, her beautiful eyes widening.

`Jan! What are you doing here?' She had a petulant impatient voice. `You're supposed to be looking for that gun.'

`Don't worry, I'll find it. But look, we can meet again, I've got money.' He showed her the notes. `And I can get more.'

She looked at him expressionlessly.

`How can you get more?'

He leaned closer.

`This place,' he waved his arm, `this place, it's crooked, Benoit is a crook. They cheat people and steal their money. But I know how to beat them. Just wait a minute more and then we can leave.'

She looked at his eager face. Was there a slight flicker of pity?

`You know how to win? How?'

`That table there,' he whispered `it's rigged. The man in the corner can stop the wheel with his foot.'

`Stop the wheel with his foot?!' she cried `Don't be stupid.'

`Let's show the lady,' I suggested. `Quickly.'

He seized her by the arm. Her weak-looking companion made an ineffectual gesture to restrain her but recoiled before Jan's stare. Jan pulled her un-willingly through the crowd.

`Just watch,' he said to her.

`This is going to be the last one,' I warned.

He pulled out all his money and laid it in a thick rustling heap on number 6. There was a gasp from the other players and they hastily removed their stakes. Everyone has to put up the same amount of money in this game. The croupier picked up Jan's stake, carefully counted it, announced the sum to another gasp from the spectators and replaced it on number 6. The shill with the beard nodded at the croupier and disappeared towards the door.

`Jan, you fool, take your money and leave while you can,' she whispered hastily, looking over her shoulder at the door. Jan glanced there too and saw the bearded shill talking to two beefy men; one with the stock of some weapon showing under his coat. Danielle tried to pull herself away but he held her firmly.

`Don't worry. we're going to be rich', he said, looking round challengingly at the other players.

But no one moved until the shill with the beard reappeared with a bundle of notes which he counted out carefully onto number 12 - directly opposite Jan's 6. And next to 0 which was the house win number.

The tension must have communicated itself to the whole room because there was a sudden silence except for the scuffling of feet as everyone crowded round the big table. The orchestra stopped playing in mid-bar as people at the back took their chairs from them to stand on and see over the heads of the others. Jan had slightly moved so that he was standing at the corner of the table, next to the man on the pedal.

The silence was electric and the croupier's voice sounded very loud as he asked if there were any more bets. Someone laughed nervously but was quickly stilled.

The bearded man was looking curiously at Jan.

`Let's make it more exciting,' said Jan, and moved his money onto number 11, next to the shill. A good move.

The brake man now had to stop the wheel on 0 for a house win or on 12 for the shill to win. But an undershoot on 11 and Jan would win.

There was a buzz of excited comment sharply cut off as the croupier put his hand on the wheel. All that could be heard was the crackling of the candles in the big chandelier over the table as he spun the wheel.

Round and round it flew, just making a faint ticking sound. Gradually it slowed, seemed to slow a little more rapidly and finally trickled up to the 6. There was a sigh of released tension from the densely packed audience.

`Should have left it where it was,' cracked Jan. No one responded.

`No win. Place your bets,' droned the croupier.

The two players nodded at him.

Again the wheel spun and amid dead silence drifted up to 9 and stopped.

The next one would be it. The brakeman had been carefully checking his brake to get the feel of it. I supposed the wood expanded during the evening and made it more sensitive. The little man was sweating and on the table-top his hands were trembling slightly. Danielle had given up trying to escape and was watching the wheel, her lips parted.

Again the croupier's voice, this time with a little more animation. Even he could realize that a drama was being played out here. Someone asked a question loudly in the foyer outside but was immediately hushed. A coach clattered by in the distance.

Everyone must have sensed that this was the decisive throw as the atmosphere was stretched like an overstrung violin-string. The wheel span around again clicking rapidly and gradually the figures on it became more and more clear as it slowed down. All eyes were glued to the slowly turning wheel under the guttering candles as 11, 12 and then 0 slipped under the pointer, but too fast to be believably stopped. You could have heard a pin drop and no one was breathing as the faintly ticking wheel slowly moved round for what must be the last turn. 7, 8, it slowed a trifle, 9, 10. Number 11 was just drifting under the pointer and the wheel was probably going to stop on 0 when Jan put his foot on top of the brake-man's foot and pressed firmly. The wheel stopped with the pointer just inside the 11.

'He did it!' shouted the man on the brake, but his voice was drowned in the roar of applause from the packed spectators.

'Take the money and run,' I said urgently but he had turned to Danielle.

'You see,' he said 'this swine here has a brake but I put my foot on it and stopped the wheel before he wanted it to.' He picked up all the money and slowly pushed it into his shirt-front.

'You did it?' She recoiled, looked up at him with horror. She turned to the two beefy men who were now forcing their way through the crowd. Benoit was not to be seen.

She pointed at Jan.

'He did it. He stopped the wheel. He put his foot on top of Alphonse's.'

'That's right, he did it, he did it!' cried the brake-man hysterically, over and over again.

Jan was looking stunned at Danielle.

'I don't think she's on our side,' I said.

She was holding his arm and one of the beefy men appeared through the crowd and grabbed his collar.

'They're not going to call a cab and wave you goodbye,' I said.

He was gradually getting the message that something had gone wrong. He looked imploringly at Danielle but she was trying to pull the money out of his shirt-front with her free hand. Around us everyone was slapping Jan on the back, clapping and not noticing the sub-plot.

Jan shook his head as though to clear it, thrust Danielle away and sliding his hand inside his sleeve pulled out his pistol. No one in the crowd heard the click as he cocked the action but the beefy man holding him heard it all right and looking down saw a pistol pointing at his stomach, hammers pulled back and Jan's finger white on the triggers.

He released his hold on Jan's collar as though it had become red-hot. Jan grabbed him by his coat front, holding him close.

I suppose the management of the Golden Fleece wanted to get Jan out of the room so that he could be quietly disposed of, not only because of the money he had won which represented a whole night's takings, but also because he had discovered the trick with the table. If that got about they would be finished.

So the other beefy guy was working his way around the table to get Jan from the other side. As he approached his coat opened and I saw he had a bell-mouthed blunderbuss with a sawn-off butt.

'Let's just have a little talk outside, sir,' he said, letting Jan see his weapon.

'He's got a pistol on me!' said the one Jan was holding.

`Come along, sir. A little pistol won't help you.' He had the blunderbuss out now and there was a faint click as he pulled back the hammer. Surely he wasn't thinking of letting that thing off in here?!

`Don't shoot!' said the other, panic stricken. But the bell mouth of the blunderbuss was coming down like a big evil eye looking at Jan.

Jan ducked and bending his knees pushed the man in front of him against the one holding the blunderbuss. It must have still been pointing in the air when they collided because it went off with a deep "boom" and shot its load of scrap-iron upwards. Right into the middle of the big chandelier which immediately disintegrated in a tremendous glittering cloud of flame, burning wax and shards of broken crystal!

There was a shocked silence and the elegant crowd of spectators transformed itself instantly into a screaming panic-stricken mob fighting to get out of the room through the single narrow doorway. The room was filled with choking smoke from the blunderbuss and a brisk fire had been started by the burning candlewax dropping on the roulette table.

`The windows,' I said.

Jan walked quickly towards one of the windows, opened it and stepped out onto the road outside. He walked across it to the river bank opposite. The mob, feeling the draught of cool air, turned and stormed the windows, falling out on the road in heaps.

Jan stood with his back to the river emotionlessly watching the scene. People were running in with buckets of water but were being knocked down by others escaping. To me it looked like one of those very early black and white film comedies.

Jan started to push the money more securely back into his shirt but found he still had his pistol in his hand. He uncocked it and shoved it in his pocket.

We walked away.

Saying nothing but filled with determination, he went back to his hotel, hid the money under the carpet and then went down to the bistro next door.

He got drunk. In fact he got very drunk. `I loved her,' he kept saying over and over again, tears in his eyes. There was nothing I could do except to try and make sure he didn't actually hurt himself. Finally he was helped up to his room by the owner of the bistro, another Breton.

I Withdrew.

Chapter 31

As you can imagine, I had little contact with Jan the next day. He had been sick several times during the night and most of his facilities were on stand-by. He had a monstrous hang-over. I couldn't help him - I just had to wait.

The Breton manager of the bistro downstairs had made up some nauseous concoction for Jan to drink which he did, obediently, like a sick child. I pondered briefly on the morality of selling someone the means to get drunk and then the means to recover from it afterwards.

He was eating croissants dipped in warm milk by the second morning, physically recovered but very depressed. He spent most of the morning wandering sadly around the streets of Paris.

I noticed again that Paris is a city made for couples. Even the street-side bistros and restaurants have small tables that will only seat two. How different to Munich where the tables are very big and if one Bavarian was sitting alone the next to arrive would often sit at the same table and they would strike up a conversation. Male Germany and female France. Why hadn't they got on better during their long history?

There was a lot going on in Paris that day. Troops were marching and cavalry cantering in seemingly endless parades past reviewing stands, bands were playing, crowds were waving and cheering.

Today was Monday the 12th of June 1815 and I remembered that today Napoleon was leaving Paris with an army to meet the threat of the Allies who were objecting to his illegal resumption of power.

Europe feared Napoleon. They had been at war with France under Napoleon for 20 years. He had finally been defeated a year ago and imprisoned on a small island - Elba. Everyone had sighed with relief. But at the beginning of March this year he had escaped from Elba and landed in France near Cannes. He had moved north to Paris, collecting support on the way, mostly from the veterans of his army who remembered the good old days when they had been the lords and masters of most of Europe.

And here the `Ogre' was free again!

The Allies - the British, Dutch, Germans and Belgians under Wellington and the Prussians under Blücher were strung out along the Belgian frontier - 220,000 of them but not yet joined up.

Screaming newspaper headlines could be seen everywhere:

`Enemy Troops massing on the Belgian Frontier!'

`The Army marches North to defend France!'

`The Emperor Napoleon defends the Homeland!'

I was rather impatient with Jan. Here we were - `Count-down to Waterloo' (next Sunday) and I could hardly see a damn thing. All I could hear was Jan going on about how much he had loved her, how he would never meet anyone so beautiful again in his life and should he join the Army and die a hero's death?

Meanwhile I had to think about my Mission.

What had Jan said? The Colonel had taken the special musket and was going to have some copies made. He had seen Jan and Danielle together and had obviously thought that Jan wasn't going to be much use for anything for a while, so had decided to go ahead on his own.

Well, since my arrival I had saved Jan from pneumonia, rescued him from the clutches of a Scheming Woman and even got him his money back.

Ah, the money.

`How much did you win, by the way?' I asked casually.

`Damned if I know. It's under the hotel room carpet.'

`Crackle if you walk on it. The cleaning woman...'

`You're right.' He heaved himself up painfully and climbed slowly up to his room. He pulled back the carpet and threw all the money onto the bed. He turned over some of the notes with surprise; they were bigger than he had expected. He started counting and then finally shuffled them all together.

`About twice as much as I left Brest with,' he said.

At the time I thought the Golden Fleece staff had over-reacted a bit, but maybe I was wrong.

He had perceptibly brightened.

`A wad to carry around,' I said.

`Yes, I must buy gold.'

And quickly, I thought. The Battle of Waterloo was only six days away and I had a feeling French paper money would not be worth much when the result of that got around.

He carefully checked his pistols and re-primed the pans. One he put in his sleeve (it was getting to be a habit now) and the other in his waist-band. Distributing the

money in various pockets he set off for the banking/money-changing district of Paris behind the Louvre, on the north or Right Bank of the Seine.

Deciding wisely not to walk past the Golden Fleece, if indeed it still existed, he set off through the student or Latin Quarter and then over the Seine. Paris was very quiet, most of the military had left the day before and just a few baggage trains were rumbling eastwards. It was a hot day and the heaps of horse manure from yesterday's parades were covered with clouds of flies.

It took Jan most of the afternoon to change all his paper into gold. The rate was not very favourable; he had to haggle and also he didn't want to change it all at one bank for fear of attracting attention. At the end of his transactions he had about 50% more gold than when he left Brest and two followers who he surprised by ordering a cab and getting it to wait for him at a corner far removed from the other cabs. He leapt into it at the last moment and whilst in the coach he transferred the gold coins to the hiding place his brother Jacques had made in his boot.

He was feeling slightly better now and was actually beginning to think of food. I had started worrying about him again for I had learnt that a Frenchman who doesn't think about food is a very sick Frenchman.

So on the way to the hotel we stopped for a light snack consisting of six oysters, a cheese omelet, a small steak with mixed vegetables and a small apple pie. All washed down with a bottle of Ros, and finishing up with a strong cup of coffee.

Feeling noticeably better, Jan was finally starting to remember why he had come to Paris in the first place - to study manufacturing methods at the Government factory so the shotgun designed by the Le Foc Brothers and sold to the Army could be easily built by them.

All that was out of the window now. Maybe it would be taken up by the next Government. The second part of his mission had been to find Pierre's Secret and that was on the musket last seen in Colonel Laurier's possession. Jan was unwilling to go back to Brest with nothing so he started to think how he could speak to Colonel Laurier and get his hands on the musket.

'Where did you last see him, then?' I asked.

'About two weeks ago when he had a ball at his home. That was also where I first met...'

'Yes,' I interrupted hastily. 'But did he give you any idea of where he was going to have the copies built?'

'He did mention some place but I don't remember its name.'

'We could go round to his house - if he's not there then maybe his wife will remember the name of the place.'

'Yes.' Pause. 'A good idea.' Did I detect something?

Jan went back to his hotel and rather unnecessarily I thought, changed into his new clothes again. We took a cab through the silent, mostly dark streets to Colonel Laurier's residence on the western outskirts of Paris. An aged servant let Jan in and bid him wait as he went to announce the visitor. Jan looked round the large room.

'Nice place,' I observed. 'Must have cost a packet.'

'Madame Laurier brought a large dowry, I understand,' said Jan stiffly.

A dowry. Now there was a good old idea that had disappeared. When I remembered the clothes my wife used to buy during my short-lived marriage - a good dowry would have taken a lot of aggro out of that first year. A man buys a coat and so long as it keeps him warm...

Madame Laurier swept down the big staircase, her hand held out to Jan.

'My hommages,' said Jan, touching it with his lips.

`I don't arrive to believe that it really is Mr Le Foc that renders us a visit! I..er., my husband and I have both been desolated that you have deserted us for so long. How could you forget us?'

`Absolutely not! I am stupefied that you could think of such a thing. Me, I have been also desolated that I was not able to see you but you know, the Affairs of State. When the Emperor calls one to Duty, every loyal Frenchman...'

`Oh, really? And the little blond had nothing to do with it? Me, I know the men.' She smiled conspiratorially.

`But Madame, it is incomprehensible that you could think of such a thing! I estimate that all the world can see that she, by the side of you...'

This looked like going on for some time, especially as they both seemed to be imperceptibly mounting the stairway where she was going to `permit herself to offer him a little collation and perhaps a little something to drink.' And perhaps a little something else. I am not a voyeur so I Withdrew delicately.

I was about to enter again two hours later but there seemed to be a lot going on so I Withdrew again hastily.

Finally I entered Jan while he was once again at the foot of the stairs bidding farewell to Madame Laurier who looked radiant.

`Now I hope we will see ourselves again before your departure for the Brittany. You know my husband is often absent with the Affairs of State and I am obliged to occupy myself also well as I may be able.'

What with the anticipation before and the tiredness after we were getting a poor translation service this evening.

`But I see you are a little fatigued and I must not prevent you from going to bed. From going to bed to sleep,' she added archly.

Jan forced himself to make some suitable reply and was putting on his coat preparatory to taking his leave.

`What's happened to the Colonel?' I asked Jan.

`He's on his way north with his Regiment.'

`And where did he get the musket copied?'

`Before I take my departure, dear Madam. I wonder if I could derange you with a small question? Do you know perhaps of a workshop, a place where your husband, the Colonel, visits in order to occupy himself with the mechanical details of his Service?'

`You mean where he has guns made?' Ah, the practical French.

`Perfectly.'

She wrote something down on a piece of paper and bid him a fond farewell, reminding him of his promise to visit her again. Jan thrust the paper into his pocket and nodded tiredly.

We left and returned to Paris. The cab driver had to wake up Jan outside his hotel. He paid him off, climbed wearily up to his room and hardly taking the time to remove his clothes, fell into bed.

Chapter 32

When I entered Jan the next morning, it was the Jan I had first met on those cliff-tops in Brittany. He had slept well, he was not thinking of Danielle, he had all his money back and more and he was going to visit a gun-factory and discover how to make a breech-loader. Furthermore it was a dry sunny day.

Apparently he had woken up ravenous and had eaten two poached eggs with thick rashers of bacon before I entered. He was now in to a heap of hot croissants covered with jam and cups of milky coffee. He was full of plans and ideas.

`That brass cartridge Captain...what's-his-name ...Captain Lardy showed us at Puteaux. A damn good idea - solves a lot of problems all at once: seals the breech making a breech-loader possible, has a built in percussion cap meaning no misfires and lastly the powder can never get wet. Pity about the price of copper though. Although we have plenty of rich customers who would pay any price for a reliable hunting-rifle.

He was right, of course. After all, if you have taken a 3 month boat trip out to India, hired elephants and porters to carry your baggage-train up into the mountains, hundreds of beaters to chase a tiger towards you, and your gun misfires at the critical moment you would be annoyed.

`The fixed propelling charge is an advantage and a disadvantage of course,' he continued, buttering a croissant.

`I should have thought an accurately fixed charge could only be an advantage,' I said. `If you don't know how much powder there is behind your bullet your sights are useless; you don't know where the bullet is going.'

`Oh, sure, you have to know what the powder charge is or you don't know where you are. But you have to use the right powder charge for the job. If you use a small charge hunting wild pig, the bullet won't penetrate and you're likely as not to get savaged. Use a large charge hunting duck and you'll blow the duck apart. Nothing left to eat.' He dipped the buttered croissant in his coffee.

I was stunned.

`On the military side I would have thought it important too. I mean if you blast away at a guy ten meters away using full charge, you're wasting powder, wearing out the barrel unnecessarily and making so much smoke that his mate can rush up and skewer you with his bayonet before you know he's there. Use the right powder charge for the job, I say.

The butter had melted and made little unpleasant blobs on top of the coffee.

`But the accuracy?' I said feebly.

`Well, I didn't say you don't have to know the charge you're using. You do and you adjust your sights accordingly. Easy.'

He drank up the coffee, butter blobs and all.

Christ, he was right. Variable charges were almost always used in big guns, in artillery. If you wanted to lob a shell over a hill to drop on someone behind it, you used a small charge. For a fast flat trajectory to hit a tank, you used a big charge.

`And a metal cartridge means you're stuck with a fixed charge,' he finished.

He stood up and paid his bill. I noticed in the mirror that he was wearing the sturdy "peasant" clothes he had brought from Brest but with the silk shirt he had bought in Paris. It looked quite original.

Today he was going to the National Gun Factory at St Maur where Colonel Laurier had had the breech-loader copied. He would find out Pierre's trick and then return to Brest.

`There was a chap looking for you last night,' said the waiter behind the bar as he returned the change to Jan.

`For me? What did he want?'

`Said he'd got something to deliver and would return later.'

Jan questioned him further but it had been no one special - just a messenger.

`Who knows you live here?' I asked as he walked out into the crowded street.

`No one, I would have thought. I haven't needed to tell anyone.'

`Well, someone knows now. Perhaps someone from the Golden Fleece. Are you armed?'

`Jesus. I hadn't thought of that.' He went back up to his room and got his pistols.

`Perhaps someone followed me back that night,' he said, stepping out of the bistro and looking nervously up and down the busy street.

Unlikely. They would have jumped him then, whilst he was drunk. Someone had been checking the hotels and had located him. We'd got to move.

He hired a horse as St Maur was 16km away. We were soon out of the city and as we rode through the flat countryside east of Paris, he kept looking back over his shoulder.

`What's the matter?' I asked.

`I'm damn sure someone's following me. Maybe that guy on the dappled horse. He's always the same distance behind.'

Who could that be? I couldn't see anyone but if he was right it could only be Benoit or one his agents. He would be raving for revenge against Jan for burning down his club but he wouldn't do anything about it. His enquiries must have shown him that Jan's company really had invented a reliable breech-loading musket and he must have realized what a fantastic commercial future that would have. And the best way to find the musket was to find Jan and follow him.

But I wasn't paying much attention as I was thinking over Jan's remarks concerning variable powder charges. It was a whole new viewpoint. Modern rifles were just too damned deadly. You couldn't shoot anyone in the leg now without taking his leg off - which was fine if you were being rushed by a crowd but pretty drastic if you just wanted to bring him down. And a high-power rifle was impossible to silence - the bullet at three times the speed of sound made as much noise as the muzzle blast. In Pakistan we had experimented by removing most of the powder from a standard cartridge which did indeed make it possible to fit a silencer but then the rifle would not reload itself, there was not enough recoil: you had to work the action for each round. And of course you had to carry two sorts of cartridges and not mix them up.

At St Maur we visited the National Gun Factory, but it was a disappointment. Yes, they had had to quickly build 10 special muskets for Colonel Laurier but he had taken the parts away with him. They showed Jan the drawings for them and he had scanned them eagerly, hoping to see the vital modification but it was not there.

Jan expressed his regrets at the absence of the Colonel and took his leave, after confirming that the Colonel was in the 21st Infantry Regiment which had marched north with the rest of the French Army about a week ago.

In slightly dampened spirits Jan rode back to Paris. He had been hoping he would be able to get this breech-seal business wrapped up and return home.

Back in Paris he returned the horse to the stables and went up to his room in the hotel. He sat dispiritedly on the bed wondering what to do next. I had no doubts: I must see that musket.

`Pity to have come so far and not seen it. Makes the whole trip a waste of time,' I began.

`It's gone up north with a million men. I'd be wasting still more time chasing after it.'

`Sure, there's a lot of people but armies usually know where their regiments are. You should be able to find him easily enough.'

He got up and kicked the bed.

`Those soldiers are not going on a picnic. There's going to be a bloody great punch-up and I just don't want to be around when it happens.'

`Just imagine!' I continued. `History being made and you won't be able to tell Geneviève about it.'

`That's not the only thing I won't be telling her about.'

`It would have been a nice way of remembering Pierre, of course. But I suppose someone else will find the idea now and claim they invented it.' I said.

`Shit.'

He left the hotel and sat at a small café, where he thought sadly of home and Brest. He imagined himself sitting on a grassy headland looking out to sea. There was a stiff breeze blowing and the grass around him was tossing back and forth in its gusts. The sun was breaking through the clouds and glittering on the sea in the distance. White waves were breaking at the foot of the cliffs and the air was clean and invigorating. There never seemed to be a wind in Paris and the damned flies were everywhere. Oh, to be able to hear the cries of sea-gulls!

He sipped moodily at his coffee and wondered what was happening back home, six days away by coach. Jacques would have stopped work on that shot-gun for the Army; he would have got his letter by now. It was clever of him to have got half the payment in advance, though some of that would have to be discounted against the fancy gun they had made for the English Milord and finally given away as a bribe.

He sighed and watched the coaches passing filled with people going to important meetings, to visit their beautiful mistresses who scantily-dressed would be laying out a table ready for them...

He felt lonely.

I tried again.

`Perhaps it would be safer to go back home. You haven't done anything here. Jacques would be very understanding. After all, he didn't really expect that his younger brother would ever be able to ...'

Jan stood up abruptly..

`OK, OK, so I'm going to find it,' he said irritably.

Chapter 33

After Jan had gone to bed I reviewed the military situation as far as I could remember it from studying it in the Chronodisp library.

France was a divided nation. Napoleon had lots of veterans, including returned prisoners of war but altogether he only had about 300,000 men. And with these he had to guard the French frontiers and hold down Royalist resistance movements.

His available striking force at the moment was no more than 130,000 men. And this for a man who at the height of his power is said to have boasted that he had 100,000 men and 10,000,000 francs to `spend' every year.

His only chance was a quick and resounding victory which would rally France around him and shatter the Allied unity. He dare not risk a defensive campaign.

Right now he had 120,000 men on the Belgian frontier at Charleroi. They were situated between the mixed nationality 100,000 man army under Wellington and the 120,000 man Prussian army under Blücher. He was going to try and keep the Allies apart and beat them separately.

*

Colonel Laurier and the muskets must be in Charleroi - about 250km to the north. If we wanted to get to him before the Battle of Waterloo, we had to leave soon.

The next morning Jan decided that the best way to find Colonel Laurier would be to follow the French Army into what was going to be called Belgium in about 50

years. So he went round to Colonel Laurier's office and got them to find him a seat in a coach that was part of a transport convoy going north that afternoon.

He paid off his hotel and took a cab round to the rue St Dominique where the convoy was leaving. There were four other officers in the coach with him and the convoy left Paris about mid-afternoon.

It was Wednesday 14 June, 1815.

We put up at Senlis the first night after a boring drive northwards frequently held up by supply waggons and marching columns. Jan was idly looking out of the hotel window when he suddenly stiffened.

'That's Benoit's horse! He's following me! It's the same dappled horse that followed me to St Maur.'

'You don't know it's Benoit,' I said.

'Who else?' he replied.

My sceptical questions about the horse couldn't move him. I suppose people those days could tell the difference between horses the way people in my day could tell the difference between a Ford and a Volkswagen.

Well, we were surrounded by the military and hadn't got the musket anyway, so I didn't see what Benoit could do.

The next day another long boring ride to St Quentin. Jan kept looking back but there were no riders on dappled horses in view.

At St Quentin the news was that the next day we would be driving to Maubeuge and then follow the French Army across the Belgian frontier.

But that night we had a change in plan. A brigadier's coach had broken down and he commandeered Jan's place. A quick trip round St Quentin revealed that there was a civilian coach leaving for Cambrai in the morning so Jan immediately booked a place in it. It wasn't in exactly the right direction he wanted but he thought he would be able to buy a horse there and then head east into Belgium.

We no longer had the military around us but perhaps Benoit would carry on following the convoy. However, as a precaution Jan arranged that the civilian coach pick him up at the outskirts of the town, where he stayed concealed until the last moment.

'60km to Cambrai,' he said as he humped his baggage into the boot of the dilapidated coach and settled down in his seat.

Another boring drive arriving in Cambrai about 6 o'clock in the evening. We didn't seem to have any followers on dappled horses, although Jan kept looking back.

This was as far as we could go by coach and now he would have to buy a horse. The immediate problem was understanding the locals. He looked at this map.

'Christ! We're still in France aren't we? Did you hear that last guy? Was that French he was speaking?'

'Perhaps if you spoke slower,' I suggested. I had watched how other people reacted to Jan's Breton French; he must have had a pretty strong accent too.

'I always speak slowly. I guess I'll just have to draw a picture of a horse.'

But in spite of Jan's exasperation he finally managed to buy one although not without the usual haggling, which didn't seem to require a language. All that was needed was the ability to simulate incredulity, amusement, indifference and finally resignation. They both shook hands after the deal, probably in mutual appreciation of acting ability.

Jan examined the map and decided the best way would be to leave Cambrai and head east via Solesmes and Le Quesnoy towards the Belgian frontier.

As soon as we left Cambrai I could see that road-wise we were back in the 17th Century, if not earlier. The villages or farms got further and further apart and the road

dwindled into a cart track often mashed into a sea of mud by cows. The farms were badly cared-for, the fences broken and sometimes the farmhouses themselves were in ruins and abandoned. We were in Flanders.

I had seen black-and-white films taken around here during World War I, which would be going on in exactly 100 years from now. What a screw-up that war was/would be, with generals on both sides ordering head-on attacks against barbed-wire and machine guns in a sea of mud!

I remembered there had been another battle going on today. The Allies hadn't joined up yet and Napoleon had attacked the Prussians and almost routed them.

*

The wind was strengthening, blowing the clouds in long black streaks across the sky. The sun had set behind us and there were just a few angry red tinges to the clouds as we plodded on. Jan shivered.

It was a desolate landscape and it was getting dark. The last farm looked and smelt like a pig-sty and Jan had no desire to stop the night there. He looked at his map but it was not detailed enough to show if there were any nearby villages. We could only press on.

And then far in the distance, against the now black eastern horizon could be seen a bobbing light. It turned out to be a peasant on foot, holding a primitive lamp on a stick. We had surprised him, probably because the soft ground had dampened the sound of the horse's hooves. He was alarmed but his light showed Jan to be decently dressed so he calmed down.

Jan asked him if there was any place nearby where he could sleep. He had enough food and had given up the idea of finding a restaurant. The man answered but I could make nothing of it.

`Either it's a speech defect or a different language,' I said.

`Or both.'

He tried miming sleeping and the man pointed back the way we had come and held up all his fingers. That was about right but Jan didn't want to go back. It would take an hour at least.

He pointed forward. The man held up ten fingers again. That must be Le Quesnoy - also too far.

Jan made a negative gesture again and held up two fingers. The man hesitated then shrugged. He pointed down the track and held up one fingers then made a sign to turn right. Jan thanked him. As we set off the peasant crossed himself.

`What was all that about?' I asked.

`After a kilometer turn right.'

`I meant the crossing himself bit.'

`Maybe there's a church there.'

Jan set his horse off down the track and sure enough, after about 1km he came to a rusted gate in a broken-down wall. He pushed it open and walked his horse up a wide overgrown path along the side of what had apparently been a large park but was now untended. At one point he had to step over a small river coming from an ornamental pool whose spill had become blocked up with dead leaves and pieces of rotten wood. A little further on he came across a child's swing, the supports almost rusted through.

Finally he turned a corner into what had once been an impressive driveway and before him was a large dignified house. No lights were showing.

As he approached it became apparent that the house was completely abandoned, the front door hanging on one hinge and the windows looking out

sightlessly. The tall chimneys made black silhouettes against the last faint glow in the western sky and a few stars were visible between the high racing clouds.

`Kinda spooky,' I said.

`Yes.'

He crunched across the neglected driveway and tied his horse to a post by the door. Then he walked slowly round the outside of the house which was surprisingly large.

`Looks like they just got up and left one day,' I remarked.

He said nothing.

Around the back of the house were long wide windows looking over a sunken ornamental garden. The flagstones were cracked and it was weed-covered.

He found an empty stable and installed his horse, feeding it some of the hay he had brought. There was an oil-lamp hanging from the roof but it was old and rusty.

Outside the stable it was completely dark now and there were some spots of rain in the gusting wind. He pulled a candle out of his saddle-bag and lit it with the aid of his tinder box.

`Inside's best,' I said.

`Er, yes, of course.'

Pistol in one hand and candle in the other he explored the house, fallen plaster crunching echoingly under his feet. It was musty and deserted, empty but for some pieces of furniture long decayed.

With the candle making flickering shadows on the high ceilings and down the empty corridors, he returned to the main room, the one having the long windows facing south.

`Might as well settle down here,' I said.

`I suppose so.'

He laid out his saddle-bags and extra clothes on the floor and sat on them. The candle was now almost burnt down so he blew it out. Inky blackness descended.

Gradually his eyes got used to the darkness and the big windows slowly appeared, with some distant stars visible through them. The only sound was the gusting of the wind against the trees outside. A full moon was rising.

He unwrapped his food and laid it on the floor, eating it with one hand and drinking out of his wine flask with the other. He put down his hand to pick up some food and touched something small and furry.

`Agh!' He leapt up into the air, spilling some wine but it was only a cat.

`Bloody cats,' he said, his heart still thumping. `They appear out of the air as soon as you start eating.' But he gave it something to eat. It curled up purring and went to sleep.

He was nervous. He put his pistol down on the ground beside him and kept glancing into the dark corners of the room. For the first time since I had known him he said his prayers before he turned over to sleep, using his saddle as a pillow. I had forgotten Jan came from a very religious part of France.

`You all right?' I asked.

`Of course I am. Why shouldn't I be?'

I Withdrew.

Chapter 34

I was reflecting on the thousands who had died that day and of others who were even now dying of their wounds when my sad reverie was broken into by what can only be described as a desperate shout for help.

It came from Jan.

I entered hastily. He was wide awake, his eyes staring into the room whose aspect had completely changed. The wind had dropped and the big long room was quiet. A full moon had risen and was riding high in the sky. Shining through the uncurtained windows it was making bright silent hot shimmering squares on the bare floorboards.

I was about to make some comforting remark when I hesitated and seemed to slide more deeply into Jan. I tried to pull back but was unable to move. Something had changed, something right outside my experience. No longer was I merely the Observer of Jan, detached and impersonal; I too was staring into that quiet empty moonlit room, sweating, my heart-thumping.

I had become Jan!

What had woken me? I normally sleep deeply - it must have been an unusual sound. I looked fearfully round the room, not moving a muscle, holding my breath, ears strained to catch the slightest sound. Why had I woken up? Absolute silence except for the thumping of my heart. I licked my dry lips and swallowed.

Nothing. I was just lying in a quiet moonlit room in an old deserted house, far out in the country. Perhaps the rising moon had woken me. But what was this sense of danger?

I looked at the bright moonlit patterns on the floorboards. Eight slowly moving squares, soon one would reach my foot. What had that peasant meant when he had crossed himself? As though warding off the Evil Eye. And why had he looked at me like that? I crossed myself shamefacedly. The imagination is very strong, I must try ... There was something peculiar about the elongated squares of moonlight on the bare floorboards. Hadn't it been eight when I first counted? Now it was nine! How could I have made such a stupid mistake? I tore my eyes from the hypnotic shimmering patterns. What was that?! Something had flickered in the corner of my eye. I froze and my eyes strained into the black corner of the room. It wasn't a corner, it was the door. Moonlight is a strange unearthly light, revealing and concealing at the same time. But hadn't I closed the door? Now I could see. It was the door, slightly open - I hadn't been able to close it properly because it was warped. The moonlight was shining down into the corridor outside the room - I could see it through the open door shining on the wall and down onto the floor.

The shadow in the corridor had moved! A shiver ran down my back and my hair rose. I heard a slight creaking outside the door as though a heavy body had moved gently on the wooden stairway leading to the door, the door through which I must go to reach safety. And suddenly I knew I'd been found! Something had been looking for me and had finally found me! It was waiting for me outside the door. Something cold, calculating and completely inhuman. Something indescribably evil, lusting after me, licking its foul lips in delicious anticipation. I couldn't move, sweat was running down my back, the walls of the room were sparkling and pulsating, closing in and pushing me towards the open door. I tried to reach for my pistol but my arm wouldn't move. In the far far distance a violin was playing a strange wild tune. It was getting closer, louder.

God! I'd got to leave, I'd got to escape, sanity was slipping! Mentally I scabbled for my Return Code:

"In Xanadu did Khubla Khana
A stately pleasure dome decree

Where Alph the sacred river ran...'

Nothing. It hadn't worked. I was trapped!

But then I found I could move my arm. With a flood of relief my hand closed over the cold pistol butt.

Thank God I had the pistol! Best to die cleanly - anything was better than those filthy slaving...thank God I had the pistol - the solution, Man's solution to the horrors of Hell! I had the muzzle to my forehead now - soon, soon it would be all over. The music was rising to a wild crescendo and I could hear an anticipatory panting. I was swooning with ecstasy - I would escape, I would win! Over the wild uncanny music I heard laughter. 'Quickly!' said a voice, 'Now, now.' Obediently back with the hammers, finger tightening on the triggers ... soon the blessed relief of oblivion, just a slight pressure and it would be all over ...

What was that moving?! The cat! The cat had woken up and crouched down was watching the half open door with unblinking black eyes. Outside in the moon-lit corridor there was another creak and the cat glided forward noiselessly, tail down flat. Over the crazy eldritch music a voice was shouting urgently, 'Now! Do it now!' I watched the cat horrified. 'No, come back!' I shouted soundlessly. 'There is a nameless horror in the corridor, there is something waiting to eat you, there is a ... there is a ... there is a mouse. The wild mad music faded and died, the walls stopped pulsating and slowly receded. Jan carefully uncocked the pistol and put it down.

But there was no mouse. The cat returned disappointed. Bored, she rubbed herself against Jan, purring.

He lay back panting, covered with sweat.

'A cat,' he said wonderingly 'A cat saved my life.'

'And my sanity,' I might have added.

He picked it up, so soft and light and stroked it. She was purring loudly but wanted to be put down. No nightmares for this cat. She was a night-hunter and on a moonlit night like this she was the one who gave nightmares to voles and field-mice.

There was a creak by the window and she twitched round and froze, all systems go. Unblinking eyes open and black, ears pointing forward like radar antenna she slid across the floor crouched down, avoiding the moonlit patches. She disappeared and there was the sound of a squeak and a scuffle.

I suddenly realized that what Jan/I had been feeling was the deep primitive fear that had pursued man from the time he had lived in the jungle - the fear of the stealthy night-hunter. The fear of something about five times bigger than this cat. And especially on moonlit nights. The fear that a hunted mouse must have for this cat so small and friendly to us.

This time I Withdrew without difficulty but I had a lot to think about. I had been on the edge of madness and I was convinced I had been the victim of another attack. Like Jan, I'd been saved only by the timely awakening of the cat. Otherwise he would have been lying in that room with two bullets in his head and I would have been in the mental ward at Chrodisp. Was this what had happened to Yvette's friend?

I didn't know how it was done but I knew it wouldn't succeed with me again and I would be able to warn Chrodisp when I got back. I resolved to adopt a cat when I returned to Chrodisp.

*

In the morning Jan saddled up his horse and went to look for the cat. He found her lying in the sun in one of the upstairs bedrooms. He picked her up rubbing his face against her soft black fur and I swear there were tears in his eyes. He searched

his saddlebags minutely and left her all the food scraps he could find. She tucked in immediately, head down, completely ignoring his fond farewells.

He looked once more around the big empty room, now warm and sunny.

'If it wasn't for that cat I would be lying there dead.' He shook his head in amazement.

As he walked his horse down the weed-covered driveway he looked back at the house over his shoulder.

'The biggest fright I've ever had in my life. I should burn the fucking place down.'

'The cat wouldn't like it,' I said.

'You're right.'

Chapter 35

The weather was changing for the worse; the air had become cold and humid. Rain was coming. Jan mounted up on his horse and we were on our way again, heading east.

We stopped briefly at Le Quesnoy to have some breakfast, buy some food and feed and water the horse.

Through Bavay and now we were seeing signs of the fighting ahead. Isolated groups of soldiers were buying food and some of the seriously wounded were being billeted.

On a small hill outside Bavay, Jan turned round and scanned the road behind for a dappled horse.

'Even if I could see through this damned rain, he could be anywhere in this crowd,' he muttered, turning the horse's head east again.

We were now following the path of the French Army as it had advanced into Belgium. More than 100,000 men. I could see the devastating effect of moving an Army across farming countryside. The small roads had been completely overloaded and the Army had cut a great swath through the fields, trampling the corn and rye into the mud, the glutinous mud of Flanders.

I had expected that Jan would be prevented from going forward but no one took any notice of him. There were a lot of civilians about, in fact. Some had brought food and drink which they were selling to the soldiers from small improvised stalls; others were just watching.

The military presence was getting more and more marked as we approached Charleroi. The soldiers were happy and in spite of the driving rain were singing as they marched. They had won a great victory against the hated Prussians yesterday and they were going to win another against the English tomorrow. With their little Emperor to lead them how could they fail? I looked at them sadly.

There was no way that Jan could ride into Charleroi so he tied up his horse outside an over-full restaurant and went into the town on foot.

The town was absolutely jammed with military, but mostly staff and supply. The fighting troops were already in position opposite Wellington. Jan was looking round for something which said "21st Infantry" - the Colonel's Regiment, but could see nothing. Finally he saw an Infantry officer who had just come out of a hotel carrying a satchel-full of papers.

Jan stopped him and asked him if he knew where he could find Colonel Laurier of the 21st. The man, a staff Captain, looked at Jan suspiciously and called over another officer.

'I've never heard of him and why do you want to know where the 21st is?'

Spy fever.

Jan said that he couldn't care less where the 21st was - he just wanted to see Colonel Laurier.

`And why do you want to see Colonel Laurier?'

Jan explained that he was part of a weapons development unit in Paris and had been sent up to see field trials.

`There'll be plenty of them tomorrow,' said the Captain grimly. `Your papers.'

Jan showed him the letter he had received from the Admiral, putting him on his staff temporarily.

`The Navy!' said the Captain in astonishment. `What's the Navy doing here?'

A good question. I waited with interest for Jan's reply but the other officer spoke first.

`Just what we need here,' he said, shaking water from his hat. `I'm surprised no one's thought of it before. The Dyle has flooded its banks and the whole bloody countryside is waterlogged.'

He turned to Jan.

`Sailed up the Sambre, I suppose. Damned clever. How many sail have you?'

Jan smiled patiently. He was about to answer but the Captain had no time for jokes. He handed Jan his letter back.

`I don't know,' he said. He pointed back over his shoulder. `Ask in there - Major Doiseau.'

Jan entered the hotel dining-room with the other officer. It was laid out with wooden trestle tables and had lots of maps pinned to the walls. Major Doiseau was a tall unhappy looking man. In response to Jan's question he looked in a file and then at the main map and said:

`He's with a small artillery protection unit.' He stabbed the map. `It's in a farmhouse here, - "The Beautiful Association".'

A translation hiccup - surely `La Belle Alliance.' He scribbled on a piece of paper and stamped it.

`Here's a Pass but the road's mostly flooded. You'll need a boat to get through.'

`He's got a frigate,' said the other officer brightly. `He's going to ram Wellington's left flank.'

He was explaining this witticism to the glum Major as we left.

`If they fight battles like they make jokes...' muttered Jan to himself.

But that was a stroke of luck. La Belle Alliance was a farmhouse right in the middle of the French lines, affording a perfect view down into the valley and across to Wellington's lines opposite. We would have a grandstand view of the battle.

Jan splashed his way back in the darkness to his horse and tagged behind some creaking ammunition wagons going up north.

9pm now, but in spite of the darkness it was quite easy to see the direction we had to take. There was a big red glow in the sky ahead; the reflections on the low-lying clouds of hundreds of thousands of camp fires. The road was not as impassable as I had thought it would be as it was all one-way now - north to the battlefield.

The light in the sky got brighter and brighter, reflected now in enormous still pools of water at each side of the pav, road. After an hour he passed through the famous cross-roads of Quatre Bras where it was obvious there had been a heavy battle. The small cottages were in ruins; there were dead horses and overturned wagons everywhere, just pushed off the road to make way.

A few kilometers further on we passed Genappe and on the other side we saw the aftermath of another battle. The white wood of cannon-shattered trees, dead horses and dead bodies in many coloured uniforms. Many had simply been pushed off the road and were floating in the muddy water which formed lakes at each side.

Here the British had fought a delaying action to enable the rest of their troops to get into position at Waterloo. Now and then I could recognize a uniform, the unmistakable kilt of some Scottish regiment, the kilt they still wore in the 21st Century.

The rain was coming down in torrents now and the road was lined with troops, all with fixed bayonets, guarding against spies who would be trying to estimate the strength and position of the French units. Several times Jan had to show his Pass to military police.

Finally we came to a big parking and dispersal area where shouting and cursing military police were directing the wagons and troops coming up with us from the Genappes road. The ammunition wagons were going no further so Jan pulled over and was told to carry straight on up a slight incline. Every few meters he was stopped and questioned until a large building appeared on our right, silhouetted against the red glow in the sky.

Wearily Jan turned into the courtyard where a large bonfire was burning. Again he showed his Pass, handed over his horse and entered the farmhouse.

It was now almost midnight and the floor of the Inn was covered with sleeping bodies. A sergeant escorted Jan to a dining room, still faintly illuminated by turned-down oil lamps. Several people were sitting at tables sleeping with their heads on their arms but in the corner two officers were sitting at a small table covered with maps. The top map was kept from curling up by a pistol on one edge and a bottle of wine on the other. There were round wine-glass rings on the map.

'Colonel Laurier, a visitor for you, sir,' said the sergeant, saluting. The Colonel turned round and looked dimly upwards at Jan.

'Jan Le Foc! By all that's holy!'

I watched to see if Jan was going to show any sign of embarrassment after his visit to the Colonel's house. But no - something to do with libert, and fraternit, perhaps. They shook hands, smiling at each other.

The Colonel introduced Jan to the other officer, a small blond man of about 40, wearing the rank badges of a Major of Artillery. Major Bertier was with a big battery of 74 guns installed nearby. Colonel Laurier's troops were to protect this battery.

The Colonel pulled the map forward and started to explain the situation to Jan. Jan was quite tired and would rather have put off the explanation until tomorrow but he realized the Colonel and the Major would not be available then so he pinched himself and tried to stay awake. It was interesting for me too. I knew the situation on the other side; I wanted to know how much the French knew before the battle.

'This is the situation,' he began. 'We have 74,000 men in place here along this ridge, mostly veterans. Wellington has about 70,000 on the ridge opposite about 2km away, but they are a real hodge-podge. We estimate 30,000 English, none who have been under fire before, 30,000 Dutch-Belgians who are not really sure whose side they are on and the rest are a jumble of various sorts of Germans. They are not very well equipped.'

'We are here,' he touched the map in the middle of the French position. 'Down to the left here, between us and the enemy, is a farm building called "Hougoumont". I imagine we are going to capture that early on. Here, in front of the enemy line, is another farm called "La Haye Saint". The English will have fortified it.'

'The Prussians,' reminded Major Berthier.

'Yes,' continued the Colonel. 'We beat them yesterday at Ligny, it's not on this map, it's off here, down to the right. They are being pursued by Marshal whats-his-name.. Grouchy, with 30,000 men..'

'And more than 100 guns,' interjected the Major.

`Quite,' said the Colonel. `We would rather have them here, of course, but if they keep the 64,000 Hun out of our hair until we've mopped up this lot,' he swept his hand over the map, `we can then turn and finish them off properly.'

`What's Wellington like?' asked Jan, who in spite of his tiredness was becoming fascinated.

The Colonel looked at the Major.

`He's an English General, of course. Best at defence. Very traditionalist, phlegmatic, conservative and doesn't delegate. Prefers set-piece battles. Accustomed to have the Royal Navy behind him to keep him well supplied and pull his chestnuts out of the fire if he makes any clangers.'

Jan tried and failed to reconcile this view with that generally held in Brittany, where the English were thought of as daring and aggressive sea-raiders, continually landing parties to harry the coastal defences, sneaking into heavily defended ports to cut-out prizes, to burn what they couldn't take. On the seas innovative and unbeatable.

`Just the man for this battle,' said Jan, perhaps incautiously.

`Yes.' There was a reflective silence.

`And The Emperor?' asked Jan.

The two officers looked round inconspicuously.

`In his day...' began the Major.

`Incomparable,' finished the Colonel.

`But now?' asked Jan.

`He's sick,' said the Colonel. `Now and then he bestirs himself and we see a flash of the old genius. Look how he has split the Prussians and the English. He attacked the Prussians and would have annihilated them if only Ney had taken Quatre Bras more quickly and swung round to take the Prussians in their flank. But Ney claims he wasn't told what it was all about so he just potted around until Wellington sent in reinforcements and made Quatre Bras a real tough nut to crack. Wellington then withdrew but the battle with the Prussians was over and a golden opportunity was lost.'

`Wouldn't have happened in the old days,' said the Major sadly.

`So what's going to happen tomorrow?' asked Jan.

`Well, we're going to win of course. We have better artillery, more experienced troops and fabulous morale,' said the Colonel. `We're going to sweep them off that ridge and this time tomorrow we'll be dining in Brussels. Right?'

The Major grinned.

`Yes,' he said. `We'll win all right but I don't think it's going to be that easy. The English Infantry are very stubborn and they have a fantastic rate of fire. I was against them in Spain and I've never seen anything like it. Wellington is a crafty general, he's got a real knack of hiding his Infantry in folds in the ground. You charge forward thinking you're crossing an empty field then they all stand up and you've got a thousand Redcoats blasting at you.'

`So Wellington has often fought against us but the Emperor has never fought against the English,' said Jan.

`Yes, that's right,' said the Major in a surprised voice.

Well, that was interesting. The French had a pretty accurate idea of the troops facing them. They obviously had lots of spies in Belgium, which was inevitable when you think about it; they had occupied Belgium for years and most Belgians spoke French.

A pretty good character assessment too. Napoleon had to win and had to win spectacularly. This corresponded to the Latin dislike of long boring preparations as

needed in defence. They preferred the excitement of the attack, the brilliant improvisation, Jan.

Wellington wanted to win too, of course, because if he lost Brussels all Belgium would fall to Napoleon, some of his old allies would rejoin him and the whole of Europe would be plunged into war again. Napoleon must be stopped here. Going for Wellington was the fact that he was in defence and defence is always a stronger position than attack.

Yes, the stage was now set for one of the most spectacular battles in European history and it was going to resemble the impact of an irresistible cannon-ball against an immovable object.

Jan left the two officers in the dining room of that small farm overlooking the field of Waterloo and found a warm place to sleep in a corridor upstairs.

I Withdrew.

Chapter 36

Jan was woken up very early in the morning by people stumbling over him in the corridor but as he had no unit to join he turned over and went back to sleep.

He finally woke up at 8 o'clock, dressed, and found some food being served downstairs. He was almost alone.

He walked outside into the courtyard. It was a grey miserable day, still raining slightly and the courtyard was a sea of mud. Staff officers were riding in and out and clumping up to one of the upstairs rooms which had been fitted out as an observation point with telescopes and maps.

No one paid him any attention to him so after eating he went back to the corridor where he had slept and was able to look out onto the battle-field from a window at one end.

The road outside the Belle Alliance farm ran straight as a die through the shallow valley to the English lines, about 1.5km away. There was not much to be seen there except some smoke and a few horsemen on the horizon.

In the valley between the two armies horsemen were galloping up and down. Six French officers were in a group in the middle of the valley, prodding at the ground. They reminded me of nothing so much as cricket team captains examining the pitch before play. The reasons were the same: they wanted to see how sodden the ground was.

Jan walked to the other end of the corridor and looked out over the French lines, on the reverse slope of the ridge. A big difference!

As far as the eye could see there were soldiers. Soldiers sitting, standing, talking together, pointing things out to each other. They were all dressed in battle-order with knapsacks and fixed bayonets and ready to move. Bandsmen had laid their instruments down carefully on pieces of cloth and little drummer-boys were talking quietly together, holding their drums against their thighs. Large horses were already coupled to the gun-carriages of the horse artillery and were patiently waiting, being comforted by their uniformed drivers.

Clumps of uniforms of similar colours indicated different regiments, all waiting. The road to the farm had been kept clear and every now and then a rider would dash up to us, spraying mud over the waiting troops.

Jan opened the window and in leapt the roar of the waiting army; 70,000 men awaiting Napoleon's order! Behind him he heard the sound of boots on the stairs. He turned to see the Colonel in full uniform.

`Ah, there you are!' he said. `You're going to have a treat! The ground is too wet to attack at the moment so the Emperor is going to review his troops in front of the English. When they see what we have they'll shit in their pants!'

He came to the window with Jan and already trumpets were sounding and troops standing up, forming into lines and pulling their uniforms straight.

Somewhere out of sight a band began to play and troops appeared, marching along the road beneath us to the thud of drums. We moved over to the other end of the corridor and there we could see the incline beneath us gradually filling up with infantry, cavalry and guns. It had stopped raining and the sun was now shining quite strongly on the sodden fields and glinting off the brilliant uniforms and band instruments. Band after band played as each regiment moved into position until the ridge was covered along its whole 3.5km length. The Colonel, who had been naming each regiment, had a telescope and was scrutinizing the ridge opposite. We could see it too was covered with multicoloured uniforms but with bands of red between them.

`He's put his English regiments between the others to stiffen them,' he muttered.

But apart from some horses slowly moving along the top of the ridge opposite, there was no movement.

Now there was complete silence. And then in the distance faint voices shouting. Louder and louder the sound approached, peeling into a thunder of cheering beneath us - `Long live the Emperor!', again and again as a small hunched figure on a white horse moved across our field of view and disappeared.

There was then a short silence during which some singing could be faintly heard from the lines opposite.

`Whistling to keep their spirits up,' said the Colonel contemptuously. `They're going to be massacred.'

The bands began to play again, the troops marched off and soon the slope beneath us was empty apart from some horsemen still checking the ground. To one side, on the crest of the ridge to our right we could hear the crack of whips and see horses towing masses of guns into position.

`There's Berthier getting his beauties installed,' said the Colonel. `Seventy-four he's got, eight and twelve pounders.'

The gunners were busy around their pieces, aiming them towards the ridge opposite, laying out powder charges, rammers and cannon balls. After all had been prepared they stood back.

Silence descended again but it was an impatient nervous silence.

The sun slowly climbed in the sky as the morning progressed, wisps of steam rose from the wet muddy ground and the larks fluttered and sang, high in the blue sky. The Colonel looked at his watch.

`What the hell are we waiting for?' he fumed, looking up and down the line. `Eleven-thirty and half the day gone.'

There was a burst of activity over to the left. A blue-grey mass of French troops were moving down the slope towards the Hougoumont farm, their feet all moving in step. They were preceded by a cloud of skirmishers, running, kneeling and occasionally firing. The popping of their rifles could be heard clearly. Behind the main body, batteries of light 6-pounder divisional artillery bumped down the ridge to support them.

The Battle of Waterloo had begun!

The popping of the muskets was now reinforced by the deeper barking of the artillery which had unlimbered to one side and was firing at the farm buildings. Puffs of smoke spurted from the wood in front of the buildings and French soldiers were dropping. The English heavy artillery from the centre of the ridge opposite opened up in a earth-shaking boom, its cannon-balls ploughing into the densely packed attacking column. And not only cannon-balls; small puffs of smoke appeared in the sky over the skirmishers.

`Shells!' said Jan surprised.

The main body of the advancing troops disappeared into the wood and the whole scene became enveloped in smoke. The artillery on both sides had stopped, evidently not knowing who they were firing at.

The track of the troops down the hill could be seen by the bodies marking its progress - they were especially thick in front of the wood. There was continuous firing and cheering from the farm and new troops were marching quickly down from our left to reinforce the attackers. As soon as they came within range the English artillery opened up again and figures began to drop.

`It's a key position,' explained the Colonel. `If we can capture that farm we can install guns to enfilade the English line and then it would serve as a base to launch an attack on the English right. There's a ditch behind the farm which would protect the Infantry from the English artillery until the moment of the assault. If the English lose Hougoumont, they lose the battle.'

Awed we watched the ferocious fighting around the farm. More and more men were rushing in from the French lines but still the firing of the defenders continued unabated. Now a different coloured smoke appeared over the farm and drifted slowly down-wind.

`The farmhouse is on fire! They can't hold out much longer!' said the Colonel. He swung his telescope to the lines opposite. `But they're not getting any help.'

There was some shouting from the observation room above us and the Colonel put his head out of the window to question them.

What?!' he gasped. `My God!' He turned his telescope quickly over to the far right and stared through it. `I don't know,' he muttered to himself.

He turned to Jan and handed him the telescope.

`There's a column of troops approaching from the right. Are they in blue, in which case they are Grouchy's forces coming to help us, or are they black, in which case they are the Prussians who have evaded Grouchy?'

Jan peered through the telescope.

`Damned if I know,' said Jan, `but if it's as muddy there as it is here it's going to be hours before they get here whoever they are.' He handed the telescope back. They looked quite obviously black to me. But then I knew.

The Colonel carried on watching the distant approaching troops for a minute then transferred his gaze back to Hougoumont.

`We've got to get a move on here,' he said. `Sacred Mother, but there's a fight going on over there. Wellington must have nerves of steel. He must hold that farmhouse but as far as I can see he hasn't moved a man to reinforce them.'

Now this was all good stuff and I was quite content just to watch the action but I had my Mission to complete and this seemed like a good time to start pushing. If I left it much later the musket would disappear for ever into the tangled Waterloo Timelines.

`What about the musket?' I said.

`I hear you had some of those breech-loaders made,' said Jan.

`Ten,' said the Colonel absently, eye to his telescope. `They're with the Battalion outside.'

I was about to do some more `nudging' when the sounds of intensified activity could be heard coming through the window at the rearward-facing end of the corridor. Bugle calls and shouts. Jan and the Colonel ran back to the window and there we could see what it was all about.

An enormous column of men was being assembled and dressed in long lines. Sergeants were shouting at the younger ones and pushing them into place: a lot of them didn't seem to know what to do. Officers on horseback with unsheathed swords were taking their places at the front and flag-bearers were unfolding their regimental pennants. Drummer boys were lining up in the middle and bandsmen were tuning their instruments. Some soldiers were loading their muskets and we could see their arms going up in the air as they rammed the charges home with the long ramrods. Others were fixing bayonets and giving them a final edge with whetstones. A group nearby were passing a bottle round and some of them looked more than a little drunk. Thousands and thousands of men as far as the eye could see.

The Colonel looked on doubtfully.

`A mass attack,' he said `Very frightening against a nervous enemy, but Wellington hasn't shown signs of having any nerves at all so far.'

Just then a messenger came into the corridor for the Colonel. He signed for it and read it.

`Artillery bombardment of the English lines in 10 minutes. I have to return to my men. If you stay here you should be quite....'

`I'm coming with you,' said Jan. The Colonel grinned at him.

Outside the noise of the battle was deafening, a continuous roar of musketry and the booming of cannon from Hougoumont way over to the left. Behind us we could hear the shouts of command, more trumpet calls and the sounds of the attack columns assembling.

Men were running past us down the slope and taking up position as markers to guide the attacking troops. We moved along the ridge to the right where a long line of guns were lined up, almost wheel to wheel. We walked quickly past about thirty of them and there met Major Berthier, surrounded by his officers. He had just finished giving them instructions as we arrived. They saluted and doubled back to their guns.

The gun-teams were now crouched around their weapons. Cannon balls were stored in a small heap by each gun and the limbers had been turned round and could be seen filled with dark-blue serge powder bags.

Behind us on the other side of the ridge silence had descended. The disciplined silence of an army waiting to attack.

The Colonel spoke to a young officer who left then returned with a musket, handed it to Jan and doubled back to his position. A glance from Jan was enough to show him that it was the breech-loader! He took it, feeling its weight, but he was watching Major Berthier. So were 74 guncrews. I was beginning to think I had left it too late.

`Open it and look inside,' I said urgently but he was not listening; he knew history was being made.

The Major had his sword out, arm stretched in front of him and was listening intently. There it was! A thin high trumpet note soared over the noise of battle.

The Major's sword dropped and Jan flinched as the 74 guns roared as one and leapt back together. A tremendous cloud of smoke completely obscured the view as the crews flung themselves on their heavy guns, seizing the wheel spokes to man-handle them back into position. The barrels were sponged out and fresh charges

rammed in. The next salvo was more ragged as some crews were quicker to load than others. Officers crouched over the sights, gesturing to the two men on the trail to slightly alter the aim and then a burning wick was pressed into the touch-hole.

It really was not very efficient. Each time the gun fired it leapt back and had to be re-aimed. There was no recoil mechanism. But they were very quick and with clever team-work were able to get off about two shots per minute.

The Major walked back up the slope a bit so he could get a view of the destruction his guns were effecting, without being obscured by the smoke. The Colonel had gone with him.

Through gaps in the smoke Jan saw the ground on the far ridge was being torn up in clods of flying earth but apart from one column in the middle that was getting heavily punished, there didn't seem to be much in the way of targets to shoot at, and certainly no red-coated ones. Had they all been annihilated in the first salvo?

A cloud of leaping smoke covered the ridge opposite and five seconds later the air was torn as cannon balls smashed overhead, sounding like tearing cloth. Counter-battery fire. I could see the cannon balls coming quite clearly as slowly moving black dots which then rapidly accelerated as they neared and then roared overhead. If they fell short they bounced in big crazy hops. Jan was very nervous but tried to imitate the young officers standing around him who were almost academically discussing the artillery duel.

Most unpleasant were the shells - you couldn't tell one from the other until it burst overhead throwing down lethal pieces of casing. But few actually burst over the French battery; I supposed it was difficult to time the fuses accurately.

Our bombardment was continuous now, the guncrews in uninterrupted frantic movement, loading and firing as fast as they could. The noise was tremendous. There was a slight breeze but the smoke was sinking down into the valley quicker than it was blowing away. Crash! A nearby gun was struck and the shot howled overhead. All the crew except two climbed shaken to their feet and recommenced firing. Two replacement artillerymen doubled forwards and four medical orderlies carried off the bodies.

The Colonel and the Major returned.

And now occurred one of those spectacles that Jan would never forget as long as he lived.

Chapter 38

Our artillery barrage ceased and in the ringing silence we could hear the distant thud of drums. And then faintly the sound of martial music. It became slowly louder and louder and then over the ridge behind us appeared a long open-spaced line of officers on horseback, followed by standard and flag bearers. And an instant later the crest of the ridge was lined with thousands upon thousands of soldiers in close-packed ranks. The music swelled as the bands breasted the ridge, the clear martial clang of brass, the deep gut-wrenching rhythmical thud of drums.

Slowly and irresistibly they marched down the ridge past their markers who stood immobile as through on parade. They resolved themselves into three enormous columns, each two hundred men wide. Five thousand men in each column - a mass attack with 15 000 men! Jan had never seen so many men at once and he thanked God they were on his side. In perfect step they flowed down onto the battlefield, an orderly forest of glittering bayonets, drums roaring, brass blaring, flags and standards glinting in the pale sun.

As they marched past stiffly in step to the beat of the drums Jan looked at their faces. Young fresh-faced recruits, bearded veterans of many famous campaigns all staring ahead in rigid exaltation, some of them with tears streaming down their faces. They were marching for France, ready to die for the Motherland!

And now the music had changed. There it was, the famous tune that had been heard on battlefields all round the world, from the frozen steppes of Russia to the hot sands of Egypt. They were singing now, heads up, open throated, exhilarated. As Jan heard the well-known words of La Marseillaise they suddenly had a new and deeper significance. He choked back a sob.

"Allons' enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivee.
Contre nous, de la tyrannie
Le standard sanglant est levee!

It was too much. They were marching to glory and he was standing by, watching them making history. He was being left behind. As the last rank marched by he dashed forward and joined them. His musket had no bayonet but he held it stiffly upwards like the others.

I shouted at him, I cursed and screamed at him but it was useless. He was intoxicated, drunk with la gloire, the rhythmic hypnotic beat of the drums. Like a robot he marched forward in a state of exaltation in step with 15,000 other French soldiers. They were going to crush the enemies of the Motherland, to annihilate them!

And now the bombardment had recommenced, our guns supporting the huge advancing phalanxes. Their cannon balls shrieked over their heads, pounding and smashing the enemy out of the way. We were irresistible.

I had lost Jan. He was completely out of reach of reason.

We were marching through thick smoke, now and then stepping over bodies, often lying in rows where English cannon balls had torn into the mass of Infantry. There was the flash and crack of shells bursting overhead throwing down deadly shrapnel and the hoarse shouts of the sergeants telling them to close up and keep in line.

We were nearing the English lines now. The music had stopped and the French artillery had ceased firing. All we could hear was the beat of the massed drums. But its rhythm was changing; it was faster now, a rapid menacing beat, the dreaded 'pas de charge'! The soldiers on each side and in front of Jan were shouting 'Vive L'Empereur!'. But our pace forwards had been checked, the phalanx had to spread out so each soldier could fire forwards in the final assault. It was a complicated manoeuvre and a sergeant looming out of the smoke swore at Jan and waved him on. Jan was confused not knowing what to do.

But then a soldier appeared out of the smoke and before Jan's shocked eyes bayoneted the sergeant callously in the back then wrenched out his bayonet. The sergeant choked and fell forward, blood gushing from his mouth. Terrified Jan saw the soldier look round and fix his eyes on him. With purposeful strides he made directly for Jan, the bayonet on the end of his long musket reaching out in deadly menace. Jan stared in frozen horror at the tall thick-set figure, the face contorted with rage and hate under the high shako. What was going on? Why was the soldier attacking him?!

'Parry, you fool!' I screamed. The blood-covered steel bayonet slid off the wooden stock of Jan's musket and gashed his left arm. What the hell was this? I only

got a blurred image but the uniform was French Infantry. Had the man gone mad? Whatever the reason, Jan wouldn't last long without a bayonet.

And then Jan started as he recognized the soldier - it was Benoit! Last seen elegantly dressed in the distinguished surroundings of the Golden Fleece.

With his lips drawn back over his teeth in a rictus of hate Benoit was attacking again. In the middle of the battle no one was paying them any attention. In a minute he would kill Jan and take his musket.

`Use your musket! Shoot him!'

Jan cocked his musket and as another thrust came towards him, he fired. The musket boomed and kicked in his hands but he had aimed too high and merely knocked off Benoit's shako. Benoit stood there a second, stunned face blackened by the gun-smoke, then up came the bayonet point again. Jan was stunned too but the spell of the music had been broken and he was listening to me again, thank God. And in the nick of time.

`Load your musket!' I said, but then I realized he had no cartridges. There was only one thing to do. `Run!' I shouted, `get back to the French lines!'

A shell must have burst nearby because Benoit was momentarily hidden by a cloud of smoke. Coughing and clutching his arm Jan turned and stumbled back the way he had come. The roar of battle was all around, the drums had stopped and the smoke was all-enveloping. He was trudging forward, breath rasping and feet dragging in the muddy torn-up ground and soon lost his sense of direction.

`Look at the sun or you'll never get back,' I shouted. Warily he raised his head and looked up at the orange disk appearing now and then through the battle-smoke.

`More to the left,' I said. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw another figure moving quickly towards him. A figure in infantry uniform but with no shako. A figure carrying a musket with a long bayonet! Jan broke into a run and the shape of Benoit disappeared into the smoke again.

Far behind us there was the simultaneous crash of hundreds of muskets, followed by a ragged silence. And then the air was filled with an eerie wailing, a strange discordant howling. It was an indescribably unearthly and menacing sound and a shiver ran down Jan's back.

`Holy mother of God! What's that?' he gasped. He stopped, eyes widening and his scalp tingling.

`Never mind. Keep going, faster, faster!' I said. I had read the history of the battle and knew we had about 10 minutes before final disaster struck the French Infantry. We had about a kilometer to go.

He lurched forward pursued by the unearthly sound and behind it the massed roar of thousands of triumphant voices.

(Unknown to him, Napoleon, taken aback by the ferocity of the counter-attack, was at that moment saying to one of his Generals: `When I see those skirts and hear those pipes I could believe I am Caesar in the woods of Germany and we are back in barbaric times!')

But I knew that the real danger to Jan was not the sound of bagpipes, but was even now getting ready over the ridge behind the English lines.

An eddy in the smoke revealed the French battery over to the left 200m away. Jan stumbled towards it as trumpets were sounding the Charge behind us.

`Faster! Faster!' I said desperately and he broke into a shambling run. As he approached he saw the guns were silent, the gunners crouched behind their pieces. A figure recognized him and dashed forward, accompanied by another officer.

`Jan, you fool!' said the Colonel, `what were you doing? Here, help him.'

He was half pulled, half dragged towards the French lines. At the top of the slope he was unceremoniously dropped and the Colonel turned to look towards the battle.

'Oh God, here they come!' said Major Berthier, his eye up to a telescope. Jan staggered to his feet. 'We've made a terrible mistake!'

The whole line of the ridge opposite was filled with horsemen as the English Cavalry poured over it in waves. Over the roar of battle and the banshee howl of the bagpipes were the high urgent notes of their trumpets - the Charge, repeated over and over again.

The French infantry had been repulsed and were fleeing the wild Scottish troops who after their single smashing volley had leapt out of the defensive ditch and thrown themselves with their bayonets on the first ranks of the phalanxes.

With the advantage of the slope the English Cavalry were smashing down on the scanty French Cavalry and then galloping along the sides of the disintegrating columns of infantry, sabring them down. The orderly columns of men had dissolved into scattered fleeing groups pursued by the ferocious horse-riders, sabres upraised, slashing and stabbing down at them. It was a scene out of Hell. A cavalry charge against unprotected infantry.

Jan was watching the slaughter, numbed with horror. He was standing in the middle of the French Artillery, just below the ridge. Behind us was a contingent of Infantry, there for our protection.

'We'd better move back,' said the Major, snapping his telescope shut. Jan turned and with the others ran up the slight slope to the shelter of the Infantry.

Looking back from the safety of the slope he could see a single figure in French infantry uniform but without a shako, standing alone and carrying a musket. Immediately he recognized that tall, thick-set figure. It was Benoit!

Sensing his danger Benoit froze and looked over his shoulder, mouth open in horror. The smoke cleared and there was the mass of the English Cavalry which had wheeled and was now pounding towards us, the riders flat along their horse's necks, sabres out-stretched, the ground shaking under the hooves.

And he was right in their path!

He threw his musket to the ground and held up his hands. The first riders bypassed him but then I saw the glitter of a single upraised sabre and when the first wave had passed he was just another motionless figure lying in the mud.

Frenzied orders were being shouted down the line of guns. Men at the trails moved the guns to point inwards and what looked like short metal cylinders were being rammed down their muzzles. Canister - hundreds of musket balls in a thin metal case. On firing, the case burst and the musket balls sprayed out. It was absolutely lethal at short range.

Behind us orders were being shouted 'Prepare to receive Cavalry!' and the Infantry started to form squares.

The thunder of the horses hooves was getting closer and closer and then one gun after another fired. With a roar the rest of the guns joined in. As the smoke cleared Jan saw the whole of the slope in front of us was covered with the shattered front rank of the cavalry. Bodies, plumed helmets and mangled, gutted horses lay inextricably mixed. But the second rank was jumping over them! The guns were now firing continually, frantically, as fast as they could be reloaded, and yet the horsemen were advancing into the hail of grape-shot, jumping over the remains of their companions, to be shredded in their turn.

There were shouts at one end of the line where they had broken through and were amongst the hated guns, sabring the gunners, breaking the rammers even

hacking at the horses in an orgy of destruction. Others had dismounted and were coolly spiking the cannon by hammering nails into their vents.

The Colonels's Infantry had formed two squares, one at each end of the line of guns and as the cavalry approached they opened a rhythmical volley fire. At the last moment the artillerymen left their guns and ran back inside the squares.

Jan had been pulled into one of the squares. He saw how the cavalry tried to smash their way into the square but couldn't force their horses through the hedge of outward pointing bayonets formed by the first rank of infantrymen who were kneeling, the butts of their muskets on the ground. Behind them were two other ranks who were alternately loading and firing over their heads, one volley after another every 15 seconds.

Except for the far side of the square which was blasting with a continuous storm of musketry. The ground in front of this side was thickly covered with dead horses and their riders.

That was it - the gun! The breech-loader!

Frustrated, the cavalymen were circling the square, trying to find a way in, leaning forward and slashing down at the kneeling infantrymen. Behind Jan there was a flurry of pistol shots and two cavalymen were in the square! Before any more could force their way in, one was bayoneted in the thigh and pulled off his horse and the other was cut-down by Major Bertier and another mounted officer. A sergeant shouted and the ranks of the square were quickly closed.

But in front of Jan several cavalymen had drawn their pistols, waiting for the right moment to break the load and fire rhythm of the infantrymen guarding that side. This looked dangerous!

‘Get some cartridges and load!’ I said. He bent down and pulled a handful from the ammunition pouch of a dead infantryman. He loaded quickly and automatically, flipping the bolt back, deftly tearing the cartridge on the little projection, pouring some powder into the pan, pushing the cartridge into the breech and then flipping the bolt back to close the breech.

The first rank fired and kneeled to re-load. The second rank was not yet ready.

‘Here they come!’ I said as the cavalymen all raised their pistols together and fired. Three infantrymen fell in front of Jan and the cavalymen with shouts of triumph spurred their horses forward. Jan raised his musket, cocked it, and fired simultaneously with an officer standing by him. A big bay horse crashed down and the others had to sidestep. The officer was reloading his pistol and the second rank was still not yet ready. Jan rapidly reloaded and fired again. Another horse crashed down and while its rider was slashing about him and trying to climb to his feet, Jan reloaded and fired yet again. Another horse fell.

The other cavalymen backed nervously away as the row of muskets of the second rank came down to the horizontal. A sergeant shouted ‘Fire!’, a smashing volley and when the smoke had cleared four more horses were down and two riders were out of their saddles.

A dismounted rider shouted something and raised his pistol at Jan but Jan was ready and shot him first. Again the dreadful menace as the first rank stood up and their muskets came down to the aim. ‘Fire!’, another volley and when the smoke cleared three more riders were down. Jan fired once more and the attempted break-in was over.

The cavalymen slowly fell back - finally heeding a trumpet which had been sounding the Recall over and over again. They emptied their pistols at the squares, dragged their horses heads round and galloped off down the rise, heading back to the English lines.

As they disappeared some artillerymen dashed out of the protection of the squares, quickly reloaded and fired at their retreating backs. Several fell, one being dragged along by his stirrup.

Chapter 39

Jan was quite dazed as the last horseman disappeared and the square opened. The infantrymen were cheering and jubilantly slapping each other on the back. Medical orderlies carried away the dead and wounded.

'Open the gun,' I said.

Obediently he raised it, clicked open the breech and peered inside. And there it was at last - Pierre's Secret!

At the end of the bolt was mounted a small blued metal disk, of slightly greater diameter than the bolt and raised slightly off it by a thin washer.

'Do you see how it works?' I asked.

He stuck his finger into the breech and looking into the distance felt a slot milled into the breech wall, just where the bolt head would be when the breech was closed.

'I think so. It's an improvement on an idea we've already tried. You push the bolt forward and as this little disk is a bit wider than the breech it gets bent back into a flattish cone. You carry on pushing until the disk comes to this slot milled in the wall of the breech. Here it springs back to become a disk again. Then you turn this lever to engage the interrupted thread and close the breech.'

'But that's not going to seal the breech. The gas from the explosion would just by-pass it: go around it, between the disk and the slot.'

'That's the clever part and I've only just noticed it. The interrupted thread has some play in it and this projection pulls it back as you turn it to close the breech. That pulls the disk back against the back edge of the slot making it into a flattish cone again - but this time pointing towards the bolt-head. So when the powder fires the pressure pushes the rim of the cone into the gap between the bolt-head and the back of the slot and makes a gas-tight fit.'

He pulled the bolt out and looked at it again. I also looked very carefully. I was going to have to describe it later to a sceptical gun-maker, (one who wasn't going to be born for another 150 years, I remembered). Now I could see how it was done it seemed fairly obvious. But I suppose all bright ideas have that effect.

So that was it. Jan's interest evaporated and looking around he began to feel sick. Bodies were everywhere, their blood dripping onto the grass. Behind us was the sound of pistol shots as artillerymen killed screaming disembowelled horses. Silent dead and groaning wounded were being carried in from the battlefield in enormous numbers. Others were hobbling to the rear using their muskets as crutches, clutching the terrible wounds made by the 1" leaden musket balls. Jan's right sleeve was covered with the blood and brains from an infantryman who had been pistoled next to him during the cavalry attack.

The slaughter was particularly concentrated on the side of the square where the nine soldiers armed with the breech-loaders had been standing. There the bodies of the cavalymen and their horses were mingled in a fearful tangle of harness. Sightless eyes stared sky-wards, colourful uniforms were stained with blood, plumed helmets lay in the mud and everywhere were dead and dying horses, in one place forming a heap almost 2m high. Dark-red human and equine blood was mixing and slowly soaking into the torn up ground. Insanely the English cavalry had charged and re-charged the square until the wall of dead had been too high for their savagely spurred horses to leap.

Such is the effect of a secret weapon when it is first used.

The soldiers who had been using the new muskets were leaning on them and grinning at each other with smoke blackened faces. One of them opened a cartridge to show how the Colonel had made them repack them with a wad behind the bullet. Jan examined it: he knew this would have to be done to make sure the bullet fitted tightly into the barrel to get maximum power. He had had to use standard infantry cartridges: they had been effective enough at close range. But Jan had lost all interest in the musket.

We were both sick of the carnage. I had what I had come for; it was time to leave. I could say my piece of poetry and would be immediately back at Chrondisp, but I couldn't just leave Jan here.

I knew there was a truce at the moment; both armies being appalled at the losses they had suffered, but it wouldn't last. That evil man had to keep attacking and the foolish besotted French would keep dying for him.

I knew that Marshal Ney, who had just made military history by sending in Infantry to be massacred because of inadequate cavalry support, would next send in the Cavalry without Infantry support. Seeing the ridge opposite empty and thinking the enemy infantry had retreated behind the shield of his artillery, he would send his Cavalry to pursue them. They would charge across the valley, on the way being decimated by the English artillery. They would overrun the guns but at the last moment the gunners would leave their pieces and dash back over the ridge. The French Cavalry would triumphantly pursue them and run onto the Infantry squares which they didn't know were waiting for them on the reverse slopes. Not able to break the squares they would retire, incredibly without spiking the guns.

The gunners would run out of the squares and back to their undamaged guns. The next wave would attack and the whole terrible sequence would be repeated. Unbelievable.

And so it would go on all during that sunny Sunday afternoon until late evening when Napoleon would send in the Old Guard - the elite Infantry; 6000 veterans who had never been defeated.

But they too would be shattered by the machine-like musketry of the stubborn English Infantry and fall back. In a final charge they would be routed and the troops who had done it would be later renamed the Grenadier Guards and wear the bearskin busby of the Old Guard as a battle trophy.

But Jan was not to know of this.

'Well, that's it', I said. 'Time to get back.'

'I suppose so. But the battle isn't finished yet.'

Indeed it wasn't and it was precisely the last part that I wanted to save Jan from. The part where the vengeful Prussian Cavalry arrive on the battlefield just before nightfall, just in time to take part in savaging the fleeing French.

'There's nothing more you can do here. You've got the secret of the gun. We should start for Brest now.'

So he went across to say goodbye to the Colonel, only to find he had been killed in the last attack.

Sobered and shocked Jan went back to the farm, La Belle Alliance. He found some water to wash his arm; it was a nasty cut but he let it bleed a while before binding it up in the torn-off sleeve of his shirt.

He recovered his horse and I rode with him down the road to Charleroi. On the way we passed thousands of fresh French cavalry exultantly massing for the next attack. No one paid any attention to Jan.

Further down the road we trotted past a large field hospital where we could hear the screams of the wounded being operated on. I remembered that if a limb had more than a flesh wound or a simple fracture it was sawn off without anaesthetics and the stump sterilized with boiling oil and pitch.

I liked Jan and I liked his friends, but I was heartily sick of the early 19th Century. 'You musn't worry, Jan. Those cavalymen were mad, they were not human. If they hadn't been stopped they would have killed you. It's a human sickness.'

What were the casualty figures? 7 000 Prussian, 12 000 English and Belgians but the French lost an incredible 31 000 - 40% casualties! 50 000 dead in two square kilometers! Unbelievable. It was such a concentrated slaughter that it would be fifty years before Europe fought another war.

I too was shocked. I had seen plenty of death but nothing like this. There were many critics of the Nuclear Standoff but no one could deny that it had one great advantage - it had made major wars simply too dangerous.

'Jan, you must get back home to Brest as quickly as possible. Something terrible is going to happen and you've got to get away.'

'Yes.'

My Mission was completed. Jan was on a Branchline and with the invention of the breech-loader the important part of his life in the Big Scheme of Things had passed. He and his descendants would now continue peacefully down through Time, unnoticed and undisturbed.

"In Xanadu did Khubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree
Where Alph the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to Man
Down to a sunless sea"

Jan trotted down the road to Charleroi and out of my life.

Chapter 40

I slowly opened my eyes and found myself looking at a dimly-lit ceiling in a long quiet room. Like awakening from a dream I could still feel the vibration of the ground under the horses' hooves, see their foam-flecked heads and the maniacal look in the eyes of their riders as they loomed out of the thick gun-smoke, heavy sabres upraised. I could still hear the jingle of harness, the boom of cannon firing grape-shot at point-blank range, the shouts of the sergeants ordering the repetitive crash of musketry volleys, the scream of dying horses, the roar of the battlefield where 130 000 human beings were frantically trying to kill each other.

Fanatical hate. Inhumanity, the disease of humanity.

God, I felt depressed.

We should send some of our fire-eating politicians back to Waterloo, back to that field hospital. Those politicians who went on about a 'limited war'. Maybe it would affect them in the same way that exploding your own atomic bomb makes you suddenly more receptive to ideas on nuclear arms limitation.

Poor Jan. His lifestyle had certainly changed since he had attracted the attention of the Chrodisp Institute.

I had saved him from being shot by that British officer, but that may well not have happened if the Other Side had not known of our interest in him. I had made

him a hero with the burning of the British frigate, even though he was in two minds about it. Count a credit.

He would have gone to Paris anyway but might not have been able to escape being called up. I had pushed him to save himself there. A credit.

And then I had certainly saved him from Danielle and got him his money back. Another credit. But then because of me he had had a great fright in the haunted house scene. One debit. Sub-total two credits.

However I had made him take me to Waterloo and I guess that was the equivalent of at least two debits. I wished we could have found the secret of the breech-loader in some other way and spared ourselves from seeing the madness of Waterloo.

There was a green light splashing onto the ceiling - on, off, on, off. A signal to someone I was awake I supposed. God, I felt grim. I must sit up. Now what must I do? Drip-needle out first.

`How about pulling the needle out of your left arm?' I suggested.

Nothing.

Fool. I made that mistake last time. I carefully sent orders to my right hand to reach across to my left arm. Contact felt through my left forearm. Now move the right hand up. There's the needle. Right, slide it up and out.

Now both hands to the Helmet. Seems bigger than it should. Lift it off backwards.

`Let's sit up.'

Nothing.

I consciously contracted my stomach muscles and the view changed. A view down a long corridor of beds, white covered sleepers, the whispering of air-conditioning, the dim lighting. A minute ago I had been sitting on horseback trotting down a muddy road in Belgium in 1815 with the roar of battle behind me. Now a quiet hospital in the 21st Century.

Two men pushing a trolley were hastening towards me. I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and looked glumly at them.

`The time traveller returns!' said one.

`"To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive",' said the other, "'and the true success is to labour".'

Dan Smith and Joe Closter, the Chronosp comedy-team.

`All right? In form? Tip-top?' asked Joe.

`I'm OK.'

`How about a nice cup of tea?' asked Dan.

Why not. I held out my hand and received a steaming mug. I cupped my hands around it, sipping slowly and feeling the warm liquid flowing down. I held out the empty mug.

`We were worried about you for a while,' went on Joe chattily, pouring out more tea. He waved his hand at a mass of electronic equipment piled up at the side of the bed and connected to the Helmet I had worn.

`You may not have noticed it, but there was something odd about your EEG about two days ago. Had all the techs here running round like blue-arsed flies.'

`I noticed it,' I said, eying the equipment.

My spirits were rising.

`On the occasion of our last meeting you were able to supply me with...' I began.

`Toast and marmalade!' said Dan, and with a flourish Joe opened a side door in their trolley. A heavenly odour wafted out and my mouth began to water. He handed me a large plate filled with buttered toast.

I crunched down on the warm toast, slapped more marmalade on, licked my fingers and ate again.

I was about to hold forth on the nutritious qualities of toast and marmalade when I remembered I had said that last time. I contented myself with patting Dan on the shoulder with my free hand.

`He seems all right,' said Joe, looking at Dan who was examining the buttery finger-marks on his white jacket.

Dan pulled out his recorder and after muttering the date and time into it asked me the usual technical questions about electro-narcosis level, precision of Insertion etc. I replied that everything had gone just perfectly.

`Right. Now can you tell us anything about what you were doing around...'he looked at this notes, `around 34 hours ago?'

I thought back a moment and remembered. I told him about the haunted house scene and shuddered slightly as I remembered it.

`And your Host was about to commit suicide? What stopped him?'

I told him about the cat and how I suddenly realised that what we were feeling was how a hunted mouse must feel on a moonlit night and ... It all sounded rather weak, sitting on a bed in the 21st Century surrounded by electronics.

He listened intently and muttered some more into his recorder.

`You may be interested in what we saw.'

I was.

`Your EEG started to slowly build up to a high amplitude and finally set off an alarm. But before we could do anything it had dropped to normal. This slow build-up is typical of an epileptic fit. We know you are not prone to these fits because you were thoroughly tested when you joined Chrondisp.'

`And all this stuff saved me?' I pointed at the electronics.

`No. You saved yourself. But after that the tecs added this equipment to detect the onset of epileptic waves and to wake you up. Should they occur again.'

Shutting the stable door.

`One last question,' he said `the Mission?'

`Successful,' I said.

He opened his phone and spoke into it. Meanwhile I pulled my clothes from the bedside locker and changed out of the white coverall.

We then walked along the line of sleepers towards the door at the end leading to the debriefing rooms. I noticed the protective glass had not yet been replaced; it was still starred with grenade splinters from the attack on the Databank.

Dan and Joe disappeared after giving a thumbs-up sign to Dr Duluth who was waiting there for me. He had a large file open on the desk.

`I was attacked yet again on my last trip,' I began heatedly and then related what I had experienced.

`Very Gothic,' he commented. `Yes, we know about it but it won't happen again. That attack on you gave us our final clue. We, or rather your friend Jim, found the mole.'

`What! Fantastic! I bet it was a bloody policeman up top. Police and criminals are the same type - I've never trusted a ...'

He held up his hand.

`No, no. There were no policemen in it, except as involuntary agents obeying orders.'

`Well, who was it? I'd like to get my hands on the bastard. Four times at least I've been attacked and the last time I might have ended up mental. Who was it?'

`Your question is not so easy to answer. The mole was not a person, it was a thing.' He paused. `And even that's not right.'

`What do you mean - a thing?' It was a person who cut that dog lead and another who slid that poison gas plastic under my door. It was some wacky Arabs that attacked the Databank.'

`You're right, of course. But they were only agents. The brain, the control, the mole, was in Chrodisp,' he said. `Right in Chrodisp,' he added bitterly.

He paused.

`Your friend Jim is a computer scientist and will be able to explain this better than I, but I'll try.' He straightened up the file on his desk then looked up. `Mr Digby, what do you know about Expert Systems?'

Some sort of fancy program for a computer, that was all. I said so.

`An Expert System is a computer program, a very sophisticated program which enables a computer to behave like an Expert. You probably have one for your personal computer which makes it behave like a medical doctor. It asks you lots of questions which you answer and then it tells you what's wrong with you and what you should do about it. You probably also have another which makes it behave like a tax consultant. There are as many Expert System programs as there are professions - lawyer, chess-player, architect, electronic engineer, music composer ... you name it.'

`Saboteur,' I named.

`Exactly. It is possible to make a program which contains the experience and knowledge of many clever saboteurs. Like a human saboteur it operates in such a way as to minimize the efficiency of the organization it is sabotaging. Naturally it would be given as much information as possible before it was set to work, what are the best ways to sabotage etc. But then it would begin to learn for itself which are the most sensitive points and the best ways of attacking those points, all the time minimizing the risk of being discovered. A conventional goal-seeking program in an unconventional application.'

It sounded logical. We had used computers as adversaries in war games. But I saw a snag.

`OK, but you need a computer to program.' I remembered the computers we had used. `A big computer. How can that be hidden?'

`Yes, and that was what fooled us for a long time. Briefly the computer used was our own computer, or at least one of our computers. The Administration Computer to be exact.'

`Jesus! But how was it hidden? I mean you've got wall to wall computer freaks in the computer centre; didn't they notice anything?'

`In the end, yes. When it was pointed out to them. But if the computer is doing one illegal task amongst all the millions of tasks it is supposed to be doing, it's very difficult to detect. Like a conventional saboteur who 99.99% of his time is a loyal employee but one day delays an important message, for instance. All the other tasks were being performed very slightly slower than they should, but so slightly that no one noticed. But once they knew what they were looking for they found it all right.'

`But how did the saboteur program get in? Didn't you program the Admin Computer yourself?'

He made a gesture of resignation. `Actually, no. We had an outside agency do it. There seemed nothing especially secret about administration - pay-roll, what to buy for the canteen, guard routines, leave rosters ... that sort of thing.'

The Administration Computer. It was joined up to all the other computers and could get any information it wanted. It even had access to a satellite link.

`But what about that last attack on me - the haunted house sequence?'

`Well, it's not easy to see how it was done, but it's easy enough to see what was done. Your EEG signals were being filtered, amplified and fed back into your brain, mixed in with the electro-narcosis current. It was arranged to give positive feed-back and almost produced an epileptic fit. It's rather like those tests you underwent when you first came here - you remember those flashing lights? Well, those lights were controlled by your EEG. Your "brain waves" made the light flicker, which produced stronger brain waves which made the light flicker more etc. We never let it get out of hand of course but it's a standard way to test susceptibility to epilepsy.'

`And the Expert System hidden in the Admin Computer learnt to do that all on its own?' I asked incredulously.

`No. That would be a little sub-routine programmed into it, to be used if and when. But the use of such a subtle technique gives us a very good idea of the identity of the organization that wrote the program,' replied Dr Duluth.

`As if we didn't know,' I said.

`It is a sub-routine that would only be called up when it could work, of course,' he continued. `There would have to be very few disturbing signals. Just before falling asleep would be an ideal time. The effect would be a sort of nightmare and if strong enough could lead to brain damage, not only because of the large brain currents produced but also because of the apparently traumatic effect of a Host's death on someone who was Empathizing with him at the time. It's a disgusting weapon.' Disgusting that we hadn't thought of it first, he meant.

He was looking down at the open file.

`As far as we can see, the first attack on you, by the MP, was engineered by the mole. It delayed the information of your arrival at Chondisp, knew from your character assessment that you would become impatient waiting and altered the guard roster to put a young aggressive MP on duty,' said Dr Duluth.

I grunted.

`The attack by the dog was done as soon as you had been identified as an Empathizer,' he continued. `The mole then found out about your Mission and informed Asiablock. They would have been very alarmed to find that we were using an Empathizer on an obviously military project. They Inserted an Empathizer themselves into that British naval officer, presumably suggesting to him that he should obtain the secret musket for Britain, and kill you. It didn't work so they got the mole to sabotage your Mission by bringing you back before you could complete it. At the next opportunity, back at Chondisp, the mole was instructed to mount another attack on you.'

`You mean that gas attack.'

`Yes.'

`And where does that big attack to destroy the data bank come into all this?'

`The big attack on Chondisp which you so helpfully foiled must have been something they had been planning for a long time as it was so detailed. It was probably organized by another department at Asiablock. But after that attack the link between the mole and Asiablock was broken.'

`But someone was waiting for me when I got back into Jan,' I said.

`You mean the Empathizer they had in Benoit? That must have been the result of information passed before the attack on the Databank caused us to cut the satellite link,' said Dr Duluth.

`How did they manage to motivate Benoit?' I asked `He was absolutely wild to get the musket and kill Jan. In that order.'

`Benoit was a highly intelligent crook. Intelligent enough to see that possession of the breech-loader musket, 50 years ahead of its time, would be worth in hard cash and power far more than anything he could ever hope for from his gambling club.'

`And where does Danielle fit in?' I asked.

`We will probably never know the exact relationship between Benoit and Danielle. Perhaps they had been lovers once. Certain only is that the Asiablock Empathizer told Benoit that Jan was the possessor of a fabulous secret and that Benoit then put Danielle on to him to hook him into the club. In love with Danielle and in debt to Benoit for gambling losses he would be more likely to divulge the secret.'

This had all happened between my two Insertions.

`It was around then that I was Inserted into Jan for the second time.'

He riffled through his file.

`Yes. You disillusioned him over Danielle and got him his money back, making him independent again. But Benoit's objectives were still the same although it was more difficult now.'

`Unfortunately Jan didn't have the secret of the musket.'

`That fact has complicated the life of all of us, on both sides of the Bamboo Curtain. But Jan knew there was a working breech-loader and would be able to discover its secret. Benoit had only to follow him.'

`Which he did, to the bitter end,' I said. I saw again those pounding horses and that momentarily uplifted sabre and shuddered.

`Benoit's Timeline was terminated because the Asiablock Empathizer had not done his homework and read up on the history of the Battle of Waterloo. There's no excuse for incompetence,' said Dr Duluth coldly.

`Tell me about the haunted house,' I said. `If Jan had killed himself, no one would have discovered the secret, never mind Benoit. It wasn't a very logical attack.'

`That was because the mole was no longer in contact with Asiablock. You had been identified as a high priority target just before its communication with Asiablock was broken. The mole was just carrying out its last order.' He snapped the file shut and looked at his watch.

There was a pause while I tried to think of any more questions. Something seemed to be missing. Of course, the reason for the whole Mission!

`And what about the obturator?' I asked.

`The obturator?' he said, blankly.

`The secret of the musket. The secret that is going to revolutionize weapon making in the 21st Century. The reason for Inserting me.'

`Ah, yes, of course. The musket. Of course.'

He picked up his phone and spoke a while into it.

`There is a man coming tomorrow from Vickers. He is one of their gun designers.' He looked at his watch again. `I suggest we break this up and meet again when he arrives. I'll give you a call.'

*

I returned to the debriefing room the next day to find Dr Duluth in the company of an elderly grey-haired man. He was introduced as Mr Janson, a weapons designer.

I described the musket breech-loader and drew some sketches. Mr Janson took notes impassively. He asked a few extra questions, such as if the standard military cartridge was used, what was the condition of the disk, what was the rate of fire. I answered as best I could.

`I've never heard of it. And it's very surprising it was never used if it was so effective,' he said.

I said I didn't know what had happened to the ten models that I had actually seen in use but they looked very much like the standard French infantry musket model 1777 from the outside. The only people who knew how it worked were the inventor Pierre who was dead, the Colonel, killed at Waterloo and Jan himself who was so sickened by seeing it in use that he stuck to manufacturing sport guns for the rest of his life.

`Hm.' He closed his book and stood up.

`Any use to you?' asked Dr Duluth.

`Perhaps - one way or another,' he said.

He turned to leave. I coughed.

`One other thing,' I said. `When I was signing my contract with Chrodisp, there was some talk of a bonus for extra information brought back. Useful information not directly requested but because of the skill and astuteness of the Observer...'

`Yes?' said Dr Duluth. `And what did the skill and astuteness of this Observer discover?'

I related Jan's maxim of only using the powder charge necessary to do the job.

`Now it seems to me,' I continued, `that if you can do away with the cartridge case because you have found another way to make a gas-tight breech, you should be able to feed the powder and the bullet in separately. And if you can feed the powder in separately you can feed in just the right amount of powder for the job.'

Mr Janson looked at me blankly.

`Why would we want to do that? A gun is designed for a certain muzzle velocity; if you use more propellant you will burst the breech. And a lower muzzle velocity means lower energy in the round.'

`In Pakistan we often used silenced guns in the first phase of an attack. Now I'm sure you know that it's not enough to put a silencer on the muzzle; that just silences the muzzle blast. You also have to slow down the bullet so it is sub-sonic or it will crack like a whip and make as much noise as the muzzle blast itself. You either have to use special low powered cartridges or a standard gun with lots of little holes bored in the barrel to reduce gas pressure and slow the bullet down that way. All our silenced guns were like that because low power cartridges wouldn't operate the auto-load and eject mechanism. They were great in the first stage of an attack, when we wanted silence and could creep up close, but much too underpowered for the second stage when we wanted normal high power. It meant we had to carry two guns.'

`So if you could vary the charge you would only have to carry one weapon,' finished Dr Duluth for me.

Mr Janson was walking around the room.

`There may be other reasons why you would want lower power,' I continued. `I've often thought the Mk 5 was overpowered - it's too lethal. You might not want to kill someone; just bring him down. But if you hit him in the leg with a Mk 5 three point five gram bullet at Mach 3 you blast his leg off and he bleeds to death before you can get to him. It's almost impossible to wound anyone anymore.'

I thought some more.

`And what about low velocity plastic rounds for riot control? Save carrying another gun around too. Anyway - there's the idea.'

Mr Janson had left with a preoccupied air. I had a feeling something would come of it.

My last interview with Dr Duluth was in a part of Chondisp I had not seen before. His new office was in what Jim called 'Mahogany Row'.

A beautiful young Arab girl smilingly showed me in.

It was above ground and with an impressive view of the desert. But compared to the Director's office next door, which I had just visited, Dr Duluth's office was almost austere furnished. The sailing picture was still on the wall but now in one corner. On his desk was a new Earth globe, one of those with a keyboard in the base. Dr Duluth himself was dressed as usual in a dark suit but there was an undefinable air of quality about it.

'I hear you're off,' he said. 'I just thought I'd let you know that that man from Vickers thinks there may be something in what you brought back. Apparently it confirms a few ideas they've had themselves.'

'And the mole?'

'It's been programmed into another computer and we're investigating it.' I had an image of a black furry object being pulled struggling out of our computer and dropped into another smaller computer. 'I understand it's quite a subtle program,' he added.

'So all's well that ends well,' I said, looking round his new office and remembering the 'Director of Security' title on the door. I was beginning to have an unworthy suspicion.

'Worked out very well for you too, didn't it?' I said.

He smiled thinly, twisting the flexible gold strap of his watch.

I thought back. In my last meeting with him he seemed to have almost forgotten about the original purpose of my Mission.

'Did you really think a practical breech-loader could have been invented by a Frenchman fifty years before one actually appeared? Or was it just a way of getting money from the military to mount a project which would attract the mole?'

He moved a jade-handled knife and lined it up with the edge of the dark-wood desk.

'Timeline theory attaches a finite probability to all possibilities ...' he began pontifically.

'So you didn't,' I interrupted. 'And what were you doing playing games with moles, anyway? If I remember, your title at the time was 'Project Coordinator'. Chasing after moles was Security's job, not yours.'

'And much good they were doing,' he said heatedly. 'Someone had to take a hand or the whole of the Chondisp Institute would have gone down the tubes.'

'"Gone down the tubes",' I thought wonderingly. Had the ice-cold Dr Duluth revealed a flaw in his character, something so weak as emotion?

'So you sent me off on what you privately thought was a wild-goose chase, whose only object was to stir up the mole and make it reveal itself. To your great personal glory and my great personal danger.'

'You found the gun and we found the mole,' he said dismissively. 'And as regards the danger, I warrant you have been paid more for risks taken than you were ever paid in the Army.'

I sat back. He was right there. I touched my pocket where I had just received notice of a transfer to my bank in Munich of a size that would make my bank managers's eyes bulge. Why was I complaining? Because I had been manipulated, that's why. Dr Bloody Duluth had used the whole project to lever himself into a better job.

'One last thing,' I said. 'Whatever your reason for starting a search for the breech-loading musket, it sure excited Asiablock. They must be convinced Westblock

are starting a big project on developing weapons with caseless munition. They will be starting one now, so we'd better be really starting on one of our own, too.'

`That could well be true.'

*

As I had promised myself, I adopted a cat. There were several running around the food storage area at Chrandisp, no doubt giving nightmares to the local mouse population. The chef was quite willing to let me have one. It was, I suppose, an Arab cat but it looked very similar to the European model. Black fur, green eyes and very playful. I picked it up - so light, so small, so warm - and looked into the black pupils of its unblinking killer's eyes. Cats are true carnivores - one of the few in the animal kingdom. For a cat to live; other animals have to die.

I met Jim, Yvette and Corporal (now Sergeant) Wolfgang Freymann by the side of the pool. Yvette and Wolfgang were holding hands and discovering similarities in each other's language, bravely hiding the distaste they felt. The Flemish thought German to be harsh guttural robot-like; the Germans thought Flemish to be not so much a language as a speech-defect, like a cleft-palette.

My cat was not particularly comfortable, disliking the water on the pool-side and cutely jumping from one dry patch to another, fastidiously shaking its paws dry.

Yvette even forgot Wolfgang for long enough to pick it up and tell me it was female (I hadn't known). She babbled to it in Flemish baby-talk and we all looked on embarrassed. She was surprised I had got a cat as a pet - I had the feeling a scorpion or a snake would have passed unremarked - and told me I must be sure to look after her.

`You must give her a name,' said Yvette. `Cats are noble animals, you can't call her "Kitty" all the time.'

She gave me some names in Flemish meaning `Velvet', `Silky' etc.

I scratched her behind the ear (the cat) and thought. A long time ago, working as a student in an electronics company, we had had a large friendly but dim secretary called Babs (short for Barbara). She had been working all week on a word-processor typing up an urgently needed proposal. As is usual, she wanted to make a back-up copy of the disk containing the proposal. So she put the proposal disk into slot 1 and an empty disk into slot 2, and prepared to copy disk 1 onto disk 2. Unfortunately she did things the wrong way round and copied empty disk 2 onto disk 1. Catastrophe!

There was no time to rewrite the proposal and we lost the job. The engineer in charge of the project said bitterly that Babs stood for `Big Autonomous Biological Servomechanism'.

`You're taking long enough,' said Jim.

`Sabs,' I said finally.

Silence. They all looked at me blankly.

`"Sabs"?' said Yvette. `That's a stupid name for a cat. Even in English.'

`"S" is for "Small",' I explained.

Epilogue

About a year later, I was pottering around in our shop in Maxburg Strasse when a visiting card was placed on the bench in front of me. The holo lettering leapt up: `Frank E. Jones, Chrandisp Institute'.

I looked up surprised.

`I was just passing through Munich and I thought you would be interested in seeing the results of your work with us.'

We walked into my office. I picked Sabs off the visitor's chair where she was dozing in the sun and decanted her onto the floor. She stalked out of the room, tail lashing, ears back in annoyance.

After the conventional remarks (Jim now on the computer staff at Chrondisp, Yvette married Wolfgang and they live in America etc..) he opened his case, pulled out some carefully shaped pieces of black matt plastic and started fitting them together.

It was a gun, of course, or at least a model of one. Assembled it looked rather like the standard SEATO bullpup Mk 5 personal weapon for the Infantry, but there were several differences - the main ones being that there was no ejection aperture for spent cartridge cases and no magazine slot.

`And this uses Pierre's thingummy?' I asked surprised.

`No, not really. The idea of caseless munition has been around for a long time but there have always been problems - not the least being the overheating of the breech. When the metal cartridge in a conventional gun is ejected it takes a lot of heat out with it. But the fact that the French in 1815 had a working breech-loader musket that could be loaded with loose powder gave someone an extra argument to start a program for the development of this - a gun using caseless cartridges. Pierre's idea just tipped the balance.'

`And the fact that Asiablock were after the same idea must have helped too,' I said.

`Yes.' He picked up the model.

`This tube below the barrel is the magazine. Bullets only. Fifty standard 3.5gm, 5.56mm bullets.'

`And the powder - I mean the propellant?'

`Ah, that's the clever bit.' He looked in his brief case again and pulled out another piece of plastic, a rod about 1cm in diameter and 20cm long.

`This is enough for fifty full-power shots. You push it into the butt here.'

`"Full-power shots" you said. Does that mean..?'

`Yes. This little lever here has three positions to control the power in three steps. On the lowest power you can use a silencer which will reduce the noise to that of an airgun - but of course a 3.5gm bullet at sub-sonic velocity won't be much more effective than a small pistol. In the middle position you just silence the muzzle blast - that means they will hear the bullet but won't be able to locate the shooter. In the top position you will blow out the silencer after the first shot, so you'd better remove it.'

`And on low power it still works on automatic?'

`Yes. As far as we know, no one else has variable power.'

He then pointed to the lever for single shot, triple shot or full automatic, the `magazine empty' and the `propellant empty' indicators, as well as the snap-on silencer.

He then rattled off some more characteristics.

`Standard muzzle velocity 1650m/sec.; 310m/sec for use with the silencer. Triple shot burst in 50 milli-seconds, 800rps on full-automatic. Electrical ignition and inductive shock absorber. I don't need to tell you all this is secret.'

I held the model. It felt handy enough.

He stood up. took the model, pulled it apart and stowed it back into his brief case. Turning to leave he was apparently struck by an after-thought:

`I don't know how business is here with you ...'

`It's not bad,' I said cautiously.

`Well, if it ever gets too quiet remember we can always find something for you to do at Chrondisp. In fact, it just so happens that at the moment we have an interesting little job that would be right up your street...'

END
