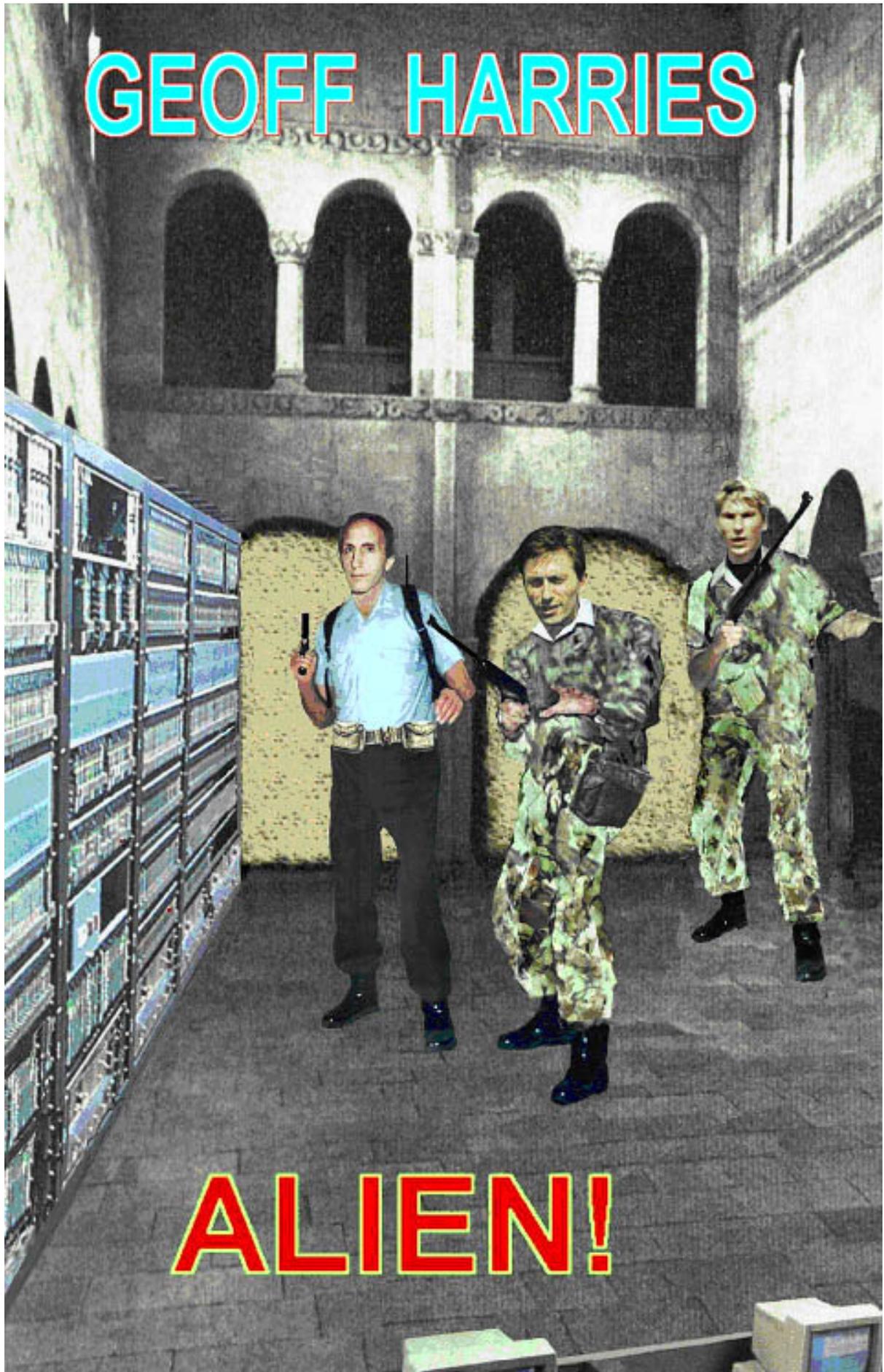


GEOFF HARRIES



ALIEN!

(Chrodisp 4)

Chapter 1

I sat shivering in the Inserter cage, in what seemed the first quiet moment since I had arrived at the Chrodisp Institute a week ago. I stretched my neck and looked around. There had been a few changes. The cage surrounding my heavily insulated seat was now spherical instead of oval and instead of being hoisted up between two slowly rotating discharge spheres I was inside a one meter high vertical cylinder which was divided up into many thin segments.

The biggest difference was the heavy suit I was wearing - heavy because of the thin lead plates that lined it. This was going to be the most distant Insertion ever, to more than 2 500 years in the past and a lot of X-ray radiation from the flash was expected.

But the echoing Inserter hall seemed unchanged, there was the same familiar faint smell of ozone and still no one had thought of installing a heater in the cage.

Glancing down I could see moving figures in the brightly lit window of the control room and once Jim had come to the glass and peered upwards, his hands shading his eyes from the back-glare. I shifted impatiently and fiddled with the headset volume control but there was just a faint hissing. The count-down panel on the wall in front of me remained impassively blank.

Jim was now the head of Mission Control Computing and I had been told that Dr Duluth, now head of Target Selection, would himself be watching my Insertion.

There was a click and the headset suddenly came alive.

'We're having some trouble untangling your Time Line.' I recognised Jim's voice. 'But it shouldn't be long now.'

I grunted acknowledgement.

*

I thought back over the hectic last week. I am what you would call a "Freelance Traveller", I suppose, and my call from Chrodisp had arrived while I was air-surfing over the Bavarian Alps. Which perhaps explains why I prefer to remain freelance. I would certainly earn more as a Chrodisp staffer, but living permanently in the Chrodisp complex in the middle of the Sahara desert? No, no.

The triple "urgent" beeps from my phone had actually arrived while I was looking for lift over the steep southern face of the Zugspitze so I had glided to a nearby crag (only exhibitionists use the phone when airsurfing), hissing in to a landing on the snow, unzipped my gloves and pushed up my sun-goggles.

I had immediately recognised Jim's Californian accent.

Without any preliminary chat he had gone straight to the point.

'Dig? We gotta problem. How quick can you get your ass over here?'

Bloody hell. I had just started my holiday and far above me I could see Helga circling, the early-morning sun glinting off her surf-board as she banked.

'You there, fella?'

'Yes, yes.' I had answered irritably, 'I've just started a holiday and ...'

'With Helga I bet, - the one with the fantastic-?'

'Yes,' I had interrupted him.

Jim had spent a short holiday with me last month and had been very impressed with the fräuleins. "Sweet and sexy" had been his verdict.

His voice softened.

'Well, tough. But this is a big one. Direct from Dr D.'

'Can't you tell me something about it?' I had asked.

There was a pause, broken only by the soft hissing of static.

`It's connected with your Mission in Victorian England. OK?'

Jesus.

`Really?' I had said stupidly.

`Yes, reely,' he had said, mimicking an English accent, and the phone had gone dead.

I had looked around the isolated snow-covered rocky outcrop on which I had just landed. The low early-morning sun in a cloudless deep-blue sky made black shadows in the disturbed snow of my landing track. Three thousand meters down below the ground was a misty blur. A nearby glint made me look up to see Helga coming in for a landing, no doubt wondering what was wrong. Fortunately I had not snapped the phone shut so the red "urgent" lamp was still visible. I had held it up to her and sadly related my already prepared story of having to return to London on "Official Business".

All in all, Helga had taken it very well. It had not been the first time I had had to disappear mysteriously for a while - she believed I was a "Secret Agent". She thought it romantic and would even cover up for me.

After the initial disappointment had worn off she had said:

`Last time it was your mother's funeral.'

`My uncle Fred,' I said sadly.

`Uncle Fred, then,' she said practically. `His heart was always weak.'

There was a reflective pause.

`But now as I suppose you have to leave immediately, I must tell you that the bright sun has a strong, how you say?, "effect", on me.'

She had looked around the isolated sunny crag and began to peel off her jumpsuit in a business-like manner. And as she had nothing on underneath it, I too had suddenly begun to feel, how you say?, an "effect".

And so I had finally taken my departure after a rather shaky glide back to ground. In excuse, I should point out to anyone who has not tried it, that when "the big bird flies out of the window" at three thousand meters, it can leave you feeling surprisingly breathless.

*

I made a short stopover at my apartment in the Schwabing district of Munich in order to repack my bag. Clothes chosen for a holiday in the Alps would not be of much use at the Chrondisp Institute in the middle of the Sahara desert. As I folded in the last shirt, the phone rang. I picked it up, wondering how anyone knew I was back. A woman's voice:

`Captain Digby? Here is Polizeinspektion Ett Str. I have Inspector Braut for you.'

There was a click and before I could say anything the voice changed.

`Captain Digby, I have recently come into possession of an unusual English firearm and I would be pleased if you could evaluate it for me.' A deep voice with an undefinable accent, certainly not Bavarian.

I looked at my watch. My flight to Tangiers wouldn't leave for another six hours. I didn't recognise the voice but it paid to keep in with the local police - our "Waffen" shop had a small contract for supplying them with practice ammunition and we also let them use out underground range from time to time.

`Yes, of course. But you have caught me at my apartment. I suggest we meet at our shop. In an hour perhaps?'

`Yes, very well. In one hour at your shop.'

Odd. Why ring here? But I supposed he had called the shop first and finding I was out had hung up immediately and tried my home number. He would think that being a part-owner I wouldn't always keep office hours.

Chapter 2

I entered our shop, the door alarm buzzing as I passed the gleaming suit of armour by the door and smelt the familiar odour of warm gun-oil. Dieter, standing by the rack of old muskets turned round, surprise on his square Bavarian face.

'Hr Digby, I did not expect to see you until the tenth! I hope everything is alright?' he asked, his voice filled with concern.

'Yes, I'm fine Hr Furst, there has been a slight change of plan. I just dropped in to tell you I may be away a little longer than the tenth, but if that is the case then I will certainly inform you in plenty of time. It's just ...' I looked embarrassed.

'Ah!' his face cleared. 'Something to do with the blond Fräulein Schmidt,' he said with a smile which started off sly and ended wistful. Dieter is much married, with two children. "Side jumps", as the Bavarians call extra-marital adventures, were strictly "verboten" to him, even during Carnival time.

He's a nice guy, Dieter, but formal.

I was about to tell him about Inspector Braut, when he added: 'It's lucky you called in. A policeman, Inspector Braut, phoned this morning. He said he had something interesting for you and would like to see you. To see you here. I told him you were on holiday. He sounded annoyed that you weren't here.'

'It's not luck,' I said. 'He caught me at my apartment.' I looked at the wall clock. 'He said he would be here in ten minutes. Something about an English gun he wanted evaluating.'

At that moment the door alarm buzzed and Heidi, Dieter's nine-year old daughter entered, her school bag on her shoulders. She kissed her father absently and after a surprised look pressed herself against me momentarily. 'I thought you had gone off with Fräulein Schmidt. I knew it wouldn't work. She's not really your type, you know.'

'Heidi!' said her father, shocked. 'That's no way to speak to Hr Digby. Go and help your mother to prepare dinner. I don't know where you pick up this way of speaking ...'

He was about to elaborate on this theme when the phone rang in the office and so with an exasperated look at his daughter he left us.

Heidi made an indescribable noise and dropping her school bag on the floor, climbed up onto a chair. She looked at me again with her disturbing blue eyes, her legs in their white stockings dangling over the edge.

'Fräulein Petersen is much nicer,' she simpered.

Fräulein Petersen, who works in the flower-shop opposite had given Heidi a pair of her cast-off gloves once. Fräulein Petersen also very much wants to get married.

'Until you grow up,' I grinned.

'Until I grow up,' she agreed seriously.

I didn't know what to say to this but was fortunately saved when the door buzzed again and a tall bulky figure in the green uniform of the Munich police entered. He had a packet under his arm and looked at me sharply. We shook hands and nodded briefly in the German manner.

'Digby - Braut.'

He took his peaked hat and belt off and hung them on the coat-rack by the door. He had a broad, rather Slav face with expressionless ice blue eyes. First impressions can be misleading, and I don't like policemen on principle but ...

'I understand you have a gun you wish to have valued?' I said.

'Yes, that is so.'

He seemed to have some trouble with his package, but finally rather savagely tore it open with his strong hands. I reached in and pulled out a not-very-often seen pistol. I recognised it immediately as the "Webley-Fosbery Self-Cocking Revolver". My grandfather had bought one when he served in the trenches in WWI and I remembered sitting on his knees and holding its weight in my two hands. As far as I knew it was the only automatic revolver ever made. The recoil of the first shot drives the barrel and cylinder back along the frame, cocking the hammer and turning the cylinder by engaging grooves upon it with a fixed stud on the frame.

It was in excellent condition I thought, opening the action and holding the barrel up to the light. Heidi slipped down from her chair and peered up at it.

'It's English,' I said to her.

I pushed the barrel back, imitating the recoil and watching how the cylinder turned and the hammer raised and locked back.

Heidi carefully watched the cylinder turn and running her little finger in the milled groove made a contemptuous noise with her lips.

'Any dirt here and it will jam.' As is to be expected, Heidi is very knowledgeable on firearms and that was exactly my grandfather's complaint.

'I would like to fire it,' said Hr Braut. Why not? - it would help my evaluation and be interesting too.

'Very well,' I said going over to the desk computer. A few taps on the keys and I identified the gun as taking the old .455 British Army revolver cartridge. More taps and I saw we had some rounds in stock.

'Are you going downstairs?' said Heidi jumping up and down excitedly. 'Can I come and shoot too?'

Heidi has a small .22 Derringer which her father allows her to use under strict supervision. She couldn't practice very often as it's a big deal opening the range, setting up targets and switching on the fans. She is a surprisingly good shot.

I nodded and she disappeared up the stairs with a flurry of white stockings.

I got the range key from a drawer in the desk and Hr Braut and I descended the stairs to the subterranean room which was our range.

'It used to be a Kegelbahn (skittle-alley),' I explained as I opened the door and switched on the lights. It was cold and there was the usual faint smell of cordite hanging in the air. I affixed a target blank to the holder and pressed the motor control which wound it out to 5 meters. Far enough for a first try.

I opened the safe we have in the range and after rummaging around finally found the small oily cardboard box of .455 cartridges. Reloads, of course. New cartridges for this calibre had not been made for 50 years.

Hr Braut had brought the paper packet down with him and unfolded it further to reveal a skeleton shoulder-stock. Now that was interesting! I looked at the pistol again and suddenly understood the purpose of the two knurled knobs on the handgrip.

Hr Braut handed it to me. His thick spatulate fingers had beautifully manicured nails. The stock, with an arrow and a number stamped on the butt, looked genuine Government Issue. There was nothing in the catalogue about this - it would immediately make the pistol a collector's item. I fitted the stock to the handgrip, tightened the knurled knobs and raising it to my shoulder took aim. It was

quite steady, but the stock wasn't very long which placed the pistol, (which would be notoriously noisy, like all revolvers), rather close to my head. I had better wear protective glasses as well as ear-defenders.

Hr Braut watched all this expressionlessly. Rather a cold fish.

I broke the pistol, pushed six of the short brass cartridges into the cylinder and with a firm click snapped it shut. Holding it carefully with the barrel pointed down the range, I offered it to him and we both donned ear-defenders. He came smoothly up to the aim and fired all six shots in one motion, the shots blurring into each other. Very good! I wound back the target. All the holes were in the black. I nodded my appreciation and he smiled back mirthlessly.

A new target and I reloaded. I fired off six aimed shots. It kicked rather higher than I expected - the first shot just notching the cardboard at the top. I corrected down and put two of the remaining shots in the black.

He reloaded rapidly and fired again, if anything quicker than the first time. He really was a natural shot and I complimented him on it again, but he just shrugged. He reloaded for me and I fired again - rather faster this time and all were in the black. God, it was noisy though, even through the ear-defenders, and I could feel the hot gas escaping from the gap between cylinder and barrel on my cheek. I broke the pistol, tipped out the empty cartridges into the box I had saved for reloads, and held it out open to him for him to load.

He pushed in new cartridges and then hesitated. I lifted off an earpiece queryingly.

'There are only six cartridges left,' he said. 'Shall we say three each?'

'Fine,' I said, snapping the action closed. It was an unusual weapon, and I was wondering if Hr Braut wanted to sell it. We could offer him a good price.

I was just about to hand the gun to him to fire when the light came on above the locked entrance. Holding the pistol, I opened the door. Framed in the doorway was the diminutive figure of Heidi, holding her tiny pistol and wearing small ear-defenders over her long blond hair. She had put Mickey Mouse ears on them.

I looked down at them. There is something wrong with Mickey Mouse ears on ear-defenders, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

'We're nearly through. I'll open the door when you can come it,' I said to her. I thought it would be interesting for Hr Braut to see how well a nine-year old could shoot. But she smiled at me blankly and pushed forward. Deaf. I reached out and lifted off an earpiece.

'Not yet,' I said loudly. 'I'll open the door when we're finished.'

She looked at the gun in my hand and made the same contemptuous sound she had made before.

'Hasn't it blown up yet?'

'There's nothing wrong with it.' I lowered my voice. 'We may even buy it. Look, still working.' I pushed the barrel back and the action snicked smoothly, advancing the cylinder one notch.

I closed the door on her disbelieving eyes and handed the pistol back to Hr Braut. This time he put it to his shoulder and fired one shot. Pause. Another shot. As far as I could see they had gone through the same hole. He aimed again and ...

*

I was lying at the back of the shooting-stand, looking at the ceiling and dazzled with a yellow flash. My legs were dead. My head was ringing and my shirt was covered with blood. I realised there was a heavy weight on my legs. I leaned forward to push it off but recoiled immediately as I touched something warm and wet.

Arm pulling on the edge of the safe, I tugged myself free and staggered upright, swaying dizzily, my head hanging. The blood on my shirt was coming from my nose which was still dripping. I compulsively wiped my wet hand on my trousers.

The light was blinking over the door and someone was banging on it too. Thank God I could still hear it, I thought stupidly. At least my ears were working. I flexed my knees and arms.

A green-clad figure was lying sprawled out on the floor. One arm ended in a shattered hand still clutching the handgrip of the pistol which had opened up like a flower. His head ...

I lurched over to the door and with difficulty fumbled it open. Outside was Dieter, his face shaded in the dim light.

'There's been an accident. I'm OK. Call emergency,' I croaked. 'Don't let Heidi in,' I warned. I slipped down and rested my head against the door jam.

*

In a surprisingly short time I heard the hee-haw of an ambulance outside, and the squeal of brakes. Feet clattered down the stairs and two men in white coats and trousers appeared, the rear one carrying a folded stretcher.

I barred their entrance.

'There is a dead man in there. The police will want to see it before you touch it.'

They looked over my shoulder.

'Grosser Gott,' said one, and the other started talking into his phone.

A few seconds later there were other heavier footsteps on the stairs and two green-uniformed police descended, pushing the ambulance-men aside. A glance inside and I was pulled out and the door closed. The killing of a policeman is understandably the worst crime in the police calendar.

I sat on the bottom step of the stairs and refused to go up into the shop - I didn't want my appearance to frighten anyone, but I had another more important reason. The detonation of the pistol against Hr Braut's head may have been because one of the rounds I had given him was faulty - overloaded, for instance. But I couldn't believe that. First because we bought the reloads from a completely reliable firm in North Germany. Second, the cartridge would need to be about 5-times overloaded to produce an explosion like that.

There wasn't room in the cartridge case for that amount of propellant.

There were lighter, quicker steps on the stairs and a small man in civilian clothes appeared. Judging by the deference shown by the uniformed policemen, he must have a higher rank.

There were some rapid explanations and then the Inspector, for that is what they called him, spoke to me.

'I want to take a statement from you at the station.' He motioned to one of the policemen to help me up.

'Just a minute,' I said. 'I can tell you what happened sitting here. And when I've finished you will agree that I should stay here.'

He had a small foxy face with snapping black eyes. I had never seen him before. Our business was exclusively with the uniformed branch. He stared at me for a while, then said:

'Very well. A police officer has died. Tell me quickly what happened.'

'His name is Inspector Braut,' I began, but he immediately held up his hand. The two uniformed policemen exchanged startled glances.

'If you are going to start by lying, we will continue at the station.'

I looked back at him bewildered.

'That's what he said his name was,' I repeated. 'Inspector Braut from Ett Str. You can check with Hr Furst upstairs. He talked to him first.'

He motioned to one of the policemen who clumped upstairs. A few minutes later he returned and nodded to the Inspector.

The Inspector looked angry and puzzled.

'I am the only Inspector Braut at the Ett Str.'

We stared at each other.

'Well, go on,' he said finally.

So I explained the sequence of events, how we had alternately fired and then there were only 6 shots left so we had decided to split them. He had loaded the gun from the box on the table and ... I suddenly realised that I was to have fired that round! I explained how my partner's daughter had knocked on the door and how I had advanced the action for her ...

'You showed the gun to a little girl? What could she possibly ...' he said incredulously.

'She's very knowledgeable,' I said with an impatient gesture. 'The point is that the accident was meant for me. And I bloody well want to know how and why,' I finished.

In the meantime the police surgeon had arrived and entered the range. I rose to enter with him but was pushed back down.

After a moment he came out, holding the shattered remains of the gun on a pencil through the trigger-guard. We all looked at it respectfully.

'I could find no police identification on the body,' he reported.

The tension almost visibly relaxed. It had suddenly become a "routine" investigation for them. But not for me.

While the scene in the shooting-range was being taped under glaring lights, I was allowed to go upstairs and wash-up (with Heidi safely out of the way) and make a short phone call. I couldn't reach Dr Duluth at the Chondisp Institute, so left a message with his secretary. While I was phoning, Dieter clumped down the stairs from his flat, and made to enter the shop but a policeman politely barred his way.

I gave Dieter a lop-sided grin.

'I'm OK, Dieter. The man who was with me is dead. There was an accident - his gun exploded. I'll tell you the rest as soon as I can.' He reluctantly retraced his steps back up the stairs.

In the meantime the police forensic scientist had arrived and at my suggestion took the gun to examine in our well-equipped workshop. It was immediately evident to him that the cartridge that had shattered the gun had not been filled with a slow-burning propellant explosive.

'Some nitro-compound, perhaps Semtex,' had been his verdict.

With some difficulty he had managed to open the action and prise out the cartridge cases. Of the one that had detonated there was little left except the brass disk of the base. He had slid this under our microscope and then suddenly sat back startled. At this point I was asked to leave the workshop and the door closed on excited conversation.

The phone rang - it was the call from Berlin for Inspector Braut that I had expected. Chondisp using their influence in the German Government. He took it in the workshop and a few minutes later he appeared, surrounded by his team and putting on his coat.

I couldn't read anything into his expression except that he was very angry. He seemed about to say something to me but then turned and left, taking his team with him.

A short time later the two white-coated men also left, carrying the remains of "Hr Braut" with them on a stretcher and loaded it into their ambulance. One of them returned and silently handed me the key to the shooting-range. They drove off, followed by the police car.

Chapter 3

I closed the shop door and stood there, holding the key and with my head full of questions. I had narrowly escaped death! If Heidi hadn't knocked on the door, I wouldn't have advanced the action of that pistol and I would have been the body just recently carried out. The false Inspector Braut could easily have slipped out in the confusion, before the real police arrived.

But why was I attacked? And by whom? The only thing that lent me any importance was my connection with the Chondisp Institute and I hadn't had any contact with them for almost a year now.

A very worried-looking Dieter descended and I told him what had happened, making out that the accident had been something to do with a defective gun.

I then gave him the range key and told him the police wanted it kept locked until they had cleaned it up.

'And I wouldn't go in myself either, if I were you,' I added.

He asked me what I was going to do now and I told him I was going to continue my holiday. He said that was probably the best thing.

I looked at my watch - I had missed my flight so I booked another for the following day and after informing Chondisp of my new schedule left for my apartment.

Chapter 4

And so, limping slightly and still with a hissing sound in my ears, I arrived at Tangier International at 11h the next day.

I had spent most of the time on the trip trying to read a book, but in fact thinking about the attack on me. I could make no sense of it. We met more than our share of "gun nuts", odd people attracted to weapons as power symbols or sex substitutes, but that "Hr Braut" had had a frighteningly competent air about him. What he had tried to arrange for me was completely impersonal.

Who was he working for? And why me? And as he had failed, would there be another attempt?

Coming from Germany, I was passed quickly through Customs and Immigration. While waiting in the Baggage

Claim lounge I confidently went to the message board but to my surprise there was nothing for me. The first intimation I had that something strange was afoot was when the light for my flight came up on the board and I went to collect my luggage. I stuck my airticket in the slot as usual, but when my bag thumped out of the chute I saw the extra protective strap I always put around it had become loose. As I bent down I noticed a small piece of paper stuck to it.

"Captain 9151903 go to Charter Departure".

I looked at it blankly, then turned it over. Nothing. What the hell was going on? It was addressed right - my old Army rank and number, which couldn't have been too easy for a prankster to obtain. I looked around but all I could see was the normal busy airport scene - no one seemed to be paying me any special attention.

'Is this slot free?,' said an impatient voice and looking round I saw an old lady with her air-ticket in her hand.

'Yes, sure,' I said, absently polite. I humped my bag over my shoulder and moved off, looking for the Charter section of the airport.

Bloody hell. Chrondisp had always had a private jet waiting for me so far. I struggled through the crowd of tourists, up escalators, down escalators, the crowd getting thicker and thicker. Annoyed and hot (I was still wearing my Munich Anorak), I finally dropped my bag with a sigh of relief and looked around the over-filled and noisy Charter Departure lounge.

A party of drunken football supporters wearing full tribal regalia swarmed around me. The last one to pass almost weaved into me but I stiff-armed him to one side and he fell down. I bent down and hoisted him up.

'It's alright, friend. I'm just lightly inebriated,' he said, climbing groggily to his feet. (Actually he didn't say that - I'm translating, as I too was born in Liverpool.) He then staggered away to rejoin his companions.

I straightened up and as I ran my hand down my Anorak I felt something sticking to the palm of my hand. Another piece of paper!

"Go to Gate 26".

Right at the end. As I plodded down the endless corridors and travelators, overtaking and avoiding tourists in clumping ski-boots and black-clad peasants carrying string bags of vegetables, and in one case a dead chicken, I figured Gate 26 must be already half way to wherever the flight was going.

But actually there was no scheduled departure from Gate 26. The departure lounge was empty except for an inconspicuous but stockily built civilian sitting in one corner, reading a newspaper. He looked up at me, glanced down at something in the palm of his hand and looked back up again. He folded his paper and stood up.

'Through here,' he said, opening a side door and ushering me through.

'Just a minute,' I said, pushing the door closed in front of me.

'You know me, but I don't know you. How about some ID?' It seemed the right sort of move for this game we were playing.

And he did in fact pull out a small card with a holo, identifying Alistair Blain as a member of Chrondisp Security.

He opened the door again and this time we both stepped through into a small musty-smelling room. He snapped the light on; it was empty except for a table and five chairs.

I dropped my bag on the floor, took off my Anorak and draped it over the back of a chair.

'What's all this circus about?' I asked exasperatedly.

He shrugged.

'I was just told to get you here by mid-day.'

He stayed standing by the door but I sat down and after rummaging in my bag pulled out the book I had been trying to read on the flight. Chrondisp was guarded by the military and in the army you get accustomed to doubling everywhere and then waiting. "Run to do FA" as the troops said.

After a while the noise level increased outside and a distant loudspeaker could be heard announcing a departure from Gate 26 to a ski centre in the Atlas mountains.

There was a double tap on the door and my guide opened it cautiously and then fully to admit someone I knew. It was Jim! He was dressed in a blue tracksuit and carried a tennis bag. I grinned at him and stood up. We shook hands in the American style.

'I'll bet you're wondering what all this is about, old buddy,' he said.

'And not only that,' I said. 'Look, I was attacked ...'

'Yes,' he said gravely, 'I heard something about it and as soon as this meeting is over, we want the full story. How do you feel now?' he added sympathetically.

Just then there was another double tap on the door and two men entered, wearing new ski suits and looking ruffled. Both had ski goggles loosely around their necks. They were rather podgy and the smaller one was wearing gold-rimmed spectacles. Neither of them looked as though they had ever worn ski clothes in their lives before. They mopped their faces and sat down at the table without a word, pulling off their new ski boots with evident relief.

Yet another double tap and this time a tall, slim figure clad in a skin-tight and obviously well-used ski suit entered. Dr Duluth! My guide closed the door, locked it and stood with his back to the wall. Apparently everyone was now present.

Dr Duluth looked at me searchingly for a moment, then went straight to the table and sat down. He pulled off his woollen cap, ran his hand briefly over his straight dark hair and reaching inside his pocket, pulled out his PC. He opened it on the table and turned his thin face towards us, by now all sitting around the table and watching attentively. He made the introductions.

'Captain Digby, one of our Observers,' he nodded at me. 'Dr Prince who heads up our Computer Centre,' a nod at Jim. Dr Opris of The Extra-terrestrial Research Foundation (the one in glasses) 'And Dr Jacquard of the French National Library.' (Darker with brown eyes.)

'Thank you all for the confidence you have in me for coming here at such short notice and without explanations.'

'A request from a Director of the famous Institute de la Déplacement Temporelle is to others a command,' said Dr Jacquard, his lips writhing in a smile which almost compensated for his sarcastic tone.

'Thank you, Dr Jacquard,' said Dr Duluth expressionlessly, 'I hope to convince you soon of the urgency of the situation.'

He looked around.

'You are some of the few people who know that Captain Digby, on his last Mission in Victorian England, may have Observed the presence of an intelligent being from outside the solar system, who I will now refer to as the "Extra-terrestrial". You have all read his report and the comments on his subsequent interrogations by your colleagues.'

He centred his PC in front of him and continued:

'It has of course long been thought that we cannot be the only intelligence in the Universe, and so it was only a question of time before we were detected by another. The evidence that a contact has actually been made is thin, but intriguing.'

He looked across the table at me.

'Perhaps Captain Digby would refresh our minds and tell us again exactly what happened?'

I was expecting this. I had in fact described the sequence of events many times to mostly unbelieving academics, and after looking at Drs Opris and Jacquard it appeared as though I was going to add another two to the list. I cleared my throat.

`I was at the end of a Mission, in Victorian England. My Host was in the carriage of a railway train heading for a broken bridge. The train was being driven by two people who didn't know that the bridge was down. My Host managed to uncouple his carriage, just before it was pulled into the ravine, and to brake it sufficiently so he could jump off. The train, followed by the coach itself, went over the edge.'

I paused a moment, seeing again the shower of sparks far down in the ravine, hearing the double crash and watching the slowly rising plume of steam, white in the moonlight.

`And the contact?' asked Dr Duluth, eyes down on his PC.

`Yes. I was, or rather my Host, was sitting on the edge of the ravine and about to get up when I felt as though I was pushed aside and I heard a voice saying "You cretin! What are you playing at. I leave you alone for 5 minutes and look at the mess you're in!"

I continued.

`Another voice said "It's impossible to be in all places at once." And suddenly I saw a view of the earth from space. The voice continued "This was an emergency and risks had to be taken." There was a break and then I had a short view of lots of people building a pyramid. Then the same voice: "But during programming no one thought that when we started, they would advance so quickly. Next transmission ...oh!"

`And during the break..?' said Dr Duluth, whose pen had been following something on his PC screen.

`Yes,' I replied `There was a sort of chirping sound. Like digital code.'

`And that was it,' said Dr Duluth, looking across at Drs Opris and Jacquard. Jim was holding a pen, but having nothing to write on looked bored, as well he might. He had heard my story many times before.

`It sounds a very colloquial conversation,' said Dr Jacquard with a politely sceptical smile.

`Insertion comes with a built-in Translator,' said Jim in explanation, `so any dialogue is always heard in the language of the Observer.'

The two academics exchanged doubtful glances.

Dr Duluth continued:

`You may be aware that one scenario is that the Extra-terrestrials have somehow sent or constructed an Inserter on or near Earth. They are using it to Insert Observers into selected humans, selected Hosts as we say, during Earth's history. The evidence, such as it is, seems to point to a first Insertion around the time of the Pharaohs, 2500BC, or about 4600 years ago.'

Dr Opris moved impatiently.

`Yes, we have read all that and I hope you have not convened us in this unpleasant environment just to repeat something which is vague, to say the least.'

The unpleasantness of the environment was suddenly enhanced by muffled drunken singing outside and the crash of a heavy body against the thin partition of our room. Our guard by the door stirred uneasily.

`Of course not,' said Dr Duluth patiently. `First as regards the environment. If there are Extra-terrestrials and if they possess an Inserter I see no reason to simplify their task in identifying and possibly Inserting into one of us.'

`What!' said Dr Jacquard, standing up. `Surely it is impossible to Insert into one of us now. I thought it is only possible to Insert into someone in the past!'

`As far as we know that's right' said Jim, `We can't Insert into anyone closer than 9 years ago, but these guys are ahead of us. Who knows what they can do?'

But surrounding ourselves with lots of people must make it more difficult for them. It sure as hell does for us, when we do an Insertion.'

'Thank you, Jim,' said Dr Duluth. 'Now if I may continue?'

He looked round the table. Dr Jacquard sat down slowly.

'I have requested your personal appearance because what I am about to tell you, and what I hope you will tell me, is in the strictest confidence.'

He paused and touched a key on his PC.

'Do I have your Word?' he asked formally and then looked at us one by one. And one by one we repeated the formula "You have my Word", except Dr Jacquard who said it in French.

'Thank you,' said Dr Duluth, touching his PC again. He looked across the table at us and speaking slowly said:

'As I said, the evidence for a contact having been made is thin, but intriguing. It is too thin for me, as Director of Target Selection at the Chrodisp Institute, to officially request funding and order a fuller investigation. But it seems so vitally important to me that this contact be confirmed that I am prepared to arrange an unofficial investigation.'

Drs Opris's and Jacquard's jaws dropped.

'But an Insertion must cost millions!' gasped Dr Opris, 'How can you alone...?'

'Not quite alone,' said Dr Duluth. 'Dr Prince and I are in this together and we think we can disguise it as an officially approved Insertion.'

There was a stunned silence while this was digested.

'But the risk...!' said Dr Jacquard.

'Our problem,' said Jim.

I looked at Dr Duluth's thin impassive features and my respect for him increased. I must admit that so far I had regarded him as a ruthless self-seeker, for twice he had manoeuvred me into helping him up the Chrodisp hierarchy but this...he was really putting his balls on the block.

Dr Jacquard looked as though he wanted to say something else but finally shrugged.

'And now Jim, if we could see the ...' said Dr Duluth, looking across at Jim.

In reply Jim lifted his tennis bag from the floor, unsnapped it and pulled out a fat square of paper. He unfolded it out into a 2m long strip which he laid on the table. There was a scraping of chairs as we moved to the same side of the table. Dr Duluth stayed on his side and faced us across what appeared to be a chart.

A long straight black line ran down the centre of the paper. There was a red jagged curve above it and many groups of 4-figure numbers were written along the black curve.

'History of civilisation,' said Dr Duluth. 'The red curve shows how it increased with time.'

And how it often decreased with time, I noticed.

'What are these units?' asked Dr Jacquard, his finger on the red line.

'The Moreau-Weiss scale,' answered Dr Duluth. He picked up his pencil as a pointer.

'Here are the first written records and here is the present.'

'You see how civilisation gradually increased during the time of the Pharaohs, reached a plateau here and then rose very rapidly indeed in the Greek period, the so-called "Golden Age", dropped just as rapidly after break-up of the Roman Empire into the "Dark Ages" and only started to rise again with the "Renaissance".'

And after that it just continued to rise, until at the end of the paper it went off-scale.

Heads down together, we studied the chart, the two academics muttering to themselves. There was a small vertical arrow near the end, dated 1852. The date of my last insertion.

After a while Dr Duluth tapped his pencil softly on the table and said to the academics:

'Now here is a question I would like to ask you. If you suspected extra-terrestrial influence on our history, how would you detect it?'

They both looked blank then Dr Jacquard looked down at the chart again and said: 'Oh, you mean ...' He paused, his eyes going from one end to the other.

'H'm, I suppose where it changes suddenly.'

'But it can change suddenly anytime for perfectly normal reasons,' protested Dr Opris. He had a high petulant voice. 'The invention of coinage in Lydia here,' ... he stabbed the chart with his finger at 700BC, 'opened the whole of the Greek mainland and ultimately the whole of the Mediterranean to trade.'

We looked, and there was indeed a slight jump in the chart.

'The M-W scale is logarithmic,' he added. 'This rise would have had enormous implications for the people living then.' He sounded a little defensive, I thought.

'And the ...' began Dr Jacquard, and faltered to a stop. 'It is rather a large rise,' he said reluctantly, looking at the Golden Age jump. 'I hadn't realised it before.' He said something to himself in French.

'This dotted line is the first time derivative of the red level-of-civilisation curve,' said Dr Duluth, pointing.

Dr Jacquard muttered something impatiently.

'I mean this line illustrates how fast our level of civilisation changed at that time. You notice that here,' he touched the Golden Age jump, 'it rises faster than at any previous time and is not reached again until the Victorian Age.'

'What you are saying is that our civilisation, with a few ups and downs should have risen continuously and that this sudden rise can only be due to external influence,' said Dr Opris, obviously not liking the term "extra-terrestrial".

There was a silence.

'Well?' said Dr Jacquard.

Dr Duluth said nothing. The pause lengthened.

'We are engineers,' said Jim.

'And you want a decision from us?' continued Dr Opris.

'An opinion,' corrected Dr Duluth.

Jim and Duluth stood up and ostentatiously moved to a corner of the room where they began to talk quietly.

It seemed to have quieted down outside in the Departure Lounge. (What a quaint old-fashioned name! Especially in view of its recent occupants.) I remembered seeing a coffee machine there on my way in. If it hadn't been vandalised I could do with a cup. I suggested as much to the guard who looked across at Dr Duluth, who nodded.

'Good thinking,' said Jim, 'I'll come along too.'

*

We returned to the small room, holding five cups between us, to find the two academics in animated discussion in French. I might have known. Frenchmen don't really believe anything unless it's in French - anything else is a clever Anglo-

Saxon trick to deceive the simple naive French. Dr Duluth would of course have invited a French-speaking American.

Dr Duluth was speaking to them now and from what I could hear, they were both in agreement that something odd had happened around 400BC. They kept looking back at the chart in surprise.

We all sat around the table again and Dr Duluth called the meeting to order.

'So can I summarise that you think something rather unusual happened in Greece around 400BC?'

The two academics nodded.

Smilingly Dr Jacquard added 'Now we just have to decide who is to be Inserted to control it.' He meant to check it.

I had a premonition that Dr Jacquard thought he was now going to be offered the job. Dr Opris was also looking up hopefully.

There was a tense silence.

'Oh, we will be using a Chrondisp Observer, of course,' said Dr Duluth, off-handly.

'But don't you think ...' began Dr Opris 'But wouldn't it be wiser..' said Dr Jacquard in unison. Then their eyes swivelled towards me and filled with recognition.

'Oh, no!' said Dr Opris.

'You will use a soldier! An English soldier!' spat Dr Jacquard unbelievably.

'I take the risk: I will use the Observer I think is best qualified,' said Dr Duluth shortly.

They both started to protest together but Dr Duluth held up his hand.

'You have given me your Word,' he said. 'But I will keep you informed,' he added placatingly.

And with this they both had to be content as they stormed seething out of the small room.

Chapter 5

Jim mock-wiped his forehead.

'They agree and you're right,' he said.

'Yes;' said Dr Duluth looking at me reflectively. 'Now you know why you're here.'

'Greece 400BC,' I replied. 'I got that much, but what I don't see is how I'm supposed to detect that Extra-terrestrial. It was a chance in a million we were both Inserted into the same host for a few seconds in 1852.'

'Perhaps now is the time to share with you some of our thoughts on the situation,' said Dr Duluth. He looked at Jim.

Jim who had been doodling on the edge of the paper started:

'There is very little data to go on so we have to assume the worst case. The worst case for us.' He was making little squares.

'The Extra-terrestrials are obviously technically advanced on us but probably by not more than 100 years at our present rate of growth. Otherwise we wouldn't have detected them, even by accident. Now our nearest star is the binary Proxima Centauri/Alpha Centauri at 4.3 light years. We don't think it has any planets, but as a worst case we gotta assume that's where they come from.' Diagonals were converting the squares into triangles.

'We think they have sent a very sophisticated robot explorer.' He drew a line under the first doodle. 'OK,' he continued, 'They've got this explorer with its built-in Inserter stashed away somewhere not too far. What can they do?' He drew a figure 1 and put a circle around it.

`One. They can Insert into anyone in our history - which would have been real useful in studying our history, our Timelines. We do it ourselves. But then what?' He drew a figure 2.

`They sure as hell want to contact and if possible influence us. Empathising with us is out - it's vanishingly rare even amongst our own home-grown Observers. The Extra-terrestrials surely have a quite different cast of mind.' Figure 3.

`And the 9-year rule will stop any other attempt to influence us, so...'

`I don't see why.' I interrupted rudely.

There was a polite pause.

`Once the Main Timeline is laid down, it cannot be influenced or moved,' said Dr Duluth.

`I know that,' I said impatiently, `but ...'

`So by the time the E-T discover something ..'

I waved my hand dismissively.

`This 9-year dead-zone doesn't stop us from influencing the direction of the Main Timeline,' I said. `You remember, I went back and found that gun gizmo in 1815. I came back to the present, which at the time was er..2010, and told you about it. We then used the idea to build that fancy personal weapon all the UNO troops use now. That must have shifted the direction the Main Timeline was going.'

`Yes,' said Dr Duluth patiently, `but I've already explained that to you - it's a special case. You brought some information into the present which we used to influence the Main Timeline - while it was being laid down.'

`There's no way the Extra-terrestrials can use the information they get in the past to influence the present,' explained Jim.

Bloody hell. These two were too close to Inserter theory.

`Look,' I said, extemporising wildly, `Let's say it's 1000AD real time and Ghengis Khan marries a beautiful 25-year old girl. The E-T, who can see everything up to 991AD, find out that this girl, when she was 25 minus 9, or 16 years old, was having it off with one of his chief lieutenants. If Ghengis found this out there sure would be some Main Timelines bent.'

`I guess so,' grinned Jim. `But how are the ET going to let him know unless.' His face changed.

There was a startled silence.

`Unless the Extra-terrestrials have some sort of mobile probe,' finished Dr Duluth.

`Of course,' I said. `They must have one anyway to do things like taking earth samples and er...things.' My imagination was beginning to flag. `Today of course Ghengis Khan would have a radio so they would just radio the information to him from wherever their Inserter is,' it delivered in a final spurt.

`Yes, they could do it that way,' said Jim, who had stopped doodling and was looking into the distance.

We waited until the nearby Departure Lounge was empty and shortly thereafter walked quickly out into the blinding white heat outside. A small old-fashioned transport plane was just taxiing up. We all climbed in hastily, there were some hurried exchanges with the tower and we were off down the wide runway, almost underneath a monster passenger jet which slid down over us with howling jets to land way-ahead of us on the same runway.

Dr Duluth and Jim had folded down jump-seats and were talking urgently, PC's open on their knees. The guard was looking boredly out of the window as the drab brown desert slid slowly by.

Jim attracted my attention and motioned me over.

`Tell us what happened in Munich,' said Dr Duluth.

I told them and they both listened grimly.

`The bastards,' breathed Jim, `We've really got to do something this time.'

`Who was it? What did the police find?' I asked.

`Analysis of the metal of the cartridge case and the residue of the high-explosive that was in it revealed Asiablock origin,' said Dr Duluth.

He looked embarrassed, as well he might. Chondisp prided itself on the protection of its employees - even free-lancers like myself.

`Asiablock!' I said. `That guy was a contract-killer, a professional! Why the hell should Asiablock go to all that trouble to kill me?'

They exchanged glances.

`We don't know, fella,' said Jim gently. `But you're one of the lucky ones. So far twenty-three of our guys have died, mostly in what look like accidents. Car accidents, falling under subway trains, phoney suicides, aircraft accidents. And some just shot in the street.'

I heard this with a sinking heart. Since I had worked for Chondisp I had always been able to return to the anonymity of my completely separate life in Munich. If I had been located and identified I would be attacked again. I would have to move, to leave all my life, my friends at Munich, to take a completely different identity. I felt rage rising.

`And they were all Observers?'

`Not at all,' said Dr Duluth. `Only two Observers so far. The rest were guards on leave, programmers, technicians and so on.'

`Jesus!' I said. `And what the fuck are we doing about it? Are we just going to let them pick us off one by one? We pushed them back in Pakistan - haven't they learnt anything? We've got to hit back! A night drop on Chondiski ...'

`Right on!' said Jim, suddenly the ex-US Marine, `with a diversionary attack on Kuluth! I've still got some buddies in the Green Berets and ...'

Dr Duluth looked at us with some alarm and held up his hand.

`The evidence is being shown to the Security Council and they must take the necessary measures,' he said.

You know that's the way it has to be,' he added. `We can't start a private war.' Reluctantly we agreed.

*

A short time later we landed at the Chondisp airfield and disembarked. As we walked across to the entry dome in the slanting evening sunlight, I noticed there was a lot of military activity - armed cush-cars hissing around throwing up clouds of sand, and what seemed like an extra perimeter fence being erected. My two companions looked at this but made no comments.

When we left the lift, deep underground in the Chondisp complex, there was only a cursory security check - I was after all accompanied by two of their top personnel. We waited in a silent group on the platform, waiting for the rubber-wheeled train that circulates endlessly around Chondisp. I pushed in the card that I had been given and was taken to R and R, the luxury Rest and Recuperation hotel. After a shower and a meal I turned in. Tomorrow was going to be an important day.

After breakfast the next day I waited in my room expecting a call, but around 9:30 there was a tap on my door and I opened it to two non-descript dressed figures. I looked in surprise at Dr Duluth and Jim. In Chrondisp Jim normally wore a flamboyant Hawaiian shirt and I had never seen Dr Duluth in anything other than a suit!

Jim drew the curtains, took a small device out of his case, extended its antenna, put it on the table and switched on. They stood around watching as it gave some loud clicks and then a green light appeared. Tension relaxed and Jim sat at the table beside it, leaving it switched on. Dr Duluth appropriated the only upholstered chair, and I, after pulling the cover over the bed, sat on it. So far no one had uttered a word.

Dr Duluth looked across at Jim who started:

'Your Insertion,' he began. 'You heard yesterday it's going to be a big one - 2500 years. We've never jumped back so far and it's only fair that you should know some of the difficulties. But above all - it's gotta be secret, secret even at Chrondisp.' He continued:

'We don't know why Asiablock is suddenly targeting us, but if they are it's not because Chrondisp is damaging the unique desert environment.'

'If they are?' I queried 'I thought you said every attack could be traced back to ... Oh, I see what you mean.'

'Right,' said Jim, 'It's all a bit too obvious.'

'Anyway,' he continued 'we have two problems. The first is the purely technical one of generating enough power to lever you back 2500 years and the second is how to keep it secret. We think we can solve the first by boosting the Resonator with the reserve Resonator - sorta putting them in series. The second is going to need some creative Target Selection.' He looked across at Dr Duluth.

'We have you and another Observer scheduled to go back to the middle of the 12th Century. We will charge both Resonators but then his trip will be cancelled at the last moment.'

'You mean 1250AD + 1250AD = 500BC.' I said. 'And I suppose that to make the deception complete you want me to read up on 1250AD?'

'Right,' said Jim, pleased. 'But you won't actually have to read up anything - it will be enough if you make these requests to the Library computer. Spaced out in time of course, to make like you are searching.' He unfolded a piece of paper covered with references and handed it to me.

'OK,' I said. 'But what about the preparations for my real trip? What about Greece in 500BC?'

He delved in his case again and handed me a Mepak.

'I got a lot of people to browse around the Library and give me anything they had on Ancient Greece. You can play this on your PC.'

'OK,' I said taking it, 'but it will be real slow.'

'Yes,' agreed Dr Duluth from the corner, 'But remember we don't have much on Ancient Greece. You wouldn't be able to do any virtual-reality walk-arounds anyway, even if you had the full Library facilities.' I digested this.

'There are some other problems too,' continued Dr Duluth. 'We have nothing like the precision we had when we sent you back to Napoleonic France or Victorian England - neither for the place nor for the time. We will be aiming for the City of Athens 450BC but there's an error of 30km on the place and 20years in the time.'

'Yes, OK,' I said. I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for anyway. 'Let's talk about my Mission. What exactly do you expect me to find?'

`You defined it best yourself,' said Dr Duluth. `An Extra-terrestrial artefact, a probe, a technical device foreign to 450BC which is somehow being used to facilitate communications between the Extra-terrestrial and the Greeks. The Greeks will not recognise it for what it is, but for you it should stick out like a sore thumb.'

I couldn't think of anything else to say. There was some more general talk and then Dr Duluth looked at his watch, stood up and came into the middle of the room.

`And now Captain Digby, I won't see you again before your Insertion, so I want to stress to you for the last time that this Mission is very, very important. I have every confidence that if there is a probe functioning in 450BC you will find it. If you discover this probe it means that Mankind has been studied by Extra-terrestrial minds for many years, and is still being studied. We can speculate, but we know nothing concrete about Extra-terrestrials. As I explained to you just before your Mission to Victorian England, Extra-terrestrials who visit us and are detected by us, are not really so very much ahead of us technologically. They can therefore interact with us. They can interact with us to our benefit or to our detriment. We have very few defences if the latter case pertains. One slight advantage for us would be if the Extra-terrestrial thought we were unaware of its presence. It is therefore **absolutely essential** if you discover the probe, you do not reveal to the probe that its presence has been detected.'

He stepped forward and I stood up from my bed. I looked into those cold grey eyes and felt his firm dry handshake.

`Good luck,' he said.

Jim opened the door and after looking out, ushered Dr Duluth through. He returned and closed the door. Dr Duluth's impressive presence still hung in the room.

`Wow,' I said.

`Yes,' said Jim. `Like I said, it's a big one.'

Chapter 7

And so I started to read up on Ancient Greece.

I was supposed to concentrate on the period 500-400BC, the 5th Century BC, generally reckoned as the "Golden Age" because of the sudden flourishing of arts and science.

Notwithstanding what Dr Duluth had said, there was a surprising amount of information available for a time so far in the past. Firstly because a lot of written records were available but also because the Greeks had been very fond of decorating their pottery with all sorts of household scenes and activities. For some reason all the men had rounded bottoms that stuck out, very big thighs and very tapering legs ending in small feet. It must have been the local beauty style. The women looked normal, although perhaps a little motherly. And casual nudity seemed much more prevalent than in the 21st Century - although this didn't affect me as much as it might have done before my arrival in Munich, where nude bathers are seen all along the side of the river Isar and saunas are routinely mixed.

Their marble statues however were anatomically quite normal. Their faces showed them to be an intelligent and lively people - the sort of people I would like to know, to invite to a party. They had made a fantastic contribution to European history, virtually writing the Manual for our civilisation. They studied human nature

and set the standards, saw what a society must do to remain vigorous and healthy, how the youth must be educated and brought up.

I looked with awe at the map of Southern Europe. A little untidily protruding bit of ragged coastline near the boot of Italy. There they were, making these marble statues 2500 years ago! History in England hadn't even started. We had to wait another 1500 years until someone wrote about King Alfred burning the cakes.

Also in the Mempelak was a painting showing the interior of a monastery. It was a grim stone-lined room. On one wall is a primitive painting of some Saint looking soulfully upwards, with arrows piercing his body. The colours are livid, the perspective flat and childish. On the other is hanging a large black wooden crucifix. Two monks are looking down at a rough packing-case that has just been opened. A warm misty golden glow streams out of the case. One monk, the younger, is kneeling before the case carefully lifting out a small white marble statue of a perfectly proportioned nude girl. She has lost both her hands and most of one leg but she is gazing up at him with a gently innocent and unmistakably coquettish look. The young monk is beholding her, his eyes yearning, his face warm in the glow. The older monk, wearing some sort of chain around his neck, has averted his austere face from the glow and is purposefully reaching for the iron bar that was used to open the case.

The title was "Golden Age" and was a further reminder that prudish Christianity, with its fear of the body, had destroyed many examples of Greek art.

The Greeks were lucky, of course. Intelligent minds need problems or they atrophy. And the Greeks had plenty of problems. Greece looks great on the tourist holos but is really mostly volcanic rocks with beautiful beaches. There was very little agricultural land so they had to import a lot of their food. And to pay for the food they had to export manufactured goods, goods manufactured from the iron, zinc and copper which they imported also. This must have given a boost to artistic creativity, to add the maximum value to the goods they sold.

As Greece has a long coast line they also had an expert fishing fleet and merchant marine. And obviously a navy. A navy to protect their trade routes and to help found colonies all around the Mediterranean. Yes, there were plenty of enemies around them who cast envious eyes on the material prosperity of Greece. But the Greeks were able to keep the technological edge because of their manufacturing base.

And because people work more efficiently if they can divide the labour, they had to find ways in which large numbers of people can live together, each sacrificing some personal liberty for the greater good. In Sparta they tried the obvious solution - impose a hierarchy and force everyone to do what the leaders thought was good for them. Very efficient for a while but then the leaders become corrupted with power. The best solution was found to be Democracy. But Democracy only works with an educated electorate, which must have given a boost to education too. I was interested to note that the large number of civil servants required were chosen by a lottery, so the poorest citizens also had a chance to earn a decent living. There was even a system whereby the neediest citizens were given a handout so that they too could take part in political debates. On the other hand the rich were expected to be Patrons of the arts and also fork out to finance wars.

I had about two days to study the Mempelak and then I had to report to the medical centre to prepare for my Insertion.

Chapter 8

There was some more activity visible in the control room and the headset came alive again. And about time. The lead suit was cold and also its weight was gradually cutting off the circulation in my legs.

It was Jim's voice taking me through the usual calibration routine where I had to say and think of various words - "Mother", "red-hot poker", "juicy steak", "calm moonlit night"...

I dutifully repeated and thought. Jim's voice sounded a little nervous.

'OK fella, this is it. Countdown starting. Get your helmet down and watch out for the green marker. Good luck.'

The countdown panel sprang to life, reading 60 seconds. It held a few seconds and then started counting down. "59, 58, 57 ..."

I waited until it reached "30" then pulled down the lead visor, clumsy with the lead-lined gloves. There was the familiar buzz of the electro-narcosis and then...

I was off! Christ, I had never moved so fast before! The yellow century markers were flying past in a blur, the white ten-year markers merely a faint streak.

Now I was gradually slowing down, individual century markers appearing. As they flipped past, one after the other, I noticed they were becoming less and less distinct, each one more blurred at the edges than the last. And I was distinctly decelerating. Between the fuzzy century markers, the individual 10-year markers were becoming visible. But they were so stretched out, like furry caterpillars tail to tail, that it would have been impossible to use them as time references.

In the distance a green glow, approaching rapidly. The usual feminine voice "Prepare to turn", now the artificially sharp green marker. I turned. Some complex swirls. My speed was slowing to zero, I drifted up to one at random and "Merged".

I was in the shade, lying on the ground, looking up at an elaborately carved stone door-lintel, about 3m above me. I could see deep blue sky outside and the sun was shining in, picking out the relief of the sculptured and typically Greek pillars supporting it. It was warm and quiet. I smugly recognised Doric capitals at the tops of the pillars. So I had made it to Greece! I had just been thrown 25 centuries back in time, back to the dawn of human history!

Under my hand the surface I was lying on was cool, hard and smooth - a marble bench, I supposed. Tilting my head back I could see, upside down, the white ceiling of a large spacious room, supported on slender fluted pillars. In the middle of the room was a small splashing fountain, glittering in the bright sunlight slanting down from a high window. Beyond the fountain was a tall closed door, presumably leading into the interior of an elaborate villa.

Excellent! As usual I had landed on my feet, into the head of a Host who was rich and high up in Greek society, someone whom I would influence to show me around Greece. It would be an honour and a privilege to be able to talk to someone from Greece in the "Golden Age", more - to be able to actually know his most intimate thoughts and feelings. Was he perhaps a famous intellectual - scientist, philosopher or artist? For a moment I felt a little guilty - I remembered the hungrily envious looks in the eyes of Drs Opris and Jacquard. Yes, perhaps one of them should have been sent in my place. But then I solaced myself by remembering that it really had to be me. I might not have the cultural background to appreciate what I was going to see, but I was an experienced Observer and was moreover one of that very rare species, an

Empathiser. After all I was not here to study Greek civilisation, but to find if there had been any extra-terrestrial influences nudging it forward.

2500 years in the past! I lay there a moment, savouring the first impressions. No one had been sent further back in the past since Chronological Displacement had been discovered - I was a pioneer!

Gradually I became aware that someone was shouting. I felt a spurt of irritation and then the golden moment, unique to each Mission, was past.

Annoyed, I raised my head again and found myself looking up at a foreshortened uniformed figure, carrying a spear. Some soldier with an important message of State, no doubt. I supposed he had been trained to shout it like soldiers always did. I was resignedly deciding to get up when I felt a blow. I looked up again in astonished anger. The soldier had apparently just poked my Host not very gently in the side!

The view swung around unfocussed, too quickly for me to follow, like an old cinema-verité film. My Host sat up and then in apparent response to another prod, shakily pulled himself upright, using a pole as a support. The ground dropped away and for a moment I glimpsed rough uncared-for hands on the pole, which turned out to be a spear.

The view stabilised and I could see the other figure now. A dark swarthy face under a conical metal helmet, laughing contemptuously at my Host's efforts to stand up. In his open mouth I could see several teeth missing.

Something was dreadfully wrong!

The other figure, which was quite a bit shorter than my Host, was dressed in an obviously military uniform, made of overlapping pieces of thick leather. Projecting over his left shoulder was the handle of a sword and the top of a circular shield. He was leaning on the shaft of a long spear.

'What the fuckinell happened?' groaned my Host. 'I was just standing looking at fuckall when my fuckin' feet slipped away and I just fuckinwell fell on the fuckin' ground. Did you see the fucker that fuckinwell shoved me?' he asked of the other.

'I didn't do fuckall,' said the other. 'You just fuckinwell keeled over on your fuckin' own.'

I reeled under this blast of casually spoken invective, presumably in Ancient Greek and being related to me by the Translator, which directly connected my speech centre to that of my Host.

So much for the culture of Ancient Greece.

Fortunately at this point a filter, sensing some sort of overload, kicked in.

'I think you must have been drinking too much last night and the sun got to you,' continued the other. 'Lucky you're on guard with me. If the sergeant had seen you drop like that you'd have been for the chop.'

My Host was now standing upright but leaning rather heavily on his spear. It could only have been my arrival that caused his upset.

As he hung his head, looking unfocussed at the ground I realised bitterly that I had chosen the wrong Host! I didn't blame myself, I had had to take the first available "swirl", but this one was absolutely useless. A simple soldier was never going to be able to carry me around Ancient Greece, let alone witness any unusual extra-terrestrial caused cultural or scientific advances.

In my Insertions so far I had had a fair amount of success, mainly because Chrondisp Mission Control had been able to drop me exactly into a Host who was known to them, a Host that would be able to help me complete my Mission. But no

such detailed information was available for Ancient Greece. I had just had to take pot-luck and hope for the best. But this oaf, not only had he the wrong job but he was as dim as arseholes. I felt a surge of impotent rage.

My Host stirred restively.

'OK, I'm not a genius,' he said to himself defensively, 'but I'm a good soldier.'

Great. So I could Empathise with the clod too. Which didn't seem somehow to be a favourable comment on **my** level of intelligence.

What the hell was I going to do? I had been sent here at great risk and enormous cost and all to no avail. Into a bloody private soldier, I thought bitterly.

'I'm the strongest soldier in the 5th Legion,' he boasted. 'No one can beat me at one-arm wrestling, not even Corporal Platos. I nearly broke his arm last night,' he added proudly.

Big deal. Stuck into a pea-brained ox. There was no way he could help me in my Mission.

He relapsed into a resentful silence and I switched off.

I cursed my luck. These two soldiers must be guarding some noble's residence. If I could have only dropped into **him** - he couldn't have been more than a few hundred meters away at the time.

What the **hell** was I going to do? Of course I could say my piece of poetry, my key return-signal, and a few seconds later I would wake up in Chondisp and report the Mission was aborted. But I could imagine what sort of reaction that would produce. It had been difficult enough to conceal my long covert trip here, there was no way I could request another shot at it. I would have to do the best I could with the poor material at my disposal. I heard my mother's chiding voice "A poor workman blames his tools".

There was only one thing to do - let myself be carried around by my fool of a Host, and in the meantime try to think of something.

*

And so began a period of simple Observation - of just passively watching what happened through the eyes of my ill-chosen Host. For the first time I understood the limitations of the Chondisp method of Timeline Observation. It was not enough to be able to Empathise with your Host - he also had to be a reasonably high life-form. Only then could you direct him towards what you had been sent to see.

Chapter 9

My Host, I learnt his name was Private Spardes, had a fairly simple life. He was a member of a company of about 100 soldiers who guarded the estate of Alumphados, a rich nobleman, who lived just outside Athens.

Spardes's job was mostly to back-up the slave supervisors, generally guard the estate from beggars and other undesirables, and occasionally mount a ceremonial guard either in front of the nobleman's house or to escort him into the local town during religious festivals. Everywhere he went, he was always fully armed with sword, shield, dagger and a long spear.

He was a Greek "Citizen", born on a farm outside Athens and about 18 years old. He had been recruited into the nobleman's household because his father had known someone in the Alumphados household.

He was about 1.70m tall, broad of shoulder, narrow of hip and with a thick neck. He was rather overweight and if he didn't take care he would be fat when he got older. I learned all this because there was a piece of polished brass in the entrance hall to the Villa and when he was on duty he used to sometimes dramatically pose in front of it with his spear, when he thought no one was watching. He had thick lips, a fleshy nose and big eyes. Rather coarsely good-looking.

His "oppo", his "buddy", his particular friend, was Private Hippos, one year older than him. His immediate superior was the small, dark and self-assertive Corporal Fledes. The Commander of the "Guard Alumphados" was Captain Demus. All the other soldiers looked on Spardes with a mixture of respect for his muscles and contempt for his brain. He was generally good-natured but when he found that he had been deceived or tricked he went into a berserk rage and then sulked. He was overweight because he drank too much wine.

As he stolidly performed his duties I looked around. To my eyes a lot of it was faintly familiar. A well-organised society, many different trades, a strong caste structure based on a few arrogant leading families and many slaves to do the menial work. The Greeks themselves were mostly small and dark-skinned. Obviously Latin, with mobile faces, who talked, laughed and gestured a lot. Generally friendly and rather emotional.

Apart from my first surprised conversation with Spardes, we had had no further communication. I could influence his emotions and non-verbally direct his activities a bit, but there were no more of the internal conversations I was accustomed to have with my previous Hosts. I had tried several times to speak to him, and I am sure he heard me, but he wouldn't reply. I sensed fear, which was unusual. My Hosts so far had just accepted my voice as their internal thoughts. I gave up in despair.

Amongst my Host's acquaintances there was a strict unspoken class-structure seemingly based on intelligence or at least the ability to speak well. Private Spardes was not a good conversationalist and so pretty-well near the bottom of the totem-pole.

His main ambition was to win something at the Games, which came around once every four years. The next one was in two months and was the main subject of conversation. The rest of the soldiers and some of the servants and slaves working on the estate thought Spardes might have a chance if he could only lose some weight.

From my internal vantage point I sourly watched him practising standard sword-and-shield exercises with the other soldiers.

Yes, he was certainly strong and quick. Quick when he knew what to do. His problem was that he suffered from a tremendous inferiority complex. Coming from a poor family he had had hardly any education, could only read the simplest words and not write at all. He had a peasant accent and usually politely deferred to people half his size who had the "right" accent. The only occasions when he had been seen to break this mould were when he was drunk - but when he was drunk he lost all co-ordination and could easily be avoided.

His trainer for the Games was Private Hippos, and pretty amateurish he was too. Spardes was being trained for something called the "Pankration", for which my Translator rather doubtfully came up with "all-in wrestling". It was apparently a particularly brutal mixture of wrestling and boxing. Only eye-gouging, biting and finger-breaking were forbidden. Everything else was allowed!

Private Hippos's training system was mainly aimed at muscle development - pushups, pull-ups, weight-lifting, work with dumbbells, and some punching practice

at a swinging leather bag filled with sand. Spardes worked conscientiously and easily followed these exercises as Hippos self-importantly encouraged him. The other soldiers watched in amused contempt and I heard one of them say something about how his first real fighter would make mincemeat of him.

I also was wondering why he was not being put up against another fighter. But Hippos hushed them with his finger along the side of his nose and a wink. Was Hippos going to lay bets against his friend? It seemed unlikely, they were as close as lower life forms can be, they went drinking together. Did Hippos think that the best chance for Spardes would be to go in to the fight without any preconceptions? Maybe that was it.

He was quick, alright. I had a convincing proof of this only the next day. Spardes was on duty, walking slowly by himself in the gardens behind the villa. He was smelling the herbs that were growing there, watching the slaves weeding and thinking of the bar he was going to visit that evening with Hippos.

There was a sudden commotion around the front of the villa, a loud wild shrill baying and shouts of alarm. Spardes spun round to face the villa and saw there a large mastiff silently running around the corner, heading almost directly for him. It was one of the guard dogs, without its collar and frothing at the mouth. The slaves had noticed it too and ran screaming into a nearby outhouse, used for storing gardening tools, slamming the door after them.

Spardes didn't hesitate. He dropped his spear, spread his legs apart and waited, slightly crouched and arms crooked by his sides, his eyes tracking the mastiff. The mastiff, apparently crazed by rabies, would have blindly run past but as it approached, Spardes made a fierce growl. Some glimmer of intelligence shone in the enormous guard dog's red eyes and it changed direction slightly, now heading directly for him, its enormous pads making a soft drumming on the hard ground. He could hear its panting breath and see its spume-flecked open maw. When it was about 2 meters away the huge hound sank down on bunched haunches and then launched itself, leaping through the air at his throat. At what seemed the last possible moment Spardes leapt to one side and as it tried to twist in mid-air he dealt it a tremendous blow on the side of its head with his right fist. Its heavy body crashed to the ground, slid forward in a cloud of dust and lay there stunned. Before it could scramble to its feet Spardes had reached over his shoulder, drawn his sword and thrust it in the mastiff's throat. A convulsive twitch and the enormous animal lay still. Bloody sword in hand he watched it carefully, his pulse racing but his breathing rate normal. Then when he was sure it was dead he leaned forward, cleaned his sword on the dog's pelt and slid it back into its scabbard. He straightened up and looked around but the garden was still empty.

Then he heard a distant shouting and a group of figures appeared from around the front of the villa, making warning gestures when they caught sight of him. Five soldiers armed like him and led by Corporal Fledes, and two slaves carrying a large net between them.

As they panted up they noticed the body of the hound at Spardes's feet and slowed down. Joined by the gardening slaves who had timidly left the protection of the outhouse, they stood around it in an awed circle. One of the soldiers turned the body over with his spear to look at the sword wound. Corporal Fledes glared at Spardes.

'You killed it!' he said in incredulous anger. 'You cretin! Do you realise that that guard dog cost 6 months of an average man's wage?'

(Now actually he hadn't said that - what I was receiving was a translation into terms I could understand).

`You big oaf!' he continued incensed `Why did you kill the dog?

Spardes shuffled his feet and mumbled something.

`Tell them it had rabies,' I said.

He shuffled and looked down at the ground.

`Rabies!' I shouted internally, as loud as I could.

`Rabies - the dog had rabies,' he muttered, unwillingly.

There was a sudden silence and the circle of viewers around the dead animal hastily widened. The fate of a human bitten by a mad dog was evidently well known in Ancient Greece.

`And what do you know about rabies, you idiot?' shouted the Corporal, who had nevertheless also stepped backwards.

I detected a slight glow of resentment. Spardes actually knew a lot about rabies, having been brought up on a farm.

One of the slaves said something, pointing to the froth still on its muzzle. The Corporal bent to look at the dog and then snapped orders to the slaves who carefully put their net over the body of the huge dead animal and dragged it away.

Corporal Fledes stared at Spardes in angry puzzlement.

`You haven't heard the last of this,' he said menacingly.

Watching their retreating backs, Spardes took a deep breath, watching the slaves return to their work.

`Thank you, O Almus,' he said softly. `I will make a sacrifice in your honour.'

Surprise! Private Spardes thought I was a God! And in a way he was more perceptive than the Hosts I had been in so far, who had merely assumed I was part of their internal thoughts. I suppose Spardes, who had very few internal thoughts of his own, had immediately recognised the stranger. And because of his religious upbringing he had naturally assumed the internal voice to be that of a God.

For the first time I began to see a faint glimmering of hope. Perhaps after all I might be able to do something with my Mission.

Chapter 10

All life now seemed to revolve around the Games which took place at Olympia, on the coast and about 150km to the west of Athens. Wars had stopped in the East and North and strange-looking foreigners, who nevertheless all spoke Greek, started to arrive in Athens (about 2km away), on their way to the Games, often to pray at the many temples there, but also to train. They were put up in various hostels in the City but there was a lot of overflow and these were offered traditional hospitality in private homes. A group of three tough-looking Spartan wrestlers came to the Villa Alumphados and were put up in a small outhouse. On arriving they marched in step straight to their quarters, looking neither to right nor left and followed by five equally unsmiling slaves carrying their baggage.

I sensed a certain reticence among the other Greeks. The Spartans were Greeks too, had in fact helped the Greeks against the Persians in the last war about 40 years ago. But now they were enemies. They had a different, authoritarian political system, a different ascetic lifestyle and had been trained all their lives to be soldiers.

Their leader kept his wrestlers away from contamination with the decadent fun-loving Greeks. They trained separately in a field behind their hut and Spardes went once secretly to watch them. He returned shaken.

I saw them too at the same time, of course. They were physically no bigger than Spardes but they trained with a ferocity that left him breathless. Spardes and I suddenly realised that if he were to have any chance at all in the Games, even to survive, he was going to have to start real training immediately.

By watching two of the Spartans fighting, I could see that the Pankration style of wrestling was a mixture of bare-fist fighting and free-style wrestling. There was no sign of the Greco-Roman style I had expected, where no holds are permitted below the waist and the competitors are not allowed to use their legs for grips. Both contestants were naked, oiled their bodies and had cut short their hair. And that wasn't all! Both fighters were very conscious of their private parts and these were obviously legitimate targets. In fact during the fight, where one contestant had upended the other and was apparently about to dash him to the ground, the upended one had won by grasping the testicles of his opponent and had knocked him out! I felt slightly sick, but Spardes saw nothing unusual in it.

The sooner we started the better.

'It would please me for you to take an honourable position in the Games,' I began. I sensed a feeling of hope. 'But you must do as I say, and you will not always understand. You must have faith.'

'I am yours to command,' he replied submissively.

Excellent.

The first thing was to get him away from Private Hippos. I did this by having him get up very early the next day and take a run up the side of a nearby mountain. He jogged up through the dew-wet grass of deserted mountain paths, seeing only an early shepherd with a few goats. We stopped in a small hidden pine-grove overlooking the sea. The early sun slanted down and far out in the bay there was ship with a single white sail standing out against the deep-blue sea. It was a beautiful unspoiled scene at the beginning of history - in 25 centuries time there would certainly be a big vacation complex here. There was complete silence except for his panting and the dry buzzing of the ever-present cicadas.

It was time to start his training.

I made him look around and find a dead pine branch about 40mm thick. He broke it to a convenient length across his knee and then supported it between two stones, about 50cm apart and a meter above the ground. He obviously thought he was being told how to construct some sort of shrine and was making to kneel before it.

'Up, up,' I said.

He scrambled to his feet bewildered.

'Make your hand into a fist and punch through the branch,' I said.

He looked at the branch doubtfully and then stepped back. He raised his arm upwards, clenched his hand then jumped forwards and smashing his arm down with all his force gave it a tremendous punch with his closed fist. The branch cracked and just barely splintered into two pieces. He gasped with the pulse of pain that lanced up his arm as his bare knuckles came in violent contact with the rough bark. He stood there, looking at the two halves of the branch on the ground, sucking his bleeding knuckles and thinking unprintable thoughts about his internal God.

'I am pleased,' I said. 'And now I will show you a secret of the Gods.'

I got him to find another branch and bridge it across the two stones again.

'Now open your hand. No, stiffly, and stick your thumb up hard.'

He did so.

'Now raise your arm up above your head.'

Reluctantly but obediently he raised his hand.

`Right. Now bring the edge of your hand down sharply on the branch. Quickly,' I said, before he could think of his damaged hand. `Now!'

There was a sharp crack and the branch split cleanly in two, the two halves leaping apart.

`Well, good gracious me!' he said. (The Translator filter was still in place, I was pleased to note.)

He was looking incredulously at the cleanly broken ends of the branch and feeling the edge of his hand.

`It is magic. I felt nothing,' he said amazed.

He repeated the trick several times for himself, with his left hand too, until both hands were sore and the small grove strewn with kindling.

`With this weapon I will have a chance in the Games,' he said, reverently, `but I must practice and make my hands harder,' he resolved.

`Even so,' I said.

He looked wonderingly around the quiet sunlit grove, picked up a branch he had chopped, raised it to his lips and kissed the white splintered end.

Jogging down the mountain he was filled with joy and resolution, jumping and laughing as he slashed the air with the edges of his hands.

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I had two weeks before the preliminary bouts.

He requested an interview with Captain Demus, who was in charge of the troop at Villa Alumphados, to formally ask for time off for training. Captain Demus, a stocky grizzled veteran of the Persian Wars, had a small austere room in the rear of the Villa.

`And which sport are you training for?'

`The Pankration, Sir.'

The Captain looked at him with a mixture of admiration and pity.

`It's a very hard sport,' he said. He was apparently about to say more when he changed his mind and turned to the sergeant who had marched Spardes in.

`Where have I seen this soldier before?'

`Private Spardes was the one who killed the mad guard-dog that got loose,' answered the sergeant.

Captain Demus looked back at Spardes again with renewed interest.

`And who is training you?' he asked.

Spardes couldn't think of what to say.

`Answer the officer!' snapped the sergeant.

`Perhaps his family God is training him,' said the Captain smilingly.

`Yes, Sir,' answered Spardes with relief.

`Then I hope he knows what he's doing.' He looked at Spardes a moment consideringly then:

`Permission granted. And good luck.'

The sergeant marched him out.

*

And so we started training seriously. First I had to toughen him up. I wanted weights on his hands and feet. He found some metal bands to bend around his wrists but for the rest he used parts of his standard armour - his shin protectors. He thought this quite normal - there was apparently a race in the Games where the men wore full armour and carried their shields.

Every day we ran up the side of the mountain, pausing only to do shadow boxing. I made him eat lots of meat and fresh vegetables. And milk instead of wine.

He didn't like this - wine is for heroes: milk is for babies. But this problem solved itself, for in the evening he was simply too tired to go out with his friends.

The first few runs were hard and he was blowing heavily, but endorphin, that natural opium-like anaesthetic, soon began to be produced in his brain and dulled the pain of his aching leg muscles. And on the third day the effect I had waited for began to appear. He began to actually enjoy running up the mountain, leaping periodically in the air and singing snatches of song. "Runner's high" it's called. Otherwise getting hooked on the opium-like side effect of endorphin.

I had thought a lot about how I could train Spardes as a fighter. Wrestling was out - I could have taught him a lot of Judo but for that you need an opponent. I remembered the hours I had practised in the gym with a partner during my Military Service, going in to the same throw over and over again until it became second nature. So that when you finally used it in combat you would instantly recognise an opening and go right in. But to do that you needed a real body, a partner.

I decided Karate was the answer. If the records were right it wouldn't be developed for another 500 years, by Chinese monks as a protection against bandits, so it should have a "secret weapon" effect in Ancient Greece. But it would have to be used very discreetly so as not to bang against the Main Timeline.

He had learnt the hand-chop already: I must build on this. I started to look around for a training aid.

On the fourth day I found what I wanted in the woods that bordered the Villa estate. It was a broken stone statue of some lesser God, lying on its back, covered with patches of green and yellow lichen and sightlessly looking up in the long grass. It had one arm out-stretched, palm upwards as though begging. I got Spardes to set it up in a clearing. He tied fine springy twigs all over it and then covered it with an old tunic, tied tight. This was our practice dummy, our target.

I showed him where the nerve centres were and how to hit them with the edge of his hand or his extended fingertips - "Like an axe or a spear" he had muttered to himself, as he danced around it, slashing and stabbing. It was painful at first but not as painful as it would have been without the springy twigs.

And gradually with all this exercise, his hands were slowly hardening up. I suddenly remembered a trick that old bare fist prize-fighters in England used to use. They hardened their hands by "pickling" them in vinegar. So from then on he slept at night with his hands wrapped in woollen bandages soaked in vinegar.

After three weeks I had the opportunity of looking at him in the mirror at the entrance hall to the villa. He looked a lot less like the overweight young bullock I remembered. He had lost a lot of weight and looked much fitter. His eyes seemed clearer and his movements more alert. He was lightning fast at all the exercises I could think of and there was not much else I could teach him. He now needed some combat experience. How could I arrange this?

Chapter 11

My chance came the next evening, which he had free. Just before sunset, after all his soldier friends had gone into the city, he left too. Villa Alumphados was already in the outskirts of Athens: a short walk took him to the city gates and then into the city itself. The red sun was setting behind the heavily fortified rock promontory on which the Acropolis - the "high town" - stood, overshadowing the city which lay at its feet.

City-state Athens, with about 160 000 inhabitants, was the most powerful member of the Greek Empire, stretching from the Black Sea to Northern Spain and including Italy and most of Turkey. Spardes strode confidently through the noisy dirty narrow streets, now cooling down after the heat of the day, and illuminated with hundreds of twinkling oil-lamps.

His interest lay on the other side of the city where there was a more-or-less permanent fairground. Eagerly Spardes cleaved his way through the dense crowds around the booths, smelling the frying octopus rings, souvlaki, giros, and stopped for a moment to watch a small shrivelled man playing a double-flute in front of a basket from which emerged the swaying head of a snake. Then he continued strolling across a small open space where a juggler was skilfully keeping six small oil-lamps in the air at once, another where five small acrobats were making an inverted pyramid, looked longingly into a tent filled with drunken singing soldiers, and good-humouredly avoided the hand of a booth proprietor who with gleaming black eyes tried to entice him in to see "An Arab Princess, Sire, and you've never seen a bigger..." I never did hear what was so big about the Arab Princess because at that moment Spardes saw in the distance what I wanted. Here I must test the quality of my Host and the effectiveness of my training. We sauntered over.

Outside a big garish striped tent a wooden plank platform had been erected - about the size of a large room and 1m off the ground. It was brightly illuminated by oil-lamps of a type I hadn't seen before. They had long bright flames from their long flat wicks. A small dark man with a loud voice was heckling the dense crowd that swirled around the feet of the platform. In the centre of the platform stood a big solid-looking, thick-necked Turkish wrestler, about forty years old. His head was shaved, he wore only a brief loin-cloth and was watching impassively with folded arms. His body gleamed with oil under the massed lights.

`Roll, up roll up! Is there a man amongst you who can stand three minutes against the Terrible Turk? Only three rounds to win a week's average pay for a working man!'

He turned to look down at a noisy knot of about ten men, unarmed but obviously soldiers by their uniforms.

`Hah, some of our brave defenders!' he said ironically to the crowd at large. `Is there not one of you heroes will show his courage to these tax-paying citizens and romp with the Turk for three minutes? All you have to do is stay on your feet. Only three minutes and think how much wine you will be able to buy!'

Spardes looked at the group of soldiers pushing each other in indecision. Behind it he could see several elaborate sedan-chairs, carried by muscular slaves. One chair was screened with fine white gauze, and slightly apart from the others. High-born ladies out for a thrill. He could hear their high-pitched voices, talking and cackling with each other.

There was a burst of cheering from the group of soldiers and one of their number was reluctantly pushed forward, heaved up onto the stage and stood there, embarrassed and dazzled by the lights. He was a well-built broad-shouldered young giant of about twenty-five, with a sword scar on his right leg. He seemed a competent fighter and I glanced over at the Turk to see any reactions, but he was still in his motionless pose.

The barker now had his arm around the shoulders of the soldier and was offering him something to drink in a big two-handed beaker. The soldier automatically took the cup but his friends were shouting warningly at him - something about it being doped. The barker looked annoyed but took the cup back.

He offered it to the Turk who without further ado flung up his head and took a deep swallow, so deep that some of the liquid slopped down his chin. He handed the cup back to the soldier, who took a smaller and more cautious sip. As the beaker was handed back to the barker I had my first clear look at it. I had seen that beaker, or its twin, before - in the Greek Glyptothek Collection in Munich!

And I had read the ticket under it.

The two fighters moved to opposite ends of the platform. The soldier removed his tunic and started to oil himself from a small jar: the Turk merely waited, arms by his sides. The crowd was now getting excited and exchanging bets amongst themselves. One old harpy in a sedan-chair was leaning down and shouting at three soldiers, holding up her hand with four fingers extended. The barker was crouching down on the edge of the platform and with a wax tablet in his hands was making bets with members of the audience.

But now the crowd was getting impatient and so after waving his tablet one more time, the barker tucked it away inside his tunic and retired to the rear of the platform. He returned with a strange stool-shaped object which turned out to be a sand-clock. This he set down at the edge of the platform and straightening up called the two wrestlers together. He made a few graphic gestures showing that eye-gouging, biting and finger-breaking were forbidden and then dramatically upturned the sand-clock.

Sudden silence and the fight began.

Arms outstretched the two fighters were circling each other, fists up like old Victorian bare-fist pugilists. (Or like Victorian pugilists would be in about 23 centuries, I reminded myself.) They were making cautious jabs at each other with hard-clenched fists, measuring their opponent's reach, their feet slapping on the boards. The soldier was experienced and quick: the Turk was slower but more assured. I would have said he was the stronger too.

One minute, and the crowd was shouting impatiently. The Turk made a swing at the soldier but he swayed back and easily avoided it. But the Turk had apparently over-reached himself for the soldier stepped forwards, saw the opening and jabbed at the Turk's head, fetching it a glancing blow. The Turk staggered back, forearms up to protect himself, and sank for a moment on one knee. The crowd roared and the barker was immediately at the edge of the platform, tablet and stylus out, taking new bets.

I looked at some of the elder citizens who were watching. They exchanged knowing grins.

The Turk shook his head and still avoiding the soldier's stabbing fists, groggily staggered to his feet. Now he changed his tactics and advanced slowly, long simian arms outstretched and talking softly. The soldier, after making a few ineffective jabs at the out-stretched arms, and apparently forgetting he only had to stay on his feet for another 90 seconds, also went into a wrestler's crouch.

Two minutes.

They were circling around each other, legs well back, reaching out to grab quickly at an opponent's wrist and then just as quickly snatching it back. The soldier was not looking too well, his eyes seeming a bit unfocussed. Suddenly the soldier grabbed the Turk's extended left wrist, apparently striving for a hip-throw, but then didn't do anything with it! The Turk twisted his left hand up, and swung across his right hand. Now he had the soldier's right wrist in both his hands! Crab-like he jumped back, pulling the soldier forward flat onto his face, crossed his right

leg over with an agile leap and sat down on the soldier's extended arm. One pull and he could break the soldier's arm against the elbow joint.

The soldier, face down flat on the boards, screamed and the barker was suddenly at the edge of the platform again, this time with a small wicker basket. Reading from his tablet he collected coins reluctantly handed up by the soldiers, carefully counting them. When he was satisfied he tapped the Turk on the shoulder with the wax tablet, who released the soldier. In an apparently friendly gesture the Turk helped up his late opponent, and with an arm over his shoulder supported him to the edge of the platform where he smilingly lowered him down to his friends.

It was obvious to me that all this was to hide the fact that the soldier was drugged.

The Turk slowly returned to the centre of the platform, turned round to face the crowd and impassively crossed his arms again. 'Who's next?' he seemed to be asking.

In the meantime the soldiers, after looking at their champion who could now barely stand, realised that they had somehow been had and were turning to the platform shouting abuse and waving their fists. Some of the crowd were supporting them and it looked as though a disturbance was about to develop. Two soldiers made to climb up onto the platform but the barker waved at some-one at the edge of the crowd over their heads and immediately a tall Greek wearing an ornate helmet pushed roughly through the spectators, followed by five burly slaves carrying wooden staves. He had a bored look on his face as though he had performed this chore many times before. The two soldiers were dragged off the stage, one almost at the feet of the unmoving impassive Turk, who looked down at him contemptuously. The others were driven away from the edge of the platform and the crowd slowly dispersed.

'Son of Ares!' said Spardes who had watched the whole scene without moving a muscle. 'That guy's a killer!'

'Now would be a fitting moment for you to intervene for the honour of the Motherland,' I intoned. 'But ponder carefully on what I told you.'

Chapter 12

'What!?' said Spardes nervously, 'I won't stand a chance - look at his arms, he's an old gladiator or something!'

'He is an old man who has done many cruel things. But now he is about to meet his Nemesis and you are the chosen instrument. You have but to heed me. I Almus have spoken.'

This was going to be tricky. I had never "stage-managed" a fight before. In any case he was going to have to do most of it himself. Theoretically I could take over his body completely, but this would be like the President of a big company going to the shop-floor and ordering all the personnel around individually. Very slow and inefficient. I must just influence/motivate the President and keep the chain of command intact. I was going to have to rely a lot on the reflex pathways I had programmed into his brain with my training program.

The biggest problem was that I would only have the same information that Spardes would have - and in particular what his eyes saw. My sole advantage would be that I would not be distracted by any pain that Spardes might encounter and could lend him my greater experience through internal conversation.

'And remember that my help must be hidden from all others,' I added.

He made an acquiescent noise then crossed his hands on his chest, bowed his head with closed eyes and murmured some words to himself.

The barker was busy counting the money in his basket at the rear of the platform when Spardes appeared out of the crowd. A thick-necked slave, thinking he was coming to support the soldiers, tried to bar him, holding his stave in both hands before him.

Without breaking his step, Spardes put his hand to his head as though to scratch his ear and then brought the edge down with a short blurringly fast chop. There was a sharp "crack" and the slave was left looking stupidly at the two halves of his stave as Spardes brushed past him and vaulted lightly onto the platform. No one else seemed to have noticed.

'That was foolish. Remember my words,' I said.

Spardes now stood up slowly, shading his eyes from the bright lights. Someone recognised him and there was an encouraging shout followed by some mocking laughter. Spardes grinned back shyly, obviously glad to be recognised.

The barker at the back of the platform, hearing the shouts, turned around surprised, and then came forward. He looked at Spardes appraisingly, taking in his physique.

'You want to dance with the Turk?' he said, jerking his thumb towards the motionless oiled figure.

Spardes leaned forwards, holding his hands together and swaying slightly.

'Is it true you will give me a week's pay just to stand up to the Turk for three minutes?' he asked.

Quickly suppressed amusement, followed by a gleam of avarice chased itself across the barker's rat-like face. He seemed about to say something then changed his mind. He put his arm around Spardes and turned him to face the front of the platform.

'Here is another brave soldier from ..' he turned to Spardes, who told him '..from the Guard Alumphados.' He raised his voice:

'Who will wager that this strapping young man will be able to stay on his feet for three minutes with the Terrible Turk? Not so terrible now, he is tired from his last fight.' He looked across at the oil-covered impassive figure who obediently unbent slightly.

From the crowds milling slowly through the fair-grounds, a new group of spectators had assembled now and were looking upwards in anticipation, their faces white in the glare of the oil-lamps. The slaves and their staves had disappeared and the group of sedan-chairs, which had distanced themselves discreetly during the near-riot had now moved back. Spardes could hear them talking and laughing. As before, the chair screened with the white veil held itself a little apart.

Two soldiers, who Spardes recognised, were at the edge of the platform, shouting at him and making warning signs, but Spardes just smiled and waved back vaguely. He stripped off his tunic, oiled himself and then took up a position at the side of the platform folding his arms in an exaggerated imitation of the Turk. The crowd roared with laughter.

Meanwhile the barker had gone to the front of the platform with his wax tablet and was busy taking bets. Hearing the laughter he looked back over his shoulder. For a moment he stared at Spardes clowning, shook his head slightly in wonderment and then turned back to the crowd.

Finally all bets had been laid and the crowd was getting impatient. With one final interrogative wave of his wax tablet over the heads of the spectators, the

barker turned towards the centre of the platform and motioned the two contestants together. For the first time Spardes, and me, had a good look at the Terrible Turk.

Close up he looked slightly older, say forty-five, with a small conical-shaped shaved skull. High Asiatic cheek-bones, shrewd brown eyes almost hidden in the folds of fat around them. A thick bull-like neck leading into massive shoulders. But there was little fat on the rest of his body, gleaming with freshly applied oil. Long arms with muscular biceps. Short springy thick legs with enormous thighs. There was a thick mat of black hair on his massive chest, but his arms had been shaved. With some old white scars on his right shoulder he looked a formidable and brutal fighting machine. A retired mercenary from the Persian Wars probably.

The introductions were made and the ritual wine cup was produced. As before, the Turk took a draught and then the barker handed the cup to Spardes. Before he drank he glanced down into it and I saw what I had suspected - two drinking orifices!

`Remember!' I warned.

Spardes took the cup by the handle offered, spun round waving it to the crowd and as they applauded quickly changed hands. He waved it a bit more and then after a small draught of what appeared normal watered wine, threw it dramatically into the crowd. The barker said something to himself and dashed to the edge of the platform but as no one handed up what looked after-all like a normal wine-cup, he waited a moment indecisively and then fetched the sand-clock.

The moment it appeared the crowd quieted down. He placed it at the edge of the platform and then suddenly turned it over. The mass of figures and faces jerked to stillness, every eye fixed on the two fighters. The noise of the fairground dropped away, we seemed to be in another world.

The two fighters circled each other. The Turk, noticing Spardes's slim build, had his arms outstretched and was going to go directly for a grapple, holding his arms out and back to conceal their length. Now and then his hands swept out crablike, but it was obvious he was "grabbing short." Spardes, fists up, followed him, sliding flat-footed around, his feet hissing on the floorboards.

30 seconds. The crowd was becoming restive, wanting some action. And then, inching closer, the Turk made a grab, his surprisingly long arm leaping out to grab Spardes's right wrist. Spardes easily saw it coming and merely moved his arm outwards, out of the way. Another grab, this time sweeping in from the left and aiming to scoop in Spardes's left hand. To make sure he had leaned forwards. This time Spardes let him contact and for a moment actually grasp his left wrist. There was a gleam of triumph in the little brown eyes but then Spardes leapt forwards and stabbed the Turk's right biceps muscle, at the last moment folding his hand so the middle-finger knuckle protruded. The Turk's hand opened helplessly and he leapt back as though stung, clasping his arm numbed by the nerve block. The crowd gasped. Spardes recovered like lightning, his hands up again in front of him.

1 minute. The barker shouted something to the Turk in a tongue Spardes didn't understand. Whatever it was, the Turk held off, just circling. Probably waiting for the drug they thought Spardes had drunk to take effect. A quick glance at the barker who was looking at Spardes in puzzlement. The Turk was advancing crabwise now, arms with clutching hands stretched before him. The nerve block would only last 30 seconds or so. There were warning cries from the crowd and suddenly Spardes felt the back of his legs touching the sand-clock and staggered as he lost his balance! In an instant the Turk was on top of him, his

immense weight pressing down, his legs around his waist in a murderous scissor-lock.

Spardes felt his lower ribs going and tried to push the trunk-like legs apart, but arm muscles are no match for leg muscles. Suddenly the pressure slightly relaxed as the barker jumped over the recumbent pair and leaning outwards over the crowd, scratched more bets on his wax tablet.

Spardes tried to wriggle free but his every move was countered by the Turk who moved his weight to compensate.

'Now I've got you, you tricky Greek bastard,' he whispered venomously in Spardes's ear 'and I'm going to squeeze the juice out of you.'

The new bets had been taken and the pressure returned, becoming quickly unbearable.

'Give up?' said the barker's voice from somewhere, heard through a red haze of pain.

'The knee!' I shouted. Spardes pulled his right hand free and jabbed with his thumb at a point on the inside of the Turk's broad right knee. Nothing!

'Higher!' Again a jab, delivered with the last of his force and suddenly the leg went slack as though broken. The relief of pain was immediate and for a moment he just lay there savouring it.

'Push,' I said. Amid cries of amazement he slowly pushed the numbed leg aside, making like it was difficult. Finally he climbed heavily to his feet and stood looking down at the Turk trying to climb up on one leg, the other stretched out beside him, but recovering quickly.

'Behind and kick his head!' I shouted, but Spardes just stood panting, waiting for the Turk to get to his feet. There was a deep-throated roar of approval from the enormous crowd which had by now assembled around the platform. Apparently Spardes had done the right "sporting" thing. I hoped he hadn't made a foolish mistake.

There was a flurry of activity in the crowd behind us, with the shouting of odds and the clinking of money changing hands. At the rear a deep voice was shouting loudly.

Spardes massaged his ribs and without taking his eyes from the Turk, viciously back-heeled the stool-sized sand-clock off the platform. There was some laughter and clapping. This was going to be a fight to the finish now, with no time-limit.

The Turk was rubbing his leg and looking upwards, his little vindictive brown eyes filled with hate. He straightened his leg experimentally and then bent it again, but this time he had his toe bent underneath it. I didn't have to tell Spardes that the Turk was feigning.

With a feline rubbery bound the Turk leapt to his feet, this time punching, using his long reach. Spardes covered his head and chest, taking the flurry of blows on his forearms, side-stepping round, acutely conscious of the edges of the platform behind him. The Turk was pushing him around anti-clockwise and I didn't for the moment realise that he was favouring his right leg and right arm. All I could hear was the panting of the two fighters and the thump of their feet on the boards.

The constant blows on Spardes's forearms were beginning to numb them. He tried a few blows at the Turk, but he was outreached. I noticed the Turk was working to a plan - smash several blows at Spardes who would retreat clockwise. Then he would pause a moment, advance his right foot a bit, step back a bit with his left foot to turn and follow Spardes and then recommence the battering.

Spardes was feeling bad, shaking his head which had received a few glancing blows. This could not last much longer. I waited another moment then:

`Down quickly and get his right knee again!'

Spardes suddenly ducked, just as the Turk was changing position and grabbed his forward thrust right ankle. This was dangerous! Out of the corner of Spardes's eyes I saw the Turk's hands disappear, certainly swinging up for a two-handed hammerblow on Spardes's exposed neck. But Spardes swung round his already stretched-back right hand, with the thumb hard outstretched, and struck exactly the same point inside the Turk's trunk-like thigh that he had hit before. For good measure he swung back and hit again.

Immediate results! The leg just collapsed and Spardes, still holding the ankle straightened up. The Turk fell back heavily flat on his back, arms out-stretched, the crash raising dust clouds from the floor-boards.

The crowd was beside itself now, people pressed against and leaning over the edge of the platform and waving their arms. Several were shouting `Time! time!' in unison, but no one, least of all the two fighters, was paying any attention.

`Get up, get up, you poisoning Turkish frog!' snarled Spardes, dancing around him, fists up.

The Turk, who apart from a numbed leg was completely unharmed, scabbled around on the floor to continually face Spardes, like some obscene hairy wounded spider.

`The head! Kill him now!' I shouted `You won't get another chance!'

But Spardes had learnt and was watching carefully. The block was wearing off and the Turk's toe was curling round under his foot ready to repeat his tigerish leap. He swung his left arm out to balance and then leapt forward, his right hand this time stretched out to grab Spardes's genitals.

Seeing this there were howls of rage and warning from the crowd.

The Turk wasn't to know it, but this gesture placed him in exactly the same pose as the stone statue that had for so long served as a practice target for my Host. We both instantly recognised this.

`Hide this from the crowd!' I said.

So obediently he turned his back to them, swiftly raised his hand up to his right ear and then brought the edge down with all the force of his body on the Turk's broad forearm in a tremendous chop. There was a sharp "crack" and the Turk screamed, looking down incredulously at his hand now hanging uselessly on the end of his broken arm.

This was really the end of the contest but everyone didn't just quietly pay their debts and move on to the next entertainment.

Far from it. They were much too excited. The barker tried to claim that the contest had not lasted three minutes, as the sand-clock had been destroyed. But this had only enraged the crowd even more. They knew it had lasted at least five minutes. Then someone had examined the trick wine-cup and climbed on the stage to exhibit it. The barker finally threw an oil-lamp at the crowd and tried to escape towards the rear.

Spardes quietly slipped down over the edge of the platform, helped by friendly but distracted hands. They were more interested in getting their money back.

The angry crowd had lost all control of itself and was now rapidly becoming the centre of a general riot, with bystanders joyfully running to join it, to smash and loot. Above the deep roar of the riot there was a splintering crash as the platform tipped over and fell, followed by a loud creaking as planks were torn from it. Oil lamps burst with yellow splashes of flame and adjacent booths caught fire, their

curtains going up in golden cascades. Over the head of the crowd planks were rising and falling as rival factions fought with each other.

In the distance could be heard a rhythmical metallic clanging. The Guard was arriving - banging their swords on their shields to make way!

As Spardes backed away through the swaying mob, he heard the thump of approaching footsteps and a panting voice saying 'Make way, Make way!'

He was in the path of an escaping sedan-chair. Two slaves were carrying it and a third, running behind and swinging a club, was trying to fend off three men who were taking advantage of the riot, obviously intent on robbing the occupant, if nothing worse. As the chair swung to the right and tipped over dangerously I saw it was the one that had stood apart. The white veil was still in place.

With some still unformed idea in my head, I was about to tell Spardes to help, but he needed no prompting. He ran forward and with a chop from the edge of his hand broke the arm of one of the robbers who was hanging onto the chair. Quickly turning he hit another below the ear with the heel of his hand who dropped limply and as Spardes turned to the third he found the slave had already struck him with a club and he was running away as fast as he could.

The chair righted itself and the two slaves carrying it were getting in step to continue their flight when there was a sharp voice from inside and the two slaves stopped, still holding the chair suspended between them. The slave with the club went to the side of the chair and after a moment bowed and then turned to Spardes.

'My Lady would speak with you,' he said.

Spardes approached curiously and the veil moved slightly.

'You have done well,' said a hidden contralto voice. 'What is your name and who is your Master?'

Spardes was suddenly covered with embarrassment at hearing the cultured tones of the Ruling Class. He looked down and shuffled his feet.

'Well?' said the voice imperiously. 'Er...Spardes. I have no Master, your Ladyship,' he muttered, blushing.

'You mean you are a Citizen?' continued the voice in slightly incredulous tones.

Spardes shuffled again and nodded his head.

'Then here is a token of my appreciation for Citizen Spardes,' the voice said, with a hint of amusement. The veil moved again and a small clinking leather purse fell on the ground before him.

He was about to bend down to pick up the purse, thinking that he might as well take what the Fates provided, after a so-far profitless night. On a sudden impulse I stopped him.

He looked back to the flames leaping up from the now completely razed wrestling booth. A forest of spears silhouetted against the glare showed that the Guard had now arrived and was ruthlessly dispersing the riot. The way was clear for the chair to return safely.

'The way home is safe, your Ladyship,' he said and turned away with a bow.

The beefy slave recovered the purse, dropped it inside the chair and snapped a short command to the two carriers.

As the sedan-chair resumed its journey, Spardes took a deep breath of relief, wiping the cold sweat from his brow.

He had been more afraid of her than of the Terrible Turk!

Spardes returned home through the still lively fairgrounds and flopped down exhausted in his bed in the barracks.

I Withdrew - it was time to review events.

*

I was pleased with Spardes. He was only a young peasant lad, but he had shown persistence in following my training course, and courage in standing up to an experienced fighter.

He had listened to me, I had been able to transfer some simple Karate tricks to him, and hopefully he would continue to follow my advice.

But what advice? He was still Private Spardes, an uncultured lout, and there was no way he was going to be able to carry me around Greece looking for Extra-terrestrial influences. I had detected some signs of intelligence in him, or at least quick thinking, but his whole cultural persona needed changing. Especially his way of speaking, his accent. I could see how the faces of people changed whenever he spoke to them, the way they leant forwards and half-closed their eyes to understand, and then looked sideways at their neighbours in amusement. Accent must be as important in Ancient Greece as it is (er ... that is, will be) in 21st Century England. How could I get him away from his soldier friends and into a more cultured environment? And quickly; I couldn't stay in Ancient Greece indefinitely.

*

When morning came Spardes found that the news about his victory over the well-known Terrible Turk, and the riot that followed it, had made him locally famous.

I was watching him closely. Unexpected fame is also a test. But although he did behave rather more confidently, he was still an inarticulate farm-lad, obliged to hear others in the Troop "explaining" his sudden success to each other. The main difference was that a lot more people now seemed to think he would have a chance in the Games, and there was talk of raising a fund to send him to Olympia, and to bet on him.

His immediate problem was his ribs, which were very sore and bruised. The Villa doctor prodded him learnedly and gave him a purgative, which I made him throw away. About a week's rest was all he needed. I reflected that after 2500 years of medical effort, we in the 21st Century have come back to acknowledge that for most "natural" illnesses, the body still has the best built-in self-repair service.

So though he was burning to continue his training, he was forced to take it easy.

Chapter 13

There was a new development the next morning, with the arrival of a messenger on a horse. The presence of the horse alone assured the attention of the off-duty soldiers who stood around looking at it while the messenger was inside the Villa delivering his message. It was in fact the first horse I had seen on this Mission. Not knowing much about horses I could only see that it was white, medium sized, had a bridle and reins but no saddle - just an elaborately woven blanket. But the soldiers were learnedly pointing out various aspects of its anatomy to each other. They might have been young boys looking at a new ground-car in my time.

The messenger exited the villa and self-consciously untied his steed and clopped off under the silent admiring gaze of the bystanders.

Spardes returned to his duties but was interrupted after a short while by a small slave that he had not seen before. His dress proclaimed him to be in the Villa domestic service.

'Lord Alumphados wishes your presence,' said the slave, looking up at Spardes with awe.

Spardes quickly returned to the barracks, divested himself of his weapons, changed quickly into his ceremonial uniform and followed his guide into the Villa.

I looked round curiously as we passed through several rooms. Spardes, and therefore I, had never been here before. Tall, cool, airy rooms, furnished but mostly empty of people except for now and then pretty young female slaves who were engaged in cleaning. They looked up wide-eyed at the sound of Spardes's military sandals.

Finally his diminutive guide led him down a long cool marble-floored corridor lined with busts on pillars, and tapped discreetly on a pair of high doors. The door was opened from the inside and his guide, after a gesture to him to enter, turned and left.

This was the courtyard, the atrium, around which the Villa was built. An internal colonnaded walk under red-tiled roofs surrounded a marble-paved open space. A few toga-dressed figures were talking to each other in the blinding white sunlight and some slaves were watering plants. Two naked children were noisily playing in the fountain. Spardes was led down the shaded side of the walk and up to a trio - two women sitting on a rose-coloured marble bench, and standing before them, a grey-haired distinguished-looking man holding a wax tablet.

As Spardes approached they turned round and looked at him silently. Spardes halted and saluted.

'Private Spardes,' said the slave and retired to stand against the wall, hands behind his back.

Lord Alumphados, Spardes recognised him immediately, looked rather nonplussed.

'Spardes,' he began, then paused. 'Spardes, I have heard of your exploit the other evening and must congratulate you on the honour you bring to your Troop.'

Spardes was suddenly conscious of the intense gaze of the two women. One was the matronly Lady Lydia, of course, about 50, and the other was one of her daughters. Lady Thera, he remembered. A dark elegant lady of about 35 with gleaming black eyes.

'I can see why,' said Lady Lydia to her daughter.

Lord Alumphados cleared his throat.

'Are you happy here, er .. food all right, that sort of thing. Eh?'

He reminded me of a Field Marshal inspecting the Other Ranks cook-house.

'Yes, my Lord, I am very happy,' said Spardes, surprised.

The two women exchanged glances and grimaced. That accent again!

'Well, there's a young lady of our acquaintance who was most impressed by your achievement, in particular by your helping her to avoid a rather nasty incident - although why she was there in the first place passes comprehension...' he added, frowning.

He paused.

Lady Thera seemed about to say something but her mother put a restraining hand on her arm.

'At all events' he continued, 'it appears she was er... most impressed, and has asked if you would like to Change Service and er ... serve with...'

To Spardes's surprise the two women giggled.

'Oh, Daddy!' said the daughter.

Lord Alumphados looked annoyed, but persisted.

'Lady Helen is the wife of Lord Perikles, our most popular leader, so I hardly need tell you that transferring to his Service is a considerable step-up for a young man. A most considerable step-up. I can only advise you to accept.'

Spardes was astonished, but I was delighted - this could be the break I was looking for.

`Thank you my Lord, but I have been very happy er... I have lots of friends here ... and for the chance you gave me...'

`Accept,' I said.

`Yes, my Lord.'

`Your thoughts do you credit, my boy,' said the Lord in an avuncular tone, `but we mustn't stand in the way of a rising young ... er... a rising...'

He paused, trying hard to think of something complimentary that Spardes might conceivably aspire to, but was forced to break off because of a veritable storm of giggles from the two women.

Spardes looked across blankly at the two women who were now holding on to each other for support and gasping.

`He's done very well but he'll only stay there as long as ... as long as ...,' gasped Lady Thera.

`Yes, yes, as long as what?' asked her mother, her lips twitching expectantly.

`As long as he can keep it up,' finished the gracious Lady and they both almost fell on the floor, weeping helplessly.

Lord Alumphados frowned, made some marks on the tablet he was holding and held it out to the slave impatiently.

`Then good luck,' he said dismissively.

I too looked thoughtfully at the two semi-hysterical women, beginning to suspect the cause of their mirth. Well, why not? It was a way up ... God, I was at it myself now.

*

Uncomprehendingly Spardes returned to his bed in the barracks to pack his kit and his few personal belongings. He looked around the empty sunny room, bewildered. Unknowingly caught up with someone from the distant future, events were moving too fast for him. I tried to raise his spirits, but he was rather melancholic. This had been his first employment, his first taste of real-life after leaving farm and family three years ago. He had carved out a simple little niche for himself here, and although he had no real friends, these soldiers were the only people he knew. What did the future hold, the new Branch Timeline I was fashioning for him? I couldn't have answered him: I didn't know myself.

With his kit-bag over his shoulder he bid adieu to Private Hippos, who was on duty at the Villa main door, arranging to meet the other soldiers of his Troop in a well-known wine-bar for a proper celebration later.

*

It was midday, about 30 degrees Centigrade but dry as he started out on his solitary journey to Villa Perikles, about 12km away and on the coast. He trudged into the town, virtually alone because of the heat, through the outskirts with most of the shops and houses closed up in what the world would one day call the "siesta" - a word from Spanish, a language which was a corrupted residue left over from the Latin of the Roman Empire which hadn't even started yet. Lulled by Spardes's steady pace I looked around. The sun looked exactly the same as it did in my time, the wind caused the grass to toss in exactly the same way it would do in the 21st Century. The people looked the same, and why shouldn't they? I knew intellectually that 2500 years is just nothing in the life of the sun, in the history of Evolution. All the amazing things that humanity was going to do were far in the future, and yet at the same time somehow in the past. I imagined myself sitting in our shop in Munich, looking back at what humanity had done and then looked at

myself here in Ancient Greece looking forward... Names slid through my head at random, each one making my head ring like a bell with the associations produced - King Arthur, Vivaldi, Edison, Henry the Eighth, Faraday, Washington, Robin Hood, Einstein, Himmler, Edward the Confessor, Napoleon, Goethe, Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Walt Disney, Debussy...

I began to feel dizzy. You can easily get drunk on historical perspective. But Spardes was unaware of all the deep philosophical thoughts going on in one corner of his brain. His problem was that he was very thirsty and hadn't found a bar open yet.

We crossed the fairground. There was nothing to be seen of the wrestling booth apart from some still smoking timbers. He looked up at the 150m high Acropolis to the south where the foundations for the Parthenon temple were being laid, but there was no shade from it at midday. However he finally found a small bar that was unaccountably still open. A short pause and then along the side of the dried-up Ilissus River until he hit the main 11km long thoroughfare, protected by the famous Long Walls, which would lead him to Piraeus, the port of Athens.

It was interesting how the Greeks had solved the problem of having their city on a hill 11km inland from a port. They had built a wide paved road between the two. But realising that this could be very easily cut in time of war, and the city starved into submission, they had started to build high walls at each side of it – the so-called Long Walls. I knew that these walls were going to prove their worth in the Penelopennesian Wars that were coming in about 30 years, but still looked at them doubtfully. 22km was a long line to defend, not counting the port of Piraeus and of course Athens itself.

Now the main part of his journey started, a 10km hike down the long road to Piraeus.

Slowly the land dropped away under his steady plodding, until finally he passed the last hill. The air became slightly cooler and he could smell the sea. And then suddenly, with a dip in the ground he could see a straight line from horizon to horizon and under it the intense blue of the sea. He had reached the coast.

The road curved around before descending into the port of Piraeus and Spardes knew that his destination, the Villa Perikles, was off to the right on a promontory, over-looking the port. He turned off, noticing how the northernmost of the Long Walls curved out to also bring the Villa into its protection. That bespoke influence in high places, I thought.

He made his way up a paved road. It was late afternoon and already noticeably cooler when he finally trudged up to the elaborate arched gate in the high wall surrounding the Villa, under the stares of two tall immobile coal-black soldiers wearing full uniform. He made to pass between them but they silently crossed their spears to bar his passage. Like in some old historical holo, I thought.

Then he noticed a small door to one side marked "Reception". After stating his business, a slave, wearing a white tunic edged in purple and gold, led him across an enormous marble-paved courtyard. He could see that the Villa Perikles completely surpassed the modest Villa Alumphados. It was more a public building than a private villa.

He was guided across the wide courtyard towards a long low marble building with the usual red-tiled roof and into an empty room that judging by the desk in the corner, was an office. He dumped his kit on the marble floor and sat down with a sigh of relief in a wooden chair, easing his still-sore ribs. Another slave, also wearing a gold-and-purple edged tunic entered and offered him a beaker of wine mixed with water which he drank gratefully. Still holding the beaker he looked

around. A cool black-and-white tessellated marble floor, an elaborate beaten brass stand holding three oil-lamps and on the wall a complex black-on-yellow painting of the chorus in a play, dressed for some reason as birds. It was quiet and the faint smell of baking bread reminded him he was hungry. There was a closed door to the left of the desk.

After a while he stood up and walking curiously round the office, tried the door. It was open and led directly into a long marble-floored room.

He looked around in amazement. Only by a great stretch of the imagination could he determine that this was the soldiers' quarters - to apply the word "barracks" seemed almost profane.

There were about 50 beds - divans would be a better word - half down each side of the room, mostly screened off from each other by hanging drapes, but some in pairs. The beds were wooden and covered with thick elaborately decorated pads.

Swords, shields and embossed pieces of body-armour were neatly stacked down the middle of the room, and at the far end was a rack filled with long spears.

Apart from three slaves sitting on a bench, cleaning pieces of equipment and talking to each other, the long room was empty. No soldiers were visible, but there was a faint smell of perfume in the air.

He closed the door and returned to his seat. He had only just sat down when he heard the familiar stamp of military sandals outside and the doorway darkened as two uniformed figures entered.

Recognising an officer, Spardes immediately stood up and saluted.

'Private Spardes.'

The officer, a tall good-looking man of about thirty-five with a short beard and a rich draped uniform with jewelled rank badges, looked around slightly puzzled, as though he had expected something else. He languidly returned the salute.

'I am Captain Glyptos, commander of the Guard Perikles, and this is Company Quartermaster Chios. You will be in his company.'

Feeling the CQM's eyes on him, Spardes looked across but averted his eyes immediately. A solidly built man of about forty, with a short beard similar to his commanding officer. But elegantly curled hair, full red lips and long tapering fingers continually active on his decorated leather sword-belt. A raving queer, if ever he'd seen one!

Looking into Spardes's mind I found none of the sad pity that we felt for the rare homosexual in the 21st Century. (**We** knew it had been caused by a careless mother who had not had her hormone levels checked during pregnancy.) No, Spardes compared homosexuals to aggressive women and from past experience he knew they found him particularly attractive. He also knew they could be overwhelmingly friendly or viciously spiteful, and wanted no part of them. As a child he had had to submit, but he wasn't going to submit anymore.

'Christ, another complication,' I thought.

Watched by the officer with a faint smile, the CQM then gave Spardes the usual talk that hasn't changed down the centuries, but delivered in an odd, slightly nasal voice that would have given him away if nothing else had... 'keep your equipment clean and in good order, remember to always be respectful and obedient to those placed in authority above you...' but loaded with innuendo that I had never realised could be there.

He was seeking eye-contact but Spardes just stared straight ahead.

'Yes, sir,' he replied woodenly.

'Where is your slave?' asked Captain Glyptos suddenly.

`I have no slave, sir,' replied Spardes.

This was in fact the first time Spardes had spoken, since he had stood up to salute and give his name.

I saw the familiar look of pain cross the faces of the two officers as they heard his accent.

They looked at him in horror for a moment, but were saved from comment by a figure who appeared at the door. It was another slave. He addressed himself to the Captain.

`Compliments of Lady Helena and Private Spardes is to report to Sergeant Plutes, sir.'

The two soldiers exchanged glances and Captain Glyptos said:

`Ah, indeed. Well, yes. I think you'll be more at home in his Troop.'

`But we'll still be sharing the same mess, lad,' said the CQM with a smile.

Spardes saluted and left. He followed the slave across the courtyard again, this time to another smaller and somehow more utilitarian-looking building. The slave looked in through one of the windows but apparently not finding the person sought, led Spardes round the corner of the building to what he immediately recognised as a small exercise square. Here there were about twenty young men dressed in full uniform, practising sword drill under the sharp eye of a sergeant.

Seeing them, the sergeant called out for a corporal to take his place and walked briskly over.

Spardes dropped his kit-bag and stiffening to attention introduced himself.

`Sergeant Plutes,' said the other formally. He was a tall muscular man of about 25 with a pleasant ugly face. No beard, short hair and a scar along the side of his face. With quick decisive movements he looked tough and competent. He dismissed the slave with a nod and then looked at Spardes curiously, obviously wanting to ask him several questions.

He explained that he was in charge of the personal bodyguard for Lady Helena `by day and sometimes by night,' he added.

`Lady Helena is good to us and if you do your duty, you'll be well rewarded. But if you let one word pass your lips about ... he made a suggestive gesture - ... `she'll have you on the hooks.' He called over one of the soldiers and told him to show Spardes to a free bed in the barracks.

He looked at Spardes speculatively. `And then you are to clean up and report to Lady Helen. Private Gaules here will take you to her.'

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Spardes lay down rather nervously on the couch and accepted a beaker of wine and water from a slave. The purpose of his invitation was quite evident.

Lady Helen was reclining gracefully on another couch, parallel and about a meter away.

He looked at her uneasily, and I saw her properly for the first time too. About 45, I estimated, but in very good nick, as they say. Dark eyes, rather thin lips and strong features. I was pleased to see that her dark hair was naturally curled and tied with a white ribbon - I had seen some women around who had dyed their hair into a weird blond colour. Lady Helen was slightly made up with a rather over-white powder on her face and arms and a slight skilful touch of rouge on her cheeks. She was clad only in the long loose dress that I knew was called a "chiton", gathered at the waist, and with ribbons that crossed over, emphasising her large breasts. She looked controlled, intelligent and aristocratic.

Married to a young man when she was 15, she had given him several children. However he had moved up in politics and was a prominent Statesman and General. He had younger mistresses now but they had apparently remained friends and he often returned to her to talk over problems of State. So she had found her own way of compensating for his absence.

She looked a little askance at Spardes - as well she might confronted with an illiterate farm-boy, however masculine.

'And how old are you, Citizen Spardes?' she asked lightly, examining her beaker closely.

'Eighteen, my Lady.'

Lady Helen said something to herself and took a sip from her beaker.

'I saw your fight. I didn't think you stood the slightest chance and lost a lot of money on you. What are you going to do about that?'

Spardes looked confused, and stammered trying to think of something to say. She held up her hand with a faint smile.

'There's nothing to say,' she said, 'You handled yourself very well. So well that Sergeant Plutes almost doesn't believe it. He thinks that if you beat the Terrible Turk you must have had help from the Gods. Can that be true?' she added teasingly.

I could see that if Spardes was more articulate he would have said something like "It's funny you should say that, but actually I did, as a matter of fact." But all he could do was mumble embarrassedly into his drink again.

'I see you are the strong silent type,' said Lady Helen coquettishly.

Spardes was feeling very uncomfortable under this verbal tantalising.

'She is not unattractive for an older lady, albeit talkative,' he thought to himself. 'But if we are to make love, which seems to be the next indicated activity, I do wish she would come to the point. For I am tired, having walked all the way from Athens today, carrying a heavy kit-bag.'

I must have been hearing this through the rather prudish Translator filter. I could only too easily imagine what he had really said to himself.

Well, I too am going to switch in a filter for the activities of the next two hours, referring the reader to the specialised literature on the subject. Suffice be it to say that the 21st Century AD has discovered nothing that was not already well-known in the 5th Century BC.

Spardes returned quite early to his new bed in the barracks of Plutes Troop and was so deeply asleep at midnight that he didn't notice the noisy arrival of his fellow Troop members from a small bar on the sea-front.

Chapter 14

In the morning he woke up and introduced himself to some other members of the Plutes, or Lady Helen Bodyguard Troop. He found them similar to himself, but rather older, not very talkative and undoubtedly heterosexual. He did not have much time to see more because immediately after breakfast he was called into the Troop office where he met Sergeant Plutes again. Not the slightest allusion, by word or deed was made to his last night's activity.

Sergeant Plutes was sitting at a desk with the Corporal of the Troop. They had a piece of thick paper (papyrus?) before them. The Sergeant looked up at him.

'At 9 o'clock you are to report in dress-uniform and no weapons to Aristide Pellucos at this address ...' he pushed the piece of paper forwards.

Spardes unwillingly took the piece of paper and looked at it blankly. He couldn't read: it meant nothing to him.

`You will be under his orders until further notice. Dismiss.' The Sergeant turned back to the Corporal.

But Spardes stood there as though rooted. `Er, Sergeant ...' he said.

`Yes?' snapped the Sergeant, then suddenly understood. He took the paper back from Spardes.

`Corporal Files will show you the way,' he said in a more friendly voice. `Wait outside a moment.'

A few minutes later Corporal Files appeared and conducted Spardes down into the port of Piraeus.

Spardes's way lay along the coast and he looked around with interest at high-prowed, broad-beamed single-sailed boats being unloaded at a long jetty. Slaves were filing off the gangplanks, each with a sack on his back. The sacks were stacked, waiting for donkey-drawn carriages to take them up the 11km to the food markets in Athens. It was a noisy, busy scene. Several more boats were anchored off-shore, waiting to be unloaded and as he watched yet another boat arrived in the bay, its sail crumpling as it turned into wind. There was a smell of spices and it was already another hot day.

Corporal Files led him up a small steep road and without looking at the paper in his hand stopped and knocked at a door set in a white-washed wall.

A young female slave opened the door and they entered a small courtyard. After a moment an old grey-haired man appeared at a balcony and slowly descended.

Corporal Files briefly introduced Spardes, handed over the paper and left. The old man looked tiredly at Spardes.

`Another young man with a strong arm,' he said. He didn't say anything about a weak brain, but I could see it hanging in the air.

`But I must not forget my duties to a guest. Can I offer you anything?'

Spardes declined with an abstracted gesture and looked at the old man puzzled.

`Very well,' he said. `Perhaps I should explain. My name is Aristide Pellucos. You will call me Master. I am a scholar and distantly related to Lady Helen's family. In return for a small stipend to pursue my studies into ..' he looked up at Spardes `... in return for a small stipend, I run, how can I say? a course to provide further education for the various young er...gentlemen she sends me. You have been sent here for this purpose.'

I had a sudden glow of pleasure - this was exactly what I wanted! Obviously Lady Helen was satisfied with Spardes as a stud, and wishing to have him stay around, wanted him to fit better into the back-ground of the Villa Perikles. It was a fantastic stroke of luck and if Spardes was up to absorbing the education offered, my Mission looked much more feasible. I tried to convey some of my elation to Spardes, but with no great success.

`I have worked hard to provide this opportunity. Make sure you avail yourself of it,' I intoned.

`Very well,' he said unenthusiastically, `but what of my training?'

`It will not be forgotten.'

And so started a crash "culture course" for my Host. It seemed a long way round to find an Extra-terrestrial, but it was either get Spardes up to speed or jack it all in and go home.

His tutor, Pellucos, rightly determining that the first thing to do was to improve his accent, started him off on speech training exercises. I tried to listen in, but all I

could hear was "the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain" sort of thing. The Translator had not been designed for this.

Spardes was very resentful. He seemed to feel that if he learnt to speak like the "toffee-nosed bastards" then he was admitting that they were in some way better than he was.

But his internal God was able to motivate him with ornate statements like "It is displeasing for Almus to speak through your mouth with an uncouth tongue". I had nevertheless some sympathy for him, having been brought up in an industrial town in the north of England. I lost my uncouth tongue in my travels around the world, courtesy of His Majesty's Armed Forces.

Next on the list was reading and writing. He proved an apt pupil, mainly because I ruthlessly kept him at his homework. At College I had done the usual "Theory of Learning" course and knew that new knowledge first went into a sort of temporary storage in the brain and could only be transferred to the permanent "neural network" store by constant repetition - from RAM to hard-disk, as my instructor had said. Repetition is the key.

And as I had nothing else to do, I learnt alongside him, looking at the characters of the Phoenician alphabet which I knew the Greeks had taken over and modified for their own speech. I was not surprised to see that in Greek the nouns were masculine, feminine and neuter (the der, die and das which give me so much trouble in present-day Germany). I swear that one day I am going to insert into the fool priest who first thought of this criminally stupid idea and somehow induce him to commit suicide.

It was fascinating to watch Spardes's brain develop. New words were new concepts. I had never before realised how much of our intelligence depends on speech. And as his accent was improving he was becoming less inhibited about using speech, not only with his Master but also with other people he met in his daily duties. He had long internal conversations with himself, where before had reigned brutish silence.

Life settled into a routine. Every morning he would spend two hours with Pellucos, one hour on his own doing "homework", and in the afternoon he was back at barracks in the "Plutes Troop".

Here he learnt his special bodyguard duties. The military life of Ancient Greece was surprisingly diverse. Every Citizen had been trained in the use of arms and in an emergency was expected to help defend the Polis, the City-state. Rich Citizens were expected to pay extra contributions to the State to finance the manufacture of the larger pieces of military technology, fortifications or warships, for instance. There was a small standing army and a ceremonial bodyguard, the "Glyptos Troop", which Spardes had already met. Handsome young men, sons of the nobility, trained in high-stepping ceremonial drill and wearing magnificent uniforms. They were held in derisive contempt by the members of the "Plutes Troop" who thought that they did the real work. "Real work" in this case meant guarding the members of the Perikles family from assassins. Assassins sent not only by rulers of neighbouring kingdoms or City-states but also from rival families in Athens itself.

The "Plutes Troop" were tough fighters of proven loyalty and were trained in all the techniques of what we would today call "counter-terrorism". How to search buildings lining a ceremonial route for hidden bowmen, how to keep the crowd at a distance to avoid the sudden dagger thrust, to test food for poison, to check doors and access to roofs etc. As the "Plutes Troop" was the only group of men that Lady Helen could really trust, it was no wonder that she selected a few of the candidates

herself, with an eye to something more than mere military competence. The occasional visit to Lady Helen was known as the "night shift" and often were the comments murmured behind a raised hand ... "make sure you don't forget your sword", sort of thing. I decided the Ancient Greeks were very similar to the modern French.

Chapter 15

Spardes was not only used as a body-guard for Lady Helen but also for the Lord Perikles. Although Spardes had now become more articulate, he still retained something about him of the aura of a strong, silent man, and was the preferred guard for Lord Perikles when he was in a meeting, either in the Senate at Athens, at ceremonial banquets or at home in his Villa.

Spardes, after opening and closing doors, looking out of windows and behind curtains, would sit against the wall fingering his sword. What he (and I) heard was usually a lot of talk of political intrigue, balancing of power groups and the personalities and weaknesses of unknown politicians. Very boring.

But now and then Lord Perikles would invite some learned man to discuss his thoughts or philosophy.

One regular visitor was a young man from Decelea, a town about 80km north, and friendly to Athens. His name was Leukas. He was about 25, dark, fat, had a small beard and talked rapidly with much gesticulation. I listened with interest but could not make much of what he said. The Translator worked manfully at his excited monologues but expressions like "cosmic awareness" and "ultimate verity" were passed on to me by the Translator with an almost audible shrug of the shoulders.

More informative were the numerous diagrams he sketched on a square of black roughened marble with a piece of limestone. They were geometrical figures, squares with triangles inside them, circles circumscribed around the square and lots of numbers. As near as I could see it, his interest was in finding fundamental ratios that appeared in different branches of knowledge like music, astronomy and geometry. Lord Perikles was particularly interested when one day he produced a device like a one-string fiddle, but with a moveable bridge. Leukas moved the bridge to various previously marked positions and when he plucked the string we heard the major third, fourth, fifth and octave.

Leukas was more interested in how the ratios of the lengths of the string could be related to various geometric constructions than in the sounds produced, but with Lord Perikles it was the opposite. Travelling around in Spardes I had heard Ancient Greek music but it sounded odd, oriental, to my ears. Now I could see that they had no E nor B but had a D sharp in their musical scale.

Leukas, chatting away, was now demonstrating what was apparently an old Greek scale, with quarter-tones. Then he removed the bridge and I could see unevenly spaced horn ridges like the frets on a modern guitar.

'Now listen to this,' he said. 'This is a new scale I discovered last year. I have played it to my musician friends and some were pleased to tell me that they liked it. One has even written songs using it,' he added modestly.

He plucked the string, moving his finger in sequence over the frets.

'It has a strange yet satisfying sound,' said Lord Perikles, thoughtfully. 'Request the presence of Lady Helen,' he said to an attendant slave.

When she arrived, looking rather surprised, Leukas had to run up and down the scale again for her. As far as I could tell, the intervals between the notes were as near as dammit those we used in our music in the 21st Century!

But the Lady Helen revealed herself to be a conservative.

'I don't see what is wrong with the scale we use already,' she said crossly, 'and if we change to this new scale how shall we sing the old songs? And more to the point, how will we sing to the Gods?'

Lord Perikles put his hand on her arm and looked at her admiringly. It really was a pity she was not young any more.

'Who are we to criticise the musicians?' he said, opening his arms and smiling tolerantly. The Artist must be guided by his Muse.'

He turned to Leukas, 'But it is good that the man of science and the man of music can work together.' He ran his finger over the frets on the instrument.

'Where did you receive the idea for this new sort of music?' he asked curiously.

Leukas drew breath to explain but at this point, Lady Helen, losing interest and knowing the conversation was going to become boring, begged to be excused.

'It was in a dream, my Lord,' said Leukas, as soon as Lady Helen had retired. 'My family had sent me to the Oracle at Delphi for the answer to a question that was troubling them, and while I was there the new music was revealed to me in a trance.'

Lord Perikles tugged at his beard.

'Yes,' he said thoughtfully, 'I was speaking to old Phidias last month and he also told me he had dreamt of a new, more realistic way of constructing his statues when as a young man he had once visited Delphi. He says that all sculptors use this method now. But this was before I was born,' he smiled.

The conversation then turned to other subjects but I was intrigued.

I had a quick internal check on the info I had received at Chondisp, where we had decided that the only way the Extra-terrestrial could influence human behaviour would be with some sort of remote controlled probe. It struck me that it would be much more convenient for the E-T to keep its probe at a fixed site, and for individuals to somehow be brought to visit it. The probe would only try to influence gifted individuals, of course, individuals who would be likely to understand the information given, individuals who would then go and propagate the information amongst the population at large.

A good site would be somewhere holy, rarely visited and that only by famous and influential people. Somewhere where the new information would have the authority of the Gods.

Like the Oracle at Delphi.

It seemed it would not be a bad idea to drop by Delphi. Maybe it would be a wild-goose chase but it would make a change from the Villa Perikles. There was certainly nothing here. But how could I get my Host to take me there?

The opportunity arrived a little earlier than I expected. Spardes was on "night shift" the following evening. Not being a voyeur, I would normally Withdraw and use the time for reassessing where I was in my Mission. I was doing just this when I sensed that the main event of the evening was over, but Spardes somehow needed help from his personal God. So I returned to find Spardes and Lady Helen lying on two parallel couches, like nothing had happened.

But Lady Helen was glowing and, as is sadly so often the case, chatty. Or maybe she had been obscurely influenced by the recently-presented play by Sophocles - "Oedipus Tyrannicus", where a woman unwittingly marries her son.

Spardes was sleepy and felt he had adequately done his duty for that evening. He was in no mood for light conversation.

`You were on guard duty when that funny little man - whatshisname - Leukas, was with my husband, weren't you?' Without waiting for an answer she said `He is quite impossible. Fancy wanting to rewrite all our musical heritage.'

She paused. Spardes knew from experience that no answer was required.

`We have a lot of problems at the moment,' she continued inconsequentially, `but the soothsayers don't seem to have a clue. What with the freak thunderstorms of last week, all those dead birds that were washed up on the shore and the dreams my Lord has been having, you would think they would have more than enough omens to go on with. But no.' She waved her hand and continued. `They've been sacrificing and examining the entrails of so many animals that the Villa is beginning to smell like an abattoir. But all they get from the Gods are contradictory messages.'

This was a golden opportunity.

`"The Gods help them that help themselves"' I said to Spardes and he repeated it out aloud.

`So I suppose that as usual we'll just have to...what did you say?!

Spardes repeated the quotation a little self-consciously.

`"Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings"' quoted Lady Helen, in surprise. I too was surprised, but this time with her quote, I thought it was from the Bible somewhere, and so not due to appear for about another 500 years, but apparently the author must have cribbed it from the Greeks.

`Would you care to expand on that illuminating remark?' asked Lady Helen curiously.

`Tell her about the Oracle at Delphi,' I said.

Spardes cleared his throat diffidently.

`Er, well after you left, Leukas said he had been to the Oracle at Delphi.' He stopped.

`Well, go on.'

`That's all. I mean if he got help there...'

There was a pause.

`Perhaps we could too,' finished Lady Helen.

Chapter 16

The next morning Spardes was called in to a curious Sgt. Plutes and told to report to Lady Helen.

He found Lady Helen and Lord Perikles together at breakfast, their elaborate table served by several laves. As befitted his station he remained immobile just inside the door, waiting to be noticed.

Because of the size of the room he could not hear the conversation between them, but Lady Helen was leaning forward talking persuasively, and across the table from her Lord Perikles was eating silently. Once he glanced across speculatively at Spardes.

Lady Helen finished her speech, saying something slowly and emphasising the words by tapping her closed fist gently on the table. Lord Perikles pushed his plate away and sighed. He held his hands out to a slave who washed them in a brass bowl.

He must have said something at the same time because another slave walked over to Spardes and gestured that Spardes follow him to the table.

Lord Perikles looked up at him.

`Lady Helen wishes to consult the Oracle at Delphi and wants you to escort her.' He was watching Spardes narrowly.

Spardes's mouth dropped open.

`Well?'

`Pull yourself together!' I snapped.

He stiffened to attention.

`Well?' repeated Lord Perikles impatiently. Gone was the tolerant patron of the arts and sciences. This was the busy administrator, the head of a turbulent intriguing empire. He must have also have wondered just why his wife had chosen this young man and what influence was he seeking.

`He wants you to plan the trip. What must you do?' I asked.

`When do we leave? I will need at least a day to prepare,' said Spardes. `And what authority will I have?' he added.

Lord Perikles looked at him a long minute.

`Good,' he said. He looked across at his wife. `Maybe he can at that.' He transferred his gaze back to Spardes.

`You will be going in the next few days. Lady Helen will give you your instructions. The journey will be made in secret. Do you understand?'

`Yes, my Lord.'

`And one more thing,' he stared at Spardes, his black eyes wide open, `If anything happens to Lady Helen due to your negligence or cowardice, it would be better that you did not return.'

Spardes shivered and there was a dead silence around the table.

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Shaken but at the same time exultant, Spardes returned to his bed-space in the barracks and bad-temperedly parried all questions about his mysterious day-time visit to the Villa. Under the curious eyes of the off-duty guards he spent the time checking his kit and weapons.

At the same time I was thinking how we would best get to Delphi. A modern tourist, wishing for the picturesque, would certainly take a boat across the Gulf of Saronia from Piraeus to Isthmia, north through the Corinthian Canal to Corinth and then across the Gulf of Corinth to Itea. A trip of about 160km. But the Corinthian Canal wasn't going to be cut through the 6km wide isthmus for another 2400 years.

I knew the Greeks had built a paved road, called the Diolkos, across the Isthmus and ships that didn't want to go the long way round to the Adriatic (320km) could be dragged over this road on rollers. But it must be expensive and the boats probably had to be extra strongly built.

We would go by boat to Isthmia, transfer to donkey cart or something to cross the Isthmus, and pick up another boat at Corinth.

It suddenly struck me that there must be a very strong reason for Lord Perikles, top man in Athens, which was the biggest of the Greek City-states, to consult the Oracle at Delphi. And a very confidential reason to send his wife and not a trusted subordinate. I knew that the answers given by the Oracle were often rather vague - perhaps only Lady Helen knew enough of the political background to be able to assess the answers on the spot, and place further questions if necessary.

It turned out that we were going to be only a small party, so as not to attract attention. Attention not only of possible attackers but also of political opponents in Athens who would be very interested that Lord Perikles was in such indecision that he was consulting the Delphic Oracle.

A sailing boat, manned by two trusted sailors, was going to take us the 60km across the Gulf of Sarona to Isthmia as soon as the weather was right. Apart from Lady Helen and Spardes, there would also be two Turkish slaves. They would mostly act as porters but one of them was a skilled archer. As an incentive they had both been promised their freedom and some land when they returned. At the express wish of Lady Helen, Spardes was in charge of the military part of the expedition.

When night fell, the two slaves inconspicuously carried provisions down to the waterfront where they were transferred into a rowing boat and taken out to a small one-masted fishing-boat anchored in the bay. Atreus, the captain and owner of the fishing-boat, supervised the stowing of their gear.

After everything had been stowed and lashed down to the captain's satisfaction, he and Spardes went over to a local wineshop where there was a map of the port of Piraeus and the surrounding seas, laid out in a marble mosaic on a table-top. Holding beakers of wine, they stood around the map and the captain told Spardes that he wanted a wind between East and South. Captain Atreus, a short gnarled man with long locks and a big black beard, said this would carry them across to Isthmia in between 8 and 10 hours, depending on its strength. He told Spardes that his instructions were to get Lady Helen across the Isthmus during the hours of darkness, to avoid recognition.

'We go the shortest way,' said the captain, his stubby finger tracing out a path directly across the Gulf of Sarona, between the two islands of Salamis and Aigina.

'Sunset is 21h and sunrise 4h at this time of the year,' he continued. 'The best time to hire a boat on the other side is at 3h when the fishing boats set out. You should be able to persuade one to ferry you across to Itea.'

'So we should arrive at Isthmia at 2h latest,' said Spardes.

'Make it 1h,' said Captain Atreus 'We've got to get your kit ashore. Is the Lady going to have much with her?'

Spardes wordlessly raised his shoulders.

They went outside the noisy wineshop and the Captain looked up at the sky, sniffed, then wet his finger and held it up. He muttered to himself.

'Wind's north-west, but it should veer back to east or even south-east tomorrow. We'd better leave at 15h tomorrow. We'll be off Isthmia around midnight but if we get there earlier we can anchor until 1am and then put you ashore.'

'And what about trouble on the way?' said Spardes.

'Pirates,' said the captain. 'Yes, they're always with us, but their favourite time to attack is just before sunset so they can escape under cover of darkness. However the League smoked out a nest of them of them at Aigina only a month ago so we should be safe.'

Spardes was slightly reassured but resolved the expedition should not fail for lack of weapons. If Lady Helen were captured, she would be ransomed, but no one would pay a ransom for him. He would be sold into slavery.

So he thought a lot about the weapons to be taken. The Greeks used two main types of swords. Each was about 80cm long with a 5cm wide blade. One had a slightly curved blade with a handle which curved around the hand. This one was made for slashing. It was not much use against an armoured adversary. The other sword had a straight blade with a straight handle and was meant more for thrusting than slashing. This was the type of sword preferred by the Plutes Troop. A thrust requires more precision than a slash but is far more deadly. But the Plutes soldiers wanted something even better so they were equipped with the Roman model sword. It had a lighter blade and so could be thrust more quickly and it also had a substantial cross-piece as hand-guard.

Also available were javelins - 1.5m long throwing spears. They could be used in close combat as well.

In the end Spardes chose a sword and two javelins for each member of the party. For himself he took his normal body armour of helmet, shield and leg-guards. They would only be in the way in the cramped conditions of a ship but could be useful when they reached dry land. For the slave who was an archer he took a bow and a sheaf of 50 arrows.

And so in the late afternoon of the next day Lady Helen, muffled in an enveloping cloak, her face covered by a piece of black gauze and escorted by the two big Turkish slaves, left the Villa Perikles by a small side gate and met Spardes at the end of a jetty where the ship's rowing boat was tied. One of the slaves was carrying a large heavy clinking leather pouch which she directed to be handed to Spardes.

We pushed off and were rowed between several big anchored merchant transport ships, past two enormous triremes with sixty oars a side, the pride of the Athens navy, and finally up to a single-masted fishing-boat, anchored a little apart.

In-oars as we approached, followed by a faint thump. Our oarsman held on to the boat for us to scramble aboard and once aboard we leant out to help up Lady Helen. We followed the captain's instructions and sat down on rope mattresses amid a strong smell of fish. Lady Helen looked around disdainfully but said nothing. Spardes, uncomfortably holding the money bag, looked around the inside of the boat and finally decided that the best place for it was next to Lady Helen, on the principle that in that way there was only one location to guard.

Our oarsman, who was one of the slaves, climbed aboard and the dinghy was tied to our stern by a long line.

There was a splashing noise from the bows and the boat slightly tipped and rocked as the heavy stone anchor was hoisted aboard. Without any obvious commands the single sail was creakingly raised and Captain Atreus stepped over us to take the steering oar. Heeling slightly in the faint breeze we slowly slid over the blue sea, the port of Piraeus gradually disappearing behind us in the heat haze.

The wind freshened and as the sail rattled and bellied we were underway, the water chuckling under our bows. The two Turkish slaves and the other crew member, a fresh-faced young man who was introduced as Melus, withdrew to the bows and lay down on their mattresses. One of the slaves was carefully examining the bow and arrows. Lady Helen stayed in the stern, wrapped in her cloak.

We held the same course steadily, nothing much happening except food and drink being handed out. The two slaves talked quietly together in the bows in their own language and Melus dozed. The sun gradually moved over the mast until we were going directly towards it. We watched as it slowly dropped and the shadows lengthened. It finally touched and then rapidly slid beneath the horizon. The stars began to appear and suddenly it was night.

Still the boat drove on, the wind freshening slightly. It became colder.

Melus opened a metal box which revealed itself as an oil lamp. He lit it by striking sparks from a piece of flint and blowing. When he had it going to his satisfaction, he snapped the lamp-cover shut and darkness descended again. He hung the closed lamp on the stern post.

It was quite dark and cold now, but we didn't feel the wind as it was almost behind us. Spardes moved around the boat, making sure everyone had their sword and javelins within easy reach. Spardes's helmet, shield and greaves, or leg

guards, were only brought for the land journey and so were stored out of the way, beneath the provisions.

Melus and the two slaves retired to their mattresses in the bows and pulling pieces of sackcloth over themselves, lay down to sleep.

'How long?' Spardes asked the captain, who was leaning on the steering oar.

'Three hours, if this wind holds.' At sea, a man of few words.

Spardes leant over the dark shape that was Lady Helen.

'Are you comfortable, my Lady?' he asked.

'As well as can be expected,' was the short reply.

So Spardes went back to his mattress and lay looking up at the stars. After a while, he got up again and after a last look round, turned in.

Lulled by the regular rocking of the boat, the clop of water against its hull and the creak of the sail, Spardes was soon dreamlessly asleep. With his eyes closed, he could only hear the boat sounds as we slowly made our way across the Gulf of Sarona.

And as I sometimes did at such moments, I concentrated carefully and could hear in the distant back-ground the faint comforting buzz of the electro-narcosis, emanating from equipment in the far future. The buzz that confirmed that I was still in contact with Chrondisp. I imagined myself at the end of a long piece of stretched rubber band, my lifeline back to the future. I only had to say my piece of poetry, my Return Signal, and I would let go of the 4th Century BC. The rubber band would contract, slowly at first, pulling me back across the intervening centuries, past Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, The Battle of Agincourt, The Spanish Armada, Cromwell, The Battle of Waterloo, faster and faster through the two vast World Wars and finally with a rush into the 21st Century where I would prosaically wake up in a bed. I wondered idly where Dr Duluth had hidden my bed - it wouldn't be in the normal ward, that would give rise to too many questions about my illegal Mission.

Chapter 17

Spardes was stirring uneasily. Unconsciously he was analysing the sounds of the boat and the noises it made as it cleaved through the water. There was an irregular sound that he couldn't place. But it was warm and comfortable under his blanket, he wasn't familiar with the boat and anyway the captain himself was at the tiller. There was a slight lurch and the sail creaked.

The wind must have shifted, he thought. But again the sail creaked and again the boat rocked. Another wind change?

Spardes reluctantly pulled down his covering, shivering in the cold damp night air. He looked back along the boat to the stern, expecting to see the figure of the captain draped over the steering oar. Yes, there was a figure, but it looked too small - hunched somehow.

Hairs rising on the back of his neck, Spardes hastily threw off his blanket, and grasping his sword, stood up. Now he could feel that the boat was unstable under his feet, out of control, wind-cocking. And as he watched, a sudden movement of the steering oar precipitated the obviously lifeless body of the captain forwards, so he fell with a thud face down in the scuppers. In the faint starlight he could see a knife hilt was projecting from between his shoulder blades! At the same time there was the unmistakable scrape of a boat against the hull.

'Wake up, wake up - repel boarders!' shrieked Spardes, drawing his sword and kicking the sleeping forms. White ghostly hands were grasping the starboard

bulwark, but more dangerously, a dark shape was climbing aboard. Spardes thrust at it with his sword and felt a shock up his arm. The shape shouted and fell overside. But the boat was rocking more violently and suddenly with a chorus of shouts there were other shapes scrambling aboard in a ferocious rush!

The two slaves and Melus were awake now and he could see their sword-blades glittering in the starlight and hear their shouts as they fought the boarders. More were climbing over the port bulwark! As he swung round to this new threat he saw the upraised sword blade of a bulky figure who was about to chop down one of the slaves from behind. He neatly skewered him in a long-armed thrust and immediately turned to parry an upward thrusting knife blade. But the boat was full of savage attackers; in a moment we would be overwhelmed!

'Back into the stern!' shouted Spardes. His first duty was to protect Lady Helen, but closing ranks was a good tactical move too.

There were now about ten pirates in the boat - there were so many in front of us that because of the narrow boat they were getting in each others' way.

The five of us had retreated into the stern now, holding the boarders at bay with sword and javelin thrusts. Behind us I heard a thump and knew that more had arrived to board us from over the stern! The situation was hopeless.

The narrow boat was rocking wildly under stamping feet and the sail was flapping violently from side to side. Spardes had a javelin in his left hand to deflect sword slashes and was fiercely stabbing at any pirate who approached. But his arms were weakening, he could not keep up his guard much longer. Melus, the young man, was defending himself against the savage attackers with a javelin, but he too was visibly tiring. One of the slaves was whirling his sword around his head like a toy, defending Melus and shouting defiance in his own tongue. The other slave was fighting behind us, defending our rear.

An idea!

'Drop the sail,' I shouted. Without missing a stroke Spardes slashed out sideways twice at the sail hoist and the sail started to collapse with a creaking of pulleys. Slowly it settled across the boat from thwart to thwart, enveloping two of the pirates in its folds and effectively dividing the boat into two. The three pirates on our side of it suddenly found themselves outnumbered. One was impaled by a javelin thrown by Melus, one jumped overboard and the other put up a desperate fight but there was a sudden hissing sound and he was pierced with an arrow at point blank range, shot from behind us. The archer! I had forgotten him.

With their front temporarily stabilised, Spardes, Melus and one slave turned their attention to the rear. Stabbing downwards over the port side they managed to dislodge two boarders.

There was a flurry behind us and a shriek. Christ, he had forgotten Lady Helen! A scrabbling sound and another boarder appeared over the starboard side! But we had nothing to worry about. Before he could scramble aboard Lady Helen appeared suddenly from her dark cloak and stabbed him through the throat with a long thin knife.

In the meantime the archer had needed no further directions. The other pirates, either enveloped by the fallen sail, or unable to get past it, were easy targets, even in the dark. The archer was pulling and releasing as fast as he could and his hissing arrows found the sail no impediment. There were shrieks and groans from the other side of the mast, followed by splashes as the survivors, unable to fight back, jumped overboard.

'Shout for help,' I said.

`But there's no one who can ... yes, OK.'

Spardes stood up and the hot lamp brushed his shoulder.

`Yes,' he said to himself and unhooked it. He snapped it open and miraculously it was still burning.

Facing backwards over the stern he waved it up and down with one hand. With the other hand cupped around his mouth he shouted over and over:

`Ahoy Perikles! Pirates! Help, help!'

Melus joined him, both shouting as if their lives depended on it.

The archer, finding no further targets on board and suddenly having the sea behind the stern illuminated, was standing up and shooting at figures in the water. I think he got one too, but the boat was rocking and made an unstable platform. In the distance could be seen the gleam from the oars of two rowing boats. One was stationary and the other was moving slowly, picking up swimmers.

Chapter 18

Spardes hung up the lamp and he and Melus felt around in the confusion for the sail hoist. They found it, tied another piece to the cut end and tried to hoist the sail but there was the body of a pirate wrapped up in it somehow. Cursing they went forward to free it. The struggling pirate had a arrow sticking out of his shoulder and was still living, but Melus and Spardes pulled out the arrow, ignoring his screams, and callously tossed him overboard. The sail now rose without further trouble. Melus took the steering oar and brought us into wind. With a boom the sail filled and the boat got underway. Spardes snapped the lamp shut.

The immediate threat was over, but they were all completely exhausted after the wild fight. The two slaves had fallen asleep amongst the dead pirates at the bottom of the boat and Melus was losing his grasp of the steering oar as he nodded forward. Spardes himself was feeling weak and giddy and trying to think what to do.

A hand appeared with a beaker of water.

`Drink,' said Lady Helen.

He was suddenly thirsty and tipped up the beaker, pouring the water down his throat. Wordlessly he held it out to be refilled and then struggled to sit up.

`We must get further away,' he said thickly, to himself.

But Lady Helen pushed him down.

`I can steer the boat. Sleep.'

Drunk with fatigue he made his way to his mattress and collapsed on it into a dreamless sleep.

He woke suddenly once in the night, but seeing the small figure at the stern and feeling the boat steadily driving through the night, dropped down again into oblivion.

*

When he finally woke the sun had just risen over the horizon, its long slanting rays revealing the chaos in the boat, the aftermath of the pirate attack. Melus and the two slaves were sound asleep, Melus still holding an empty water beaker in his outstretched hand.

Spardes rose, stiffly pushing aside a cloth he didn't remember covering himself with, and stood up stretching. He turned to the stern where a small hooded figure was draped over the steering oar.

`My Lady!' he said, stepping over the bodies.

As he approached he could hardly recognise the elegant Lady Helen in the tired old lady grimly hanging on to the steering oar. Seeing the look in his eyes she

pulled her cloak up over her face and regarded him defiantly with black hate-filled eyes.

'The boat is in a disgusting condition,' she said, her voice muffled.

He looked at her with strange feelings. The merciless light of early morning revealed her as she was - a 45-year old Greek woman who had kept a semblance of her figure by rigorous dieting and massage. He suddenly guessed that now very few people saw her as she really was. But illogically he felt a rush of affection, something he had never felt before. He put out his hand and touched her shoulder.

'Please come and lie down over here,' he said gently. 'Melus will take the rudder.' He had almost called her "mother"!

Stiffly she rose and allowed him to support her to a mattress.

He spoke to Melus who was now in place at the rudder.

'We must return to Piraeus. How long will...'

'Return!?' snapped a voice from the mattress. 'There is no question of returning! We have provisions and the boat is in good condition. We continue.'

Spardes shrugged his shoulders at the oarsman and motioning to the two slaves turned to clearing up the boat under the autocratic eye of Lady Helen.

Lady Helen herself must have removed the knife and straightened out the body of Captain Atreus when she took over the steering-oar. His body was now covered with a piece of sacking.

There were the bodies of four pirates lying in the boat, their faces frozen in the rictus of violent death. Two were pierced with arrows, one had the head almost severed and the other a javelin wound in the chest. All four were searched and after the arrows had been pulled out, were un-ceremoniously dumped overboard - but not before Lady Helen had identified them as from the village of Alpoa on the island of Salamis.

'My husband will learn of this and they will be sorry,' she said grimly.

The body of the captain was carefully tied in sacking and weighted with two ballast stones. A slave took the oar while we all stood. Melus said a prayer over his dead friend as he was slowly lowered over the side. Burial at sea.

'He was a good sailor and a good friend,' said Melus.

'His family will be taken care of,' said Lady Helen.

She then lay down in the shade of the sail and pulled her cloak over her head.

It was incredible how we had survived. Our only casualty had been the captain. Melus had a slash wound on the left arm, but the two slaves and Spardes himself were unscratched. Lady Helen herself cleaned Melus's arm and bound it with some pink cloth from her baggage.

There was still a lot of work to do. The boat was in a shambles. Provisions had been overturned, there were bloodstains all over the boat and someone had vomited in the bows. Water was hoisted from over the side with a leather bucket to swab down the boat and after a while some semblance of order reigned. Spardes took the oar and Melus went around repairing the rigging.

Chapter 19

Around midday, when everyone had had something to drink and eat, Melus came and sat by Spardes. Lady Helen was still fast asleep on her mattress and snoring slightly.

'What the hell happened?' asked Spardes. 'How did they find us?'

'Mainly luck, I think,' said Melus. 'It was normal for us to sail within sight of the island of Salamis, just to check our position. The pirates must have been waiting

for anything interesting to appear. They had two fast rowing boats, probably six or seven men in each and as soon as they saw us they dashed out to snap us up. They could see we were something special as we were a laden fishing-boat but nowhere near the fishing grounds.'

They both looked over the boat.

'It was a wonderful idea of yours to cut the sail hoist,' added Melus, looking at him admiringly. 'It really stopped them.'

This brought Spardes up sharp. He had thought the sail had dropped because of the general fighting around the mast, but thinking back carefully he now remembered cutting it himself. He turned away from Melus.

'I must thank you again, Oh Almus.'

I said nothing but conveyed the impression of a benign nod.

'Do you have any idea where we are?' asked Spardes, after a pause.

Melus rubbed the bandage on his wrist and after looking around the empty horizon, glanced up at the sun.

'The wind has been steady due East. I reckon we're not too far off our course. We should hit the coast in a couple of hours and then I can tell you better.'

Spardes was making calculations too. On this course we would certainly hit the coast south of Isthmia and would have to beat up north to it. He knew a sailing boat could not sail closer to the wind than about 80 degrees (keels hadn't been invented yet).

'The captain said the wind may veer north again so I think we had better get as far windward as we can, while we can,' said Spardes.

'Better too far north than too far south,' agreed Melus.

Spardes pulled on the tiller and Melus tugged on the boom. The boat heeled and the water began to chuckle under our bows. The sun slid behind us as we took up our new course. The thrust on the steering oar (which doubled as a keel) was now too tiring for Spardes to hold for a long time, so he slipped a notched wooden arm over it and stood up stretching.

There was nothing more to do for the moment. He stooped down and adjusted the cloak so Lady Helen's face remained in the shade.

Looking at the sun he could see they had about three hours of daylight left. The wind was holding and so they would have about an hour of daylight to locate Isthmia and find a place to disembark. Then they would have to kill time for four hours.

'What's going to happen after you disembark?' I asked Spardes.

'I suppose ...' he began. He turned to Melus.

'What are your instructions for after we have disembarked?' he asked.

Melus looked surprised.

'I don't know. Only the captain and Lady Helen knew.'

It was a problem. We were on a secret mission and so no one at Isthmia knew of us or would give us special treatment. Isthmia was a Greek port, but Spardes wasn't sure if they were friendly with Athens at the moment. They could be obstructive. Best stay hidden.

Melus obviously hadn't thought that far ahead. It was even less use asking him what he was going to do about the return journey, after the visit to the Oracle.

'We will anchor the boat in the bay. You and I will go ashore first to find a hostel for tonight and transport for tomorrow. Then we will bring the rest of the party ashore.'

'But what about me?' said Melus.

`You will come with us and Lady Helen will surely be grateful.' Melus was a good lad and we could always use a sailor on the other side.

We hit the coast quite a bit north of Isthmia with the sun just setting and Melus recognised the coastline immediately.

As planned, we moved out to sea again until we could just see the land and slowly drifted down the coast. Night fell and the wind veered north as expected, dropping to a gentle breeze, barely enough to give us steerage way. With one eye on the North Star, hanging low in the sky behind us, and another on the distant coast, Melus brought us slowly south. Finally a cluster of scattered lights appeared on the dark line of the horizon and were identified as the port of Isthmia. We turned and drifted towards them, the sail hanging loosely, the port lights reflected in the sea which was as calm as a mill-pond.

As we approached the wind slightly increased, due to the cooling land and the still warm sea, I supposed. With Melus at the steering oar and Spardes in the bows we approached the port. There was a lot of activity down to the south, a concentration of lights and a continuous distant muffled roar, heard clearly over the flat sea. This must be the end of the "Diolkos", where ships were being loaded off and on to wheeled trolleys. We steered north, towards the lights of the town.

We passed several large transports and a small fleet of fishing boats similar to our own, anchored in the bay, some with lights. When we were about 200m from the shore Melus gave a signal, the two slaves released the stone anchor with a resounding hollow splash and as we swung round he left the steering oar and dropped the sail.

At this point the bundle that was Lady Helen moved. A pale face appeared and looked around the harbour.

`The sun set two hours ago and we are at Isthmia, my Lady,' said Spardes. `I suggest that Melus and myself go ashore to find accommodation.'

`Very well.'

Spardes leant over the stern and pulled up our dinghy. He and Melus climbed in and we rowed across the bay up to a stone jetty, illuminated with infrequent oil lamps. As soon as we had tied up, a small man approached and demanded a landing fee.

`For a rowing boat?' said Spardes incredulously, climbing up out of the boat.

`For your ship anchored in the bay,' said the toll-collector.

Spardes looked out over the dark sea. Their ship was quite invisible.

`What ship?' he said. `We're just rowing round the bay.'

The toll-collector seemed about to say something else but Spardes stood up to his full height and then Melus climbed up and handed Spardes his sword belt. Spardes slipped it over his shoulder and then absent-mindedly pulled his sword out of the scabbard a few centimetres and pushed it back, making an unpleasant rasping sound. The toll-collector turned away sullenly.

`There's always someone who tries that,' grinned Melus, as they walked down the jetty.

At the end there was a gate and a price list. Melus handed over a small coin to the sleepy guard, the gate was opened and they entered the port.

`We need a hostel with three rooms,' said Spardes, looking around the busy scene. There seemed no lack of hostels, nor of noisy winebars. Small stalls selling fried fish, bread, olives, grapes. Bigger stalls with people living above them, some with women leaning over simple wooden balconies, looking down at the crowds. The narrow waterfront was full of sailors, porters and slaves wandering

up and down, some obviously drunk, others singing. The nearest thing to a truckers' stop in Ancient Greece, I guessed.

`Lady Helen will flip if we book her a room here,' he thought.

Aloud he said to Melus:

`Isn't there something a little more up-market?'

Melus shrugged, but led him to a small street leading steeply uphill and away from the waterfront. It suddenly became quieter and we soon found a more suitable hostel. Melus went in to haggle over the price of three rooms and when he came out we went back to the boat.

Lady Helen, heavily masked, came over on the next trip with the two slaves, one carrying the money-bag. She was escorted into the hostel.

`Holy Apollo,' she said, pulling off her mask and looking around her room distastefully, `the advice I get at Delphi had better be worth it.'

Spardes stoically did his usual bodyguard routine of checking the doors and windows and satisfied waited outside her room until the two slaves were installed in a room on one side of Lady Helen's room. Melus arrived and they both moved into a room on the other side. Then he reported next door. He found a young waif-like female slave had arrived and was combing Lady Helen's hair.

`Yes?' said Lady Helen, from under her hair.

`My Lady, I have made some plans and I need your approval.'

He then told of the horse-drawn carriage that would be delivered to the hostel at midnight and how they should be ready to move at 1am.

`Why so bloody early?' said her voice testily from under the hair.

`Er, our journey to Corinth takes an hour, and the captain said the best way to leave Corinth is with the fishing fleet at 3am.'

`So we leave at 2am.'

`It might take an hour to find a boat to take us, my Lady, and then we have to transfer the provisions, our weapons and your er...clothes,' he said apologetically.

`Well, you don't want me to appear before the Oracle looking like a fishwife, do you?'

Spardes said nothing. The slave was quite pretty.

`Very well,' continued the voice petulantly. The face appeared from under the hair and looked up at him.

`You all did very well.'

Sudden changes of mood confused him and he could think of nothing to say. After a pause he bowed and left.

Chapter 20

It was a quiet sleepy party that moved off in the cold pre-dawn darkness.

Spardes noted that there was an extra member of the party now. Lady Helen had casually bought the slave girl he had seen the evening before and she was now sitting stiffly in the cart by her side. I wondered briefly how she felt, hardly out of childhood by the look of her, suddenly uprooted from all the personal relationships she must have made. But she was just a slave, an impersonal "thing". Perhaps captured with her parents by pirates and sold separately. Or perhaps the product of a "slave farm".

I grimly called up some statistics I had seen about the population of the city of Athens:

80 000 adult Citizens
 35 000 adult male slaves, for farms or workshops
 15 000 female slaves, for housework and childcare
 10 000 child slaves in training
20 000 male slaves in the silver mines.(Life expectancy 3 years)
 160 000

Then I recalled some everyday prices:

Skilled technician slave	6 000	drachmae
Craftsman slave	300	"
Pretty girl slave	300	"
Adult female house slave	170	"
Adult male house slave	166	"
Mine slave	150	"
Child slave (under training)	72	"
Couch	17	"
Linen curtain	11	"
Table	4	"

An average Citizen earned 20 drachmae per month.

When I looked up from reviewing this gloomy "Golden Age" price list, I found we had passed through the still-sleeping town and along the 6km track that led across the isthmus to Corinth on the other side. The Diolkos was about 2km to the south of our track, we could hear the rumbling of the trolley wheels and occasionally see lights, but it was mostly hidden by trees. I resolved to see it better on the way back.

Now we were in Corinth itself, or rather on its northern outskirts and were standing in the cold darkness while Melus was negotiating with the owner of a boat to take us the 60km across to Itea, on the other side of the Gulf of Corinth. It was quite obvious to the sailor that we were going to Itea to visit the Oracle. What he couldn't reconcile it with was the small size of our party. Apparently only rich people with large escorts of soldiers and slaves visited Delphi. He kept looking in the darkness behind us for the rest of our party. But the masked figure of Lady Helen handed over the sum demanded without question, so he shrugged and waved us aboard.

Lady Helen and her slave disappeared into a small cabin at the rear of the boat and Spardes installed himself in the bows. Melus and the two Turkish slaves lay down amidships and slept.

There was a grey patch in the sky off to our right as the two-man crew hoisted the sail, fitted the steering rudder and cast off. As we tacked out of Corinth harbour the sun climbed above the mountains and suddenly flooded the harbour with slanting golden light. Slightly heeled over we slid between anchored boats, our square sail full and the water bubbling under our hull. Clearing the harbour, the crew brought us about with casual competence and we set course for Itea. Spardes breathed deeply with pleasure as he looked around curiously. He had never been so far away from home.

The 5 hour trip across the Gulf was made without incident. Spardes stayed in the bows. The cabin door remained closed except for twice when the little servant

girl came out to rummage in Lady Helen's baggage and carry back various items of dress.

From the bows Spardes watched as a dark range of mountains gradually rose over the horizon before them. This was the Kingdom of Locris, which because of the famous Oracle had a long tradition of respected neutrality.

As we approached the coast, jagged volcanic mountains with cloud crests seemed to tower over us and an awed silence descended on the party. It was not difficult to imagine that this was the abode of the Gods. Melus and the two slaves had woken up, and from their whispered conversations it was clear that our party were gradually realising what we were doing. The real purpose of the voyage was beginning to sink in. This was not a sight-seeing trip: we were going to ask advice of the Gods, the Gods that rule all life on Earth. Over there, up in the mountains, was the Omphalos, the navel, the centre of the Earth. And at the Omphalos, the most holy place in the whole world, was located the Delphic Oracle. A place where Mankind was allowed to speak to the Gods, to ask them questions concerning the trivialities of our life down here and receive an answer from on high. Even the crew, who had been exchanging cheerful shouted obscenities with each other, had fallen silent.

Through Spardes's eyes I was also regarding those mountain peaks. Could this be where the E-T had installed its "real-time" probe, its beach-head on Earth? A mountain top would be an excellent site for communication with a satellite in geostationary orbit.

Spardes was suddenly thankful that Lady Helen would be the one who would actually be going into the presence of the God: he would be waiting outside at a respectful distance.

He firmly believed in the Gods, of course. With all the imposing temples in Athens, the frequent and complex ceremonies and the fact that people obviously more intelligent than he believed in the Gods, it could hardly be otherwise. And if he had any doubts they would have been stilled by the recently discovered presence of Almus, his personal God.

We were approaching a stone pier now and a sailor stood ready by his side, a coiled mooring rope ready in his hand.

Itea, in the Kingdom of Phocis, was completely different from any of the ports that Spardes had seen so far, the commercial ports of Athens, Corinth or Isthmia. Itea was quieter for one thing. There were a few fishing boats, but they were obviously only fishing for local consumption. There were merely two transport boats visible, one unloading and the other leaving the port loaded only with ballast.

With a clatter our sail came down, a slight bump and the sailor jumped athletically over the side onto the pier. He tied up swiftly and then moved back to receive another rope thrown by the captain which he tied up too. The breeze dropped, and it was suddenly hot.

The brilliant white sun shone down through the crystal-clear unpolluted air onto the volcanic rocks of the pier. The water was so clear that the boats at anchor seemed to be floating in the air. He could hear the whirr of the cicadas and smell the aromatic tang of a near-by olive-wood fire. All this was familiar, but up that track, between those olive groves was where Apollo the God of prophecy and patron of philosophy spoke through the voices of the Earth Spirits, Themus and Phoibe. That way led to the centre of the Earth. In spite of the heat, Spardes shivered and started uneasily to think back over the various sins of commission and omission he had committed in his brief life. A little encouragement seemed in order.

'Have respect but no fear,' I intoned. There was a slight reduction in tension.

Spardes looked around at the boats tied up at the pier. There were eight or nine, and they all had an undefinable air of "quality" - freshly-painted, immaculate white sails and clean alert-looking crew members. These boats belonged to the rulers of small City-states or Greek provinces from around the Mediterranean. There may have been some tourists but the majority were here on business. They had consulted soothe-sayers in their home states, but soothsayers only gave general information about how the Gods were feeling, general trends. If you wanted a direct answer to a direct question you went to an Oracle - and the most famous was the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi.

With our boat tied up to the stone jetty, Lady Helen appeared from the cabin ceremonially dressed in what I had learnt was a Doric chiton, pale yellow silk, with lots of carefully arranged ruffles. Her hair was elaborately coiffured, piled up over her head and tied with yellow ribbons. Over it she wore a jewelled diadem which glittered in the brilliant clean sunlight. And a white gauze mask. The queen incognito.

She certainly looked queenly as she stepped down the gang-plank onto the pier followed by her maid-servant. Melus and the two Turkish slaves stayed aboard, watching respectfully.

Waiting for us at the pier were three white-robed figures and two coaches drawn by donkeys. The elder bowed formally before Lady Helen and gestured to the other figures who bowed in turn. Lady Helen signalled to Spardes who came forward and was introduced as her escort.

The three priests exchanged annoyed glances.

'You will be perfectly safe with us, my Lady,' said the eldest.

'My instructions are that I stay by the side of ...of my mistress at all times,' said Spardes woodenly.

'There is no way that you can be admitted into the Presence,' said the eldest definitely.

Lady Helen nodded her head acquiescently.

The legalities of the situation established, one of the junior priests produced an elaborate brass bowl from their coach and poured some water over Lady Helen's hands in a symbolic cleansing gesture. Spardes held out his hands and was also reluctantly accorded a portion.

Lady Helen, her maid-servant and Spardes now climbed into one carriage, the eldest priest regained his own, and the two other priests fell in behind on foot.

There was some more mumbo-jumbo and we finally moved off.

We moved upwards at a fast walking pace through fragrant pine trees and olive groves. Soon the pace slowed down as the path started to wind in long serpentine up the side of the mountain. Gradually we left the shade of the pine trees and the temperature rose. Spardes looked backwards at the intense blue of the sea in the bay behind us. But after a while even this disappeared and we were alone, winding up the mountain, hearing only the clapping of the donkeys' hooves. Ahead there was nothing to see except stunted trees and the glaring mottled red and white limestone rocks, pitted by the sun.

Higher and higher until the paved road suddenly fell away and a breath-taking panorama appeared. Spread out before us was an amphitheatre capable of seating a thousand on marble seats arranged in concentric circles and facing the steeply rising face of the mountain opposite. And in the middle of this almost vertical olive green back-drop gleamed the long white marble building of the Sanctuary,

ending in a small domed Temple. This was the Oracle at Delphi on the southern slope of Mount Parnassus!

We paused, the priests chanted some more and there was another hand-washing. The road slightly descended and then rose and looped towards the Sanctuary.

When we approached it was evident that the long building was only one face of a courtyard. The Sanctuary was just part of a whole support complex to the Oracle at Delphi.

We entered a wide tiled open space with small courtyards branching off to left and right. On one wall was inscribed "Know Thyself" and on the wall opposite "Nothing in Excess". We were shown into one of these smaller walled enclosures and a door was closed behind us. It was bright and quiet, except for the tinkling of water in an elaborate water-clock in the middle of our courtyard.

It was made clear that the Seeing would be tomorrow at an exact time to be determined. In the meantime Lady Helen was having to submit to a long and complex purification ceremony.

She had formally presented her written question and retired to a special visitor's room. Spardes unloaded his kit in his room and then opened the courtyard door and crossed the open space to investigate some excitement in the courtyard opposite. Smilingly questioning a bystander, he found a visitor was leaving, having had a Seeing with the Oracle that day. The visitor had been a young Greek philosopher named Eratosthenes. He was jubilant and not a little drunk.

Through Spardes's eyes I saw him waving his arms excitedly and talking rapidly to his attendants. They were submissive but were shrugging their shoulders to each other and obviously didn't understand a word he was saying. They were stolidly making preparations for the return home.

Spardes was amused by the philosopher's excitement and rather contemptuous of volatile Southerners. But I was intrigued; my experience with Greek intellectuals was that they strove for enigmatic omnipotence. I induced Spardes to stroll over to the group. As he approached the philosopher looked up at him and addressed him gaily:

'And here is another well-built young man who doesn't know what a wonderful world we live in today! You must know that the world is round but did you know how big it is? You don't? Well, don't worry, you are not alone - many people have tried to measure its size and there are as many sizes as there are sizes of the people who are measuring it! But I, Eratosthenes, have had revealed to me a way in which I can measure it!'

'Look,' he said bending down and scratching on the ground. 'When the sun shines, no the sun shines, down this well here, it is possible to measure with a fantastic accuracy ...' he burped ... 'I see the sun shining in the water and I know' he waved his finger 'and I know the sun is then exactly overhead, and if I know that the noon sun at Alexandria is seven and a half degrees ...'

His head dropped on his hands and he snored. His attendants carefully picked him up between them and laid him on some blankets in the back of their cart. It looked like they had done it before.

Well, well. That didn't sound like the answer to the sort of questions people asked of Oracles - it sounded more like some way of measuring the diameter of the Earth. I was now convinced there was something going on here.

Spardes retired to his room to sleep and I withdrew. If the extra-terrestrial probe was around here somewhere, I had to see it!

Think. What would the Extra-terrestrial do if it had a remote controlled probe here somewhere? Surely the first step would be to check on the intelligence and knowledge of each visitor, to see which little technical goody could be best donated. Unfortunately Lady Helen wouldn't qualify for anything, as far as I could see.

The procedure for visiting the Delphic Oracle was apparently as follows:

Lady Helen, the suppliant, would be taken into the Temple. The Pythias, the female priest whom the Gods actually spoke to, would then enter, accompanied by a male priest. This priest would also bring in the piece of paper on which Lady Helen had written her question and it would be burnt in a brazier. The Pythias would then communicate with the Earth Spirits and speak some words which would be written down by the priest. The Pythias and the priest would then leave the Temple.

After a suitable pause Lady Helen would leave the Temple too and a short time later would be convened to meet another priest in a special room where she would be given the "interpretation" of what the Oracle had said.

Chapter 21

Spardes was in his room having his breakfast when he heard voices outside. Dropping everything he was immediately out of his room and as Lady Helen appeared with two priests, he was there beside her. The two priests looked at Spardes with distaste but as they moved off with Lady Helen between them, Spardes, matching their slow pacing, was immediately behind them.

The Temple door leading to the Oracle was opened with a big key and Lady Helen was ushered forward. The two priests moved together to prevent Spardes's entry but with a quick shove, he was between them. They raised their voices in shrill protest, but it was too late - from his middle position he just pushed them apart and without breaking step followed Lady Helen into the Temple - the Holy of Holies! He closed the door behind us and slid a bar across.

We were in a small cool circular room with a domed roof. There was a tiny hole in the centre of the dome through which a dim light entered. In the middle of the tessellated marble floor was an irregular cavity, surrounded by a low rail. Some slight wisps of vapour rose from it and a faint smell of sulphur hung in the air. There were two short iron bars standing up out of the cavity, bent over at their ends. By the side of the cavity was a fluted marble pillar on which was mounted a flat open bowl in which incense was smouldering. Behind the cavity, and dividing the room in two, was a white diaphanous curtain. We stood there in silence, hearing only the faint crackle of burning incense. After what seemed an eternity, but was probably no more than ten minutes, the curtain moved slightly in a faint draught. A door, so far unseen, had opened in the wall and two figures entered. Although the gauze curtain prevented clear vision, one figure was that of an old man and the other that of a young girl - she must be the Pythias!

They both stood motionless behind the screen and then the voice of the old man broke the silence. He had a high and rather reedy voice.

'O Themus and Phoibe, Spirits of the Earth, the suppliant before you wishes to partake of your wisdom, to seek guidance in a problem which is sorely perturbing her kingdom. We beseech you to look into her mind and give her guidance.' He then reached forward through the gauze with a piece of paper which he dropped into the brazier. That must be the written question Lady Helen had brought. It burst

into brief flame and disappeared. Smoke rose lazily upwards and vanished through the hole in the dome above.

This was it! "Look into her mind", he had said. How was it to be done? Spardes was all eyes and ears.

The priest touched the shoulder of the young girl. The curtain parted and the priestess, no more than twelve years old, dressed in a simple white chiton and rather plain, stepped forward and placed her hands on the bent-over ends of the two iron bars, one on each side of the hole. Because of their position she was obliged to lean over and gaze down into the cavity before her. There was a silence - indeed she seemed a little dazed.

'What say the Spirits?' asked the priest.

Nothing. The priestess continued to gaze motionlessly down into the cavity.

'What say the Spirits?' repeated the priest with a faint overtone of impatience. The girl stirred herself, raised her head and in a flat monotonous voice said:

'What is closed can be before the final end, and is always to be as though it was. To have time is being. The living of the Gods to help are towards the truth of evermore.' There was a pause and then: 'I have spoken.'

There was a silence, the priestess continuing to gaze into the hole. The silence lengthened until the priest said something sharply whereupon the girl pushed herself away from the handles, stood upright, woodenly turned away from us and walked through the curtain. The priest opened the door for her, followed her out and closed it behind him. Silence descended, broken as before only by the soft hissing of the brazier. The Seeing was over.

Lady Helen turned, and with an annoyed and perplexed look on her face made for the door. Spardes opened it for her.

Outside were the two priests, their faces contorted with fury. Two others, bigger and armed with bows, were standing behind them. Lady Helen, preoccupied, and with a priest on either side began the slow ceremonial walk back to her room. Spardes ignored the extra priests and took up his position just behind Lady Helen and fell in step. The two armed priests took up position several paces behind Spardes, also in step. It was clear that as soon as Lady Helen had been safely escorted into her room, blasphemy was going to be punished. Spardes was sweating during the slow march, head unmoving but his eyes searching all corners of the courtyard. In this closed courtyard, unarmed and against two archers he would stand no chance! Jesus, this was a mess. And all for nothing! I had forced Spardes to bull his way into the Seeing, but I could have sworn there was nothing extra-terrestrial there.

I must protect my Host - I would need him to carry me elsewhere. We were slowly approaching the distinguished visitor's room, occupied at the moment by Lady Helen. A few paces to the right was Spardes's room. He remembered that in his hurry that morning to escort Lady Helen he had left it unlatched. Slowly it approached and over his shoulder he heard one archer mutter something to the other. But as if unknowing of the threat behind him, Spardes paced on phlegmatically passing his door. A few seconds later he estimated that one of the archers behind him would now be level with his door so spun round suddenly and leapt towards him. The archer had an arrow notched but Spardes was too close. The other archer was also ready but could not shoot because of the proximity of his friend. Spardes slipped between the two of them and regaining his room turned and slammed the door. Lady Helen paced on, preoccupied by the irrationality of the message, and entered her room.

Saved for the moment! Now Lady Helen didn't know that Spardes had committed a sin - when she found out she would probably make some effort to extract him, but if she thought it would jeopardise or delay her return to Athens with the all-important answer to her question, he would have to take his chances. In any case she was now closeted with the priest, receiving an 'interpretation' of what the Oracle had said in answer to her question.

The first step would be to see her and let her know that in the course of duty he had incurred the wrath of the Oracle and would she please explain that he was acting under orders.

He looked around his room. It was circular with one door, a domed roof and the usual small hole to admit light - much too small for him to crawl through. He would just have to open his door suddenly and dash up to the door of Lady Helen's room - hoping it would not be fastened. If it was, she would have the unpleasant experience of seeing her trusty escort skewered to it with several arrows when she next opened it. But if he took a run at it and crashed through? He looked doubtfully at the solid-looking locking bar on the inside of his own door.

Sweating he began to slowly slip back this bar when:

'Stop,' I said. 'Over the roof and into the back door of her room is better.'

'Sure it's better,' he said to himself, but how can I squeeze through ... ah, perhaps.' He looked at the furniture in his room, measuring distances. He selected the sleeping couch which he tipped against the wall. Then the table jammed against it to stop it slipping and also to act as a step. He took his sword and climbed up onto the end of the bed. The roof was now about 1m above his head. He extended his sword and pushed the tip gently against the dome. It sank in without any measurable resistance! Good - I thought that might be the case. I had once had a conducted tour around a mosque in Istanbul and had been told the enormous domed roof was made of ultra-light pumice stone.

He was about to start cutting out a man-sized opening when there was a creak of the door. Looking down he could see that a thin serrated instrument had been pushed in through a crack in the door - just over the wooden locking bar! It was now starting to work backwards and forwards and sawdust was falling on the ground. Christ, they were trying to saw the locking bar in two! Already they were a quarter of the way through! He jumped down and taking his sword in both hands, jammed it underneath the saw-blade and pulled it up. When it was out of its cut, he bent it sideways. Thank God the saw-blade was badly tempered! He heard a curse outside and the saw-blade was withdrawn - straightening as it exited. But there were plenty of other cracks in the door! He looked round frantically!

'Something metal,' I said.

His eyes fell on the lamp support. He pulled the lamp off it, threw it to the ground and jammed the iron bar of the support across the top of the wooden locking-bar. They would never saw through that! He was about to jump up on the bed again when I made him realise that it would be better to exit off the roof on the side hidden from the courtyard. Some precious minutes were lost as he took down and re-erected his improvised scaffold. Meanwhile the rasp of the saw on the iron bar told him that those outside were recommencing their attack on his door. He leapt up his scaffold and began to jab and cut at the soft pumice. The grey powder started to fall on him. Meanwhile those outside, realising what had been done, were reversing the procedure. The saw-blade had been pushed in underneath the wooden bar and was being worked backwards and forwards to cut the bar from underneath. Again sawdust was falling copiously to the floor.

Spardes redoubled his attack on the roof and was soon rewarded by seeing daylight. The roof was about 200mm thick. Furiously he attacked it, the grey powder and small blocks of pumice falling in a cascade and almost blinding him. A splintering sound from the door told him that someone was not waiting for the bar to be completely sawn through but was charging it! Spardes returned to the roof. He could see the edges of blocks now and by thrusting his sword in between them could dislodge whole blocks. With a rush a whole section fell in. And not before time! The door below crashed open on its hinges and two white-robed priests rushed in shouting! Only their eagerness to enter, which jammed them together, saved him. He was able to scramble over the edge of the wall, pushing his bed back at them. As he hauled himself over the wall there was a zip as a hastily aimed arrow scored a furrow in his left thigh. But he was out!

Hanging from his arms he dropped to the ground and looked around wildly. That must be the rear door to Lady Helen's room! He dashed across and tried to open it. Locked! Behind him he could see one of the archers kneeling on the edge of the roof and fitting an arrow to his bow. He thumped on the door.

`Who's that?' said an irritated voice.

`It's me, Spardes.'

`Then why are you knocking on the rear door?'

An arrow streaked towards him and was only avoided by jumping aside at the last moment. The arrow thunked into the door and stood quivering.

`Please open, my Lady - I am in danger!'

`Very well,' said the voice grumbling. God, another archer was now kneeling on the edge of the hole!

But inside the sound of a bar could be heard scraping as it was withdrawn and the door opened inwards. Spardes pushed it fully open and jumped in - just in the nick of time! Before he could close the door there was the double thunk of two more arrows arriving. He jammed the bar across and turned to look at Lady Helen and the wide-eyed maid-servant. Lady Helen was still in her ceremonial dress but had removed the golden tiara and the mask. In one hand she was holding a wax tablet.

She looked coldly at him, and he must have been a sight. Face and shoulders covered with pumice powder and sticking in a red streak to the cut on his thigh.

`And what in the name of Jupiter was all that about?' she demanded.

`I should not have followed you into the Oracle,' he said. `I am to be executed for blasphemy.'

Chapter 22

She looked at him thoughtfully. I could see the thoughts chasing themselves through her mind. Her visit to the Oracle had been incognito, her entree paid for with the cash Spardes had brought. She could only protect Spardes by revealing who she was.

`You pose a problem - another problem,' she added bitterly. `You saved my life from pirates,' she said `and if I made my identity known and claimed your immunity, you would be safe on pain of war with City-state Athens. But then it would become known that Lord Perikles is undecided about the answer to a certain question,' She looked at him with a troubled gaze and sighed.

`I'm afraid you don't even understand what I'm talking about.' She looked away sadly. It suddenly struck me that in order to preserve the secrecy of her

mission Spardes was in any case going to be "terminated" on their safe arrival in Athens. Together with Melus the sailor, the two Turkish slaves and the maidservant. Of course, these last were only slaves, and could be written off without complications.

It was nothing but the truth that Spardes had not understood her difficulty and was looking at her blankly.

'Tell her I understand and will help her,' I said. It was a long shot but surely the 21st Century AD could give a helping hand to the 4th Century BC.

'Er, my Lady. My personal God says he understands and will help you.'

'Your personal God!' she said torn between scorn and sadness. 'What can he do that I cannot do myself?' She opened the door to leave.

I looked around quickly - I must retain her attention.

'Show her how you can break that spear shaft,' I said.

'I will show you the power of my God,' he said, laying the spear between the table and the bed-head.

'Bring the table nearer,' I said. I didn't want the spear-shaft to flex. He complied.

'See now the power of my God,' he said quietly, raising his arm out horizontally. He then turned his hand and brought the edge down with a quick chop. The shaft split cleanly.

Lady Helen started and turned away from the door. The maid-servant gasped.

'That was a trick - the shaft was already half broken,' she said contemptuously.

Spardes was hurt, but picked up the two halves and showed them to her. She looked carefully at the broken edges. She then minutely examined one of the halves, even to the extent of jamming one end in the door frame and trying to break it. The 20mm shaft bent but did not break. It was then laid across the two supports.

'Break this,' she said shortly.

'Do it quickly and don't let her see your hand,' I said. No point in demystifying the trick.

So he turned his side towards her as he raised his open hand and then turned and chopped down lightning fast, his hand blurring. With a sharp crack the shaft split again, the two halves jumping apart and ringing as they rolled about the marble floor.

The maid-servant picked them up and gave them to Lady Helen. She looked at the cleanly shattered edges dazedly and then put them aside.

'Sit down. You are a strange person, sometimes behaving as though you were much older. Perhaps you do have a personal God.'

She sat down herself.

'Tell me Spardes, what do you know of the present political situation in Greece?'

'The political situation?' stammered Spardes, 'I am but a ...'

'Exactly,' said Lady Helen. 'So how can your personal God possibly help me?'

'Ask her what the priest said to her.'

'My Lady,' he said 'my personal God asks that you tell him what the priest told you.'

She considered.

'Very well, only the question itself is secret.' She looked down at the tablet in front of her and read out in a slightly mocking tone:

'What later appears should be considered in the same light as that first seen. Essential it is to judge each facet as though it were itself alone.'

She raised her head from the tablet and looked at him.

'It makes no more sense to me than the gibberish the Oracle originally uttered.'

I too had got nothing from the Oracle - I suspected it was "noise" anyway. The real answer was in the interpreted noise. I tried to put myself in the position of the priest, confronted with a question from an obviously high-born lady. Assuming for the moment that Lady Helen's identity was actually unknown to the priest, he would know nothing of the background of the question and so could only give some general advice.

I repeated the interpreted answer over to myself again. Yes, that was it! It was a roundabout way of warning Lady Helen to "beware of first impressions". But "first impressions" of what? Some physical situation like an enemy defensive position, where a first impression seemed to show it impregnable but more info showed it just to be a sham, a brave front? Or perhaps a treaty whose terms appeared favourable at first view but on mature consideration ...No, Lady Helen would not have been sent in either of those cases. It must be ... That was it!

Spardes looked up to find Lady Helen regarding him curiously. He had apparently been walking up and down the room, hands behind his back, with a preoccupied look on his face. Exactly the way I had caught myself behaving when I had a problem to think through!

He suddenly realised his disrespectful behaviour, blushed and sat down. He cleared his throat.

'Er, my Lady, my God thinks that the answer you have received refers to the personality of someone. Someone you have to judge.'

Lady Helen gasped. 'By Jupiter, if you let the slightest word of that ...'

She paused, realised what she had said and just looked at him silently. So I was right!

It was a well-known failing of the human brain that it was heavily influenced by first impressions. At psychology class in the Army we had learnt that the classical case was that of the job interview. The applicant presents himself punctually in a clean shirt and a sober suit. Quiet, informative and deferential, he makes an excellent first impression on the interviewer. The interviewer then opens his file and finds he has had five jobs in five years. Odd. Does that mean he couldn't hold a job for more than a year? 'Oh, no,' the applicant assures him earnestly 'I deliberately moved around to accumulate experience.' The interviewer, already favourably impressed by the appearance of the applicant, gives him the benefit of the doubt. Then he is questioned a bit on his technical knowledge. He knows a lot of the words but sometimes puts a strange interpretation on some and in fact appears ignorant of others. 'Ah, that is because I have mostly worked with Americans and they have a slightly different vocabulary,' he smiles disarmingly. Again you give him the benefit of the doubt, for after all he presents well and has striven to give himself a wide experience in readiness for this job...

Spardes continued.

'My God thinks that you have to judge the character of someone. You have a lot of information about him, but it can be interpreted in his favour or against it. The only thing that is certainly good is that which you first saw. The Oracle is telling you that you should not let this first favourable characteristic influence your judgement of the others.' I hoped the Translator would not make Spardes sound too educated as he said this.

In his role as bodyguard to Lord Perikles, Spardes, and therefore I, had met this person twice. He was a real smarmy character, and for my money lying in his teeth.

'You're damn right!' said Lady Helen violently. 'He's just too bloody smooth. They're all eating out of his hand just because ...' she pulled herself up. 'And what else does your God say?' she continued.

Yes, how did we get around this problem in the 21st Century? Easy, we had one person to evaluate his experience, another to check his energy, yet another his technical competence, etc. And lastly, one to make a resume of all the independent evaluations. I got Spardes to pass this on.

'By the sacred harp of Apollo,' said Lady Helen, pacing tigerishly around the room. 'But if we do that we know absolutely sod-all about him. We've just taken everything on trust!' She turned to Spardes.

'Does your God have anything else to say?'

I had nothing else to add. She seemed to have understood the message - I could only hope it would now influence her enough to see a reason for getting Spardes out of here alive.

'My God has nothing further to add.'

'He's right,' she said forcefully, 'there's nothing more needed. I've got to get back to Athens as soon as possible.'

She looked at Spardes speculatively. 'And I want you to repeat to my Lord what you just said to me,' she said. 'And you can show him your trick too,' she added.

She looked around. 'And now I must get you out of here somehow.'

She obviously wasn't going to reveal her identity - it had suddenly become even more important that she get the message from the Oracle back to Athens secretly.

An idea!

'May I suggest, my Lady?' asked Spardes diffidently, (inwardly he was terrified of his temerity) 'that I wait until nightfall and then dress up as you.'

Lady Helen glared at him and then smiled.

'Yes, that would work, you would have to go with my maid-servant too.' But then her face changed. 'And as soon as you had gone they would think that whoever was left here was you. They would rush in and skewer me without thinking.'

'I am sure I could overpower the priests as soon as we were on our way. Your maid-servant would return to you and you would return in the normal way. In broad daylight you would be instantly recognised and therefore safe.'

'And you?'

'I would find my own way back to Athens.'

Lady Helen looked at Spardes consideringly.

'Yes,' she said finally 'It would work. I think we have underestimated you.'

And I had underestimated the problems involved in this damned Oracle visit. I thought bitterly that it had turned out to be a complete waste of time Extra-terrestrial-wise but nevertheless I had had to:

- help my Host fight off a pirate attack.

- push him into seeing the Oracle to make sure

it wasn't an Extra-terrestrial. This had unfortunately got him accused of blasphemy and placed on the Oracle guards hit-list.

- So I had to save him from immediate execution by having him run into Lady Helen's quarters. Here he had to convince Lady Helen that he was worth saving.

- To do this I had to have him interpret (re-interpret) the Oracle's message myself.

- And now I had to think of a way to get him out of Lady Helen's room and back to Athens.

Wearily I wondered what would be the next call on my ingenuity. This part of my Mission was fast turning into one of those boring dreams where you know you are sleeping and dreaming but have to go through a whole lot of wearisome well-known routines if you want to stay asleep. Actually the next emergency occurred almost immediately.

There was a scraping sound from the door and the end of a large plank appeared under it. Some ingenious clowns outside were going to lever the door open! I was about to bend my weary brain to the problem (have Spardes cut his way out through the roof again? Use one of Lady Helen's chitons to disguise himself as a priest? Set the whole bloody Sanctuary on fire and escape in the panic?) When you push your Host out of his normal life-style you have to take over his thought processes completely.

I was interrupted by the sound of a bell tolling outside in the courtyard. The plank disappeared from under the door and we could hear departing feet. Some sort of evening prayers. Now was the time to leave!

Spardes cautiously slid the door bolt back and opened the door a crack. He was about to open it further when he saw the shadows of people waiting outside. He just had time to slam the door and bolt it. They had all gone to prayers but left a couple of guards.

Spardes turned round to face Lady Helen and it was at that precise time that it happened.

Chapter 23

There was a low 'beeping' sound from the other side of the room and we all pivoted around. On the wall was a large and complicated picture that I had already noticed during Spardes's conversations with Lady Helen.

It was of a human figure with a bull's head superimposed over a complex system of concentric circles. I had vaguely assumed it symbolised the old myth where Theseus got lost in the labyrinth with the Minotaur. But as we looked in its direction, seeking the source of the strange beeping, a faint glow appeared in its interior. The glow spread until the whole picture was giving off a soft radiance! The beeps gradually changed, prolonging themselves into strange impossible yet constantly ascending chords. Then a spot of brighter light appeared slowly running round the outermost ring of the maze, speeding up until it was a ring of fire. The music deepened and now points of light appeared in the other rings of the maze. Spardes was gazing fixedly at the rotating spirals and I was bugging at it too.

This had to be it - the Extra-terrestrial probe! Nothing more out of place in Ancient Greece could be imagined. Everything clicked into place - all our vague theories were confirmed. I had overheard an Extra-terrestrial when I was on Mission in Victorian England, there was a probe at the Oracle in Delphi, so the Extra-terrestrials had arrived and were watching Earth!

What to do? Nothing - what I was seeing was surely on the Main Timeline. If I tried to interfere I would at best just be ignored, at worst ejected out of Spardes and be drawn back into the 21st Century. All I could do was Observe. But careful!

The speed of rotation of the spiral was increasing to a rapid flicker, I guessed 10Hz, the frequency of the brain's alpha rhythm, and was sucking Spardes's eyes in. At the same time a deep voice started 'Look deeply into my eye,

sink yourself deeply into my eye ...' I instantly recognised what was happening. This was a mechanical hypnotiser! I must prevent Spardes from falling under the influence; otherwise he would be useless to me.

'Spardes!' I shouted, 'Close your eyes!' He automatically shut them but the after-image was bright and he could still hear the voice.

'How old are you?' I shouted. There was a long pause and then he answered thickly 'Eighteen'.

'And what is the name of your father?'

'Forlescus,' A little more awake.

'Forlescus what?'

'Forlescus Spardes.'

'You must now stand quite still and keep your eyes closed. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, but what is ...?'

'Never mind. Do as I tell you.'

Somehow the probe had detected that the Guest Room was occupied and had signalled to the E-T who was now going to directly check up on the obviously important visitors.

After a while I could hear that the hypnotising routine had terminated and there was a pause. We were now going to have a question-and-answer session.

Spardes cautiously opened his eyes and glanced sideways. Lady Helen and the maid-servant were both staring wide-open-eyed at the picture.

'Who are you?' asked the deep voice, accent-free as far as I could judge through the Translator.

'I am Lady Helen, wife and consort of Lord Perikles, elected head of City-state Athens.'

'Have you received a satisfactory interpretation of the Oracle's words?'

'Yes,' answered Lady Helen tonelessly.

'And the purpose of your visit?'

'A spy named Kelmos wishes to sell us important information concerning our enemy Sparta. We do not know whether to trust him.'

The deep voice almost perceptibly lost interest. Bloody Greek politics.

'And will your interpretation of the Oracle's words enable you to judge the spy?' asked the voice boredly.

'Yes.' (Thank goodness she was not asked to say where she got this interpretation from.) There was a pause.

'And who are these people with you?'

'On my left is Spardes, my bodyguard - on my right, my maid-servant.' Another pause.

'You will all remain asleep until you hear the prayer bell again. You will then all awake and forget everything that you saw or heard since the first prayer bell. Is that clear?'

'Yes,' we all answered automatically.

Noiselessly the lights on the picture dimmed and died, leaving all three of us staring at the now lifeless picture.

'Outside quick!' I said.

He opened the door cautiously. There were two priests outside, but as I had hoped and suspected, they were frozen rigid, looking into the distance. They must have been hypnotised some time previously and the courtyard bell had sent them to sleep through post-hypnotic suggestion.

In the middle of the courtyard the bell was connected to the water-clock. Water was trickling out of a small cistern and judging by the small amount left, the clock was going to ring again any moment. I had Spardes dip his cupped hands into the water-bowl and fill the cistern up to the brim. He looked round but apart from the two frozen soldiers the small courtyard was empty. We returned quickly to the Guest Room. I had to examine that picture!

It was about 1m by 70cm and rather thick at 50mm. By the way it was mounted on four iron spikes driven into the wall, it was not supposed to be moved. It was very, very old and the wood along one edge was warped and cracked. By cautiously lifting open this unglued side, Spardes could see that the interior of the picture was virtually empty, except for a slab of some material 300mm by 300mm by 40mm. This slab was positioned just behind the circles of the maze on the front of the picture. On the top edge of the slab was engraved another design, a design I had often seen in the 21st Century. The folded spiral of a flat antenna! Around 2 GHz, I estimated.

I got Spardes to heft the picture - it was slightly loose on its mounting spikes, and surprisingly heavy. About 5kg, and most of that must be due to the slab. He looked attentively at the picture from the front. It was clear that the concentric circles of the maze had been carefully cut out of the wood to expose just that part of the side of the slab where lights were mounted. And now I noticed that right in the middle of the maze was a 10mm diameter hole and in the middle of this hole was a gleaming convex glass lens! A fish-eye lens for a video camera! I recoiled hastily, but the probe seemed lifeless.

I tried to think of other things to do. A hand on the back of the slab revealed no extra warmth, the material was cool and hard and Spardes couldn't mark it with his nail. I wished I could take it back with me, but that was impossible of course.

Another quick dash outside to top up the cistern again under the frozen figures of the guards and then a pause to think.

This was it. I had discovered that there was an Extra-terrestrial probe and the slot antenna showed that the Extra-terrestrial itself could not be far away. My Mission was over, successful. I just had to recite my few lines of poetry and I would wake up in a bed in the Chrondisp Institute in the far, far future, where I would make my report to Dr Duluth.

But if I just pushed off now, Spardes was going to be in a mess - in fact he was going to be killed. He was really not very bright, and God-like I had manoeuvred him around for my own purposes, finally leaving him in a very dangerous situation. In the Great Scheme of Things his early death would be a trivial and unnoticed event - he was very much a Branch Line person. But even Gods have a conscience.

He topped up the cistern again and walked rapidly back into the Guest Room, where Lady Helen and her little maid-servant were still gazing transfixed at the dead picture. I looked at them thoughtfully, I could at least try a little Branch Line bending.

'You must now say my words out loud,' I said to Spardes. I thought a moment.

'When you awake you will remember that you have given your maid-servant to Spardes as a reward for saving your life and you have sent them both to Athens, bearing the message that no decision is to be taken about Kelmos until your return. Is that clear?' said Spardes.

'Yes,' said Lady Helen and the maid-servant automatically, still regarding the picture fixedly.

'Now wake up the girl,' I said to Spardes, internally. By shaking her and forcing her to move around he finally managed to get some sign of life in her eyes. As soon as she saw who was shaking her, she collapsed in tears on his shoulder.

Holding her hand he then looked around, picked up his sword, and left the room, the maid-servant still in a daze. A last top-up of the clock cistern and he made for a side door in the courtyard, ignoring the two armed but sleeping priests. There was a man on the hillside outside feeding some pigs but he paid no attention to them as Spardes closed the door behind him and took a path down the back of the mountain towards the sea, stopping now and then to look with surprise and pleasure at his new acquisition who was trotting beside him and clutching his hand like a lost child. He had learnt the name of the suspect spy, Kelmos, and this would prove to Lord Perikles that his message was true. So he would not be immediately "terminated". He had a pretty female slave who he seemed to like, so perhaps he would protect her too. What happened to them when Lady Helen returned was in the lap of the Gods.

*

Greece in the year 440BC. If you weren't a slave it wasn't too bad a place and time to live in. Of course the weather made life easier, and they had inherited a lot (weights and measures, lunisolar calendar, musical scales from the Mesopotamians, the Phoenician alphabet, astronomy, metal coinage from Asia Minor and Egyptian art) but the Greeks, even without the help given by the E-T, were advancing fast. I had confirmed a lot of what I had read in the Mempelak Jim had given me. They were an ingenious people experimenting with their brains. They were exploring the human mind as well as the physical world. They had firm ideas on how the young should be educated, how to argue and debate logically and how politics should be conducted, ideas which were going to shape the whole of Western Civilisation.

But they were too small, too independent minded, too arrogant and egotistical, too obsessed with the "quality of life", to survive against the next power structure coming down the pipe-line - the disciplined Roman Empire. They could not unite and were always fighting amongst themselves (in another fifteen years there was going to be a disastrous war and Sparta was going to defeat Greece). They were all destined to become Roman slaves, respected and often used as tutors for Roman rulers, but still slaves. Athens would become a "must" for visiting Roman tourists, but Greek culture and the Greek world outlook would only exist by permission of their conquerors. The decision centre of the Ancient World would move to Rome.

After the decline of the Roman Empire, which had protected them, Athens would decline too, becoming a provincial town in the Byzantine Empire, then occupied by the Crusaders, then captured by the Turks

The sun was beginning to set as I took a last look around Ancient Greece through the eyes of Spardes as he went down the mountain path towards the distant blue sea and out of my life.

Time to get back.

"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."

Chapter 24

After a long blank pause I found myself looking at a system of girders - undoubtedly from the 21st Century. Well, on a closer look they were rusty and worn and were more likely to have been made back in the 20th Century.

But rusty and worn girders holding up what I now saw was a dirty white-washed ceiling!? Where was I? Certainly not in an aseptic ward at the Chrondisp Institute. I reached back and up to lift off my helmet and felt my fingers on my head! Where was the helmet? My hand brushed against a wire and tracing it I found it was connected to two small rubber sucker pads on my forehead. I pulled them off with a popping sound and sat up.

Ow! I had pulled out a drip tube from my left arm and now there were some drops of blood on it. Sitting up groggily I looked around through gummy eyes I was on a grubby mattress on a wooden bed in what looked like the furnace room of a cheap apartment house, illuminated by a single small glow panel. The wires that had gone to my head were plugged into a piece of shiny modern equipment, obviously pulled out of a rack, and lying on the floor by my bedside. And hanging on a nail was the plastic bottle containing the drip-feed. It was almost full but emptying rapidly onto the floor via the needle. I absently tightened the clip on the rubber tube.

God, what an awakening! I knew from past experience that I would feel gloomy, but from the bright glare of the sun on the side of the Mount of Parnassus to a grotty cellar in 2015 was too much! And what about Bedside Reception and Debriefing? Nothing - I was on my own. No computer link to tell someone that I had returned, and to hasten in with greetings and especially with hot food and drink.

I opened a small package on the floor to find a thermos and two ham sandwiches. Bloody hell, this was a real low-budget Return. I had been told before I left that my Insertion was the most distant and expensive yet - was someone trying to cut overall costs?

I sipped what turned out to be over-sweet coffee and nibbled at the sandwiches. I hate coffee in the morning, they should know by now that I prefer tea. OK, so it wasn't morning ... but maybe it was - what time was it anyway? Searching through my clothes which had just been tossed over the foot of the bed, I found my watch - 11:03.

I looked round again. This sure wasn't the Chrondisp Institute! Breeze blocks and earthen floor - this wasn't a European house either. There was a roughly wired fuse-box with some Arab script over it and two wooden doors. I was still in Morocco - perhaps in Kazmir, an Arab town about 100km north of Chrondisp. Why had I been parked here? Surely some safe niche could have been found for me in Chrondisp? I looked at the equipment left with me. "Electro-narcosis Unit" S/N 128. This is what had been generating the background buzz that I could sometimes hear in Greece. And this "Elektro-übung Gerät" had been used to prevent muscle atrophy while I was asleep. Together they must constitute about the absolute minimum for an Insertion. But in a way the most important piece was missing - the computer hook-up which would tell Dr Duluth that I had returned so I could give him the nugget of knowledge, the priceless piece of info. that I had found in Golden Age Greece. There **was** an E-T probe and it **was** being used to feed technical know-how to the Greeks! Not the vague supposition I had brought back from Victorian England, but hard data. I hugged it to myself. This information was going to rock the world!

I reflected a bit. No, the computer hook-up was not the most important piece of equipment missing - a simple telephone call would do as well. But there was no phone amongst my clothes and neither was there one placed conveniently by the bedside. Someone had made a stupid omission.

Ah well, what the hell. I was back to somewhere in the 21st Century and I should be able to find a phone outside easily enough. I dressed myself quickly, finished off the rest of the coffee and the last sandwich and looked round for my shoes. There they were by one of the doors, just under the glow panel. I padded over and was just about to bend down to pick up the first when I heard a clink of metal followed by a fiercely whispered curse just outside the door. Acting on a sudden impulse I looked up at the glow panel and seeing a toggle switch underneath, slowly pushed it over, muffling its click with my closed hand. Instant darkness. I picked up a shoe but it was the wrong shape to use as a weapon and not heavy enough anyway. Instead I picked up the other one too and eased them both on.

There was some more whispering and a crack of faint light appeared around the edge of the door. Whoever it was outside had turned the knob very quietly. This wasn't a friendly visit. Someone out there knew I was asleep and was creeping in!

I began to sweat and I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck. The door hissed open wider and the voice whispered something in a language I didn't recognise but in an unmistakable tone of contemptuous disbelief. There was another emphatic whisper and light fanned across the foot of the bed. But I was intently watching the edge of the door and I saw the flash-eliminator at the end of a rifle barrel. That was enough - someone was creeping into my bedroom with a gun! I inflated my lungs and braced my feet.

`Aieeee!' I screamed at the top of my voice, grabbed the end of the barrel and everything went red as training took over. All I remember was a stocky figure kneeling on the ground in front of me. I had my right hand on the muzzle of his rifle, left hand on the butt. I tried to wrench the rifle from him but he had it on a sling under the epaulette of his right shoulder. He overbalanced towards me and put up his hand to protect his head. I swung the muzzle around in a short arc and struck him on the bridge of the nose. Taking a better grip I smashed the muzzle into his face again and then grasping the rifle firmly in both hands heaved. With a snap his epaulette tore off and I had the rifle. Rapidly I grasped the pistol grip in my right hand, jumped back against the wall and groped for the bolt. It was not a familiar action and I felt my skin tear on it but finally it slid back and a cartridge leapt out. I let the slide snap forwards.

In the faint light from the corridor he was lying on the floor looking up at me, his contorted face covered with blood.

`Hold!' I shouted, seeing his right hand scrabbling with a pistol holster on his belt.

`Hold!' I shouted again, and as the pistol barrel came up I triggered the rifle twice. Two ear splitting bangs but no ricochets - the bullets must have pierced him and buried themselves in the earthen floor.

The fool! Had no one taught him how to enter a room? He had an unfamiliar uniform but I had no more time to spend on him. There were others outside. I kicked the door shut and checked the rifle, panting.

`What the fuck are you waiting for? Get on, get on!' shouted a voice in my head. It belonged to the sergeant in charge of a street-fighting course I took once.

I fired two shots through the door and crouching down crashed it open. Shit - darkness! No, a slight glimmer at the top of the stairs. Still crouching I ran up the steps and saw a swinging half-open door at the top leading into a brightly-lit room. There was a shadow just moving out of the line of the door. A rifle muzzle appeared and fired a burst down the stairs, the shots hammering into the ceiling above my head and bringing down clouds of white dust. The muzzle disappeared. Without pausing I fired three or four shots into the room and then just before rushing through the doorway, I lowered the muzzle and triggered off another three or four shots at the floor, seeing stars appear in the hard tiles. Over the bangs I could hear the howl of random ricochets.

Now I was in the room, firing shots at random. There was a movement in the corner of my eye.

'Behind you!' shrieked the sergeant. I spun round and fired twice from the hip then - click - empty magazine! I raised the rifle to throw it when I noticed an unmoving khaki-uniformed figure lying on the floor staring at me. He had a hand stretched out in front of him holding a grenade! With a final dying effort he loosened his fingers. The arming lever flew off with a "ping" and the grenade wobbled towards me - the fuse hissing and its deadly crenellations clicking on the tiled floor!

'For Christ sake, get it away!' I grabbed its cold heaviness and looked around desperately. Outside door to room closed, window covered with a grill - with a convulsive jerk I threw the infinitely deadly object down the stairway I had just ascended. I heard it clumping down the individual steps as I ran to the far corner of the room and crouched mouth open and hands over ears. There was the hammer blow of an explosion and the floor heaved beneath me.

Silence. I picked myself up, but apart from ringing ears I appeared undamaged. The door was leaning outwards drunkenly on one hinge, the window glass had disappeared, the tiles in the floor were bulging up, displaced and lying all over the place, the air was filled with falling dust and choking fumes.

I turned over the body in the corner. He was quite dead and lying on his rifle. I kicked it away and pulled three magazines out of his pouch, fitting one immediately to my rifle. On the other side of his belt was another pouch, the flap open. I dug my hand in and found three grenades and for some reason a piece of yellow silk.

'Get out! Move!' screamed the voice. These were soldiers and at the end of a chain of command. There would be a back-up. I ran through the blown-out door into the next room - a normally furnished living room in the Arab style. A glance out of the window showed a sand-car with big inflated wheels parked in the road outside. Two khaki uniformed soldiers were behind it with levelled rifles and two others were running up the sides of the path towards the front door. I glanced around in panic. There was another door at the far end of the room but it led outside. There would be others waiting there. Caught like a rat in a trap! Those soldiers were incredibly motivated - they must be elite troops and they weren't interested in taking me prisoner! Where? Where?

There had been another door in the cellar! I ran back into the first room and down the stairway, in my haste almost falling down the stairwell. The grenade had completely destroyed the stairway - the steps were just shattered matchwood. So I hung on the edge of the door, dropped down to the floor below and ran into the room I had woken up in. It was a complete shambles. The door frames were hanging out, pieces of breeze-block were everywhere and what remained of my bed was burning briskly. Taking a deep breath and putting up my hands to shield my face from

the heat I ran into the smoke-filled room, trying to remember where the other door was. I found it easily enough - it had been blown open outwards too. Guided by the flickering flames I made my way through it and ran down what turned out to be a corridor about thirty meters long.

Judging by the state of the tunnel it hadn't been used for a very long time. I pushed open a rotten door at the end and found myself in a broken-down outhouse, so neglected and fallen in on itself that it was almost level with the ground. Small scrubby bushes surrounded it. It must have been a buttery or some sort of cold store in the distant past.

I cautiously pushed my head above the ground, above the scrub, and for the first time was able to look around. I was in a sort of settlement at the edge of the desert. In the blinding sunlight I could see two houses, approximately 100m apart and standing on a small sandy hill. A dense plume of smoke was rising from the house I had just left and about 15 soldiers were standing around watching it, the nearest ones with their backs to me. Now I could quite clearly see that they were Asiablock! Their transport must be on the other side of the house. Shivering in spite of the heat I looked at them, remembering the last time I had seen those uniforms in Pakistan. What the hell were Asiablock infantry doing here? Were we at war again? Why were they after me?

As I watched the smoke thinned out as the house really started to burn and crackle. The plume of smoke had disappeared, consumed by the upward reaching flames, visible only as a shimmer in the bright sunlight and I could feel their heat from here. There was a sudden movement as the Asiablock car appeared. It made a brief circuit of the doomed house, soldiers standing up in the back and looking inwards. I pressed down into the scrub. The car braked to a stop and I saw the patrol-leader holding up a handset. After a moment he put it down and signalled to drive on. The soldiers were picked up one by one and with a last look round the car departed.

Silence descended, the hot intense silence of the desert during the afternoon. I wrapped my handkerchief around the cut on my hand. Safe for the moment - but I was exhausted and hungry and thirsty. Especially thirsty. But it would be stupid to move out of cover so soon - it was standard practice to leave someone behind. Think.

Duluth must have had a very good reason to move my sleeping body out of the Chrondisp Institute, where you would think I would be infinitely safer than out here. Someone must have heard about my illegal Mission and was trying to interrupt it. It could only be someone who didn't want me to discover the E-T probe and therefore the E-T itself. Those two academics had been fairly pissed off that they hadn't been sent to Ancient Greece, but that was hardly enough motive for them to spoil it - even if they had the clout. So it must be someone in the 21st Century - and someone with power. But why should some powerful person in the 21st Century want to prevent me discovering that an E-T was distributing goodies to the human race in the 5th Century BC? Some religious nut or a sect of religious nuts? Someone influenced by the E-T? But that didn't make sense either. The E-T was obviously a "nice guy" and was encouraging our development. Most people who do good don't mind being discovered in the act. If the E-Ts were trying to make friends with us it would be an excellent selling point to be able to say "Look at all those free samples I gave out in 500BC". And having me coming back and confirming it could only help its case.

I gave it up. It was a mystery. The egg-heads at Chondisp would have to sort it out. My job was to get my vital phone call through to them, if I could stay alive long enough to do so.

I needed water.

I checked the rifle, I recognised it now as the Ashanti model used by elite Asiablock troops. I cocked it, raised my head and looked round discreetly. Nothing.

I felt my head swimming - I needed water urgently. Abandoning caution I stood up and jogged towards the second house. Now I was aware of it, my throat was a furnace, I was consumed with passion for cool water. I crashed a door open and lurched across a courtyard to the kitchen - there must be water there. I could almost hear the splashing of water gushing out of the tap as in my imagination I turned it. I put my hand out to open the door when it suddenly opened in front of me. An Asiablock soldier stood framed in the opening, his rifle raised!

Chapter 25

Behind it his broad yellow face was grinning. That patrol leader had not been so stupid - he had guessed that if I were still alive I would need water and so had stationed a man exactly at that spot. I held my hands out sideways weakly, but it only increased his enjoyment. He was carefully sighting on my head, obviously this was going to be a moment to cherish, to relate to his friends afterwards, when suddenly his body stiffened and his aim changed as his rifle pointed urgently upwards. But it was too late. There was the tearing rasp of a laser and a small hole appeared in his forehead. He crumpled forwards, his rifle clattering to the ground.

I crouched down and swung my rifle round on its sling but a voice behind me said matter-of-factly in a very British accent:

'Don't worry, he's the only one.'

I turned round expecting to see at least an officer of the Brigade of Guards but saw only a slim figure in an untidy private's uniform, carelessly holding a large aperture Browning laser.

I turned away from this enigma of the British class-structure - where was the water?! I entered the kitchen, turned a tap on over the sink and out gushed cool water! Without looking for a mug I just cupped my hands and drank and drank, splashing the water over my hot face and neck and laughing with relief.

'I say, steady on.' A hand appeared and turned off the running tap. 'Only a limited amount of water in the cistern, you know.'

Whoever he was, he was right, of course. Ignoring him for the moment, I found a beaker in the cupboard, filled it and drank again. Then holding the refilled beaker I started searching through the cupboards. One had about 20 tins of German beer! I looked at the "Augustinerbräu" sign with affection. A message of comfort from another saner world! But then I found some tins of preserved meat and opened one. I prised the salty meat out of it with a knife, chewing it down with frequent gulps of water. Better stay off the beer. After a while I sighed and put down the empty tin. Finally I looked at him - he had been patiently watching me eat and drink. He was about 25, with a small round pink face and fine blond hair falling over his eyes.

'John Hodgeson,' he said.

'Er, Digby,' I said. I detested my first name. 'Call me Dig.'

'I've been sort of away,' I began. 'Perhaps if you could ring me up to date ...' I waved my hand, taking in the burning house, the body outside. He put his laser down on the table.

`Yes, of course,' he said `Well, when the Inserter blew up Dr Duluth sent Jim, you know Jim of Computers?, with me to stow you...' I waved him down.

`The Inserter "blew up"!' I said incredulously.

`That's right. We had hardly repelled the first wave when one of the buggers must somehow ...' I held up my hand again.

`Look,' I said. `I've been away a few weeks. Start right at the beginning.'

He did, and it was a sad and horrifying story. It had started with a wave of assassinations of Chrodisp personnel - this I knew all about - but then the assassinations had spread to Western World leaders. The West accused Asiablock who replied that they had nothing to do with them. And although the evidence showed Asiablock to be behind the attacks, there was something phoney about the evidence and somehow Asiablock's protests of innocence rang true. Westblock started beefing up security, thinking it must be Arab fundamentalists, the Mafia, whatever. And then the heads of Asiablock started to fall, and this time the evidence pointed to Westblock.

Asiablock automatically assumed these attacks were Westblock engineered revenge killings but around this time all the Comsats went off the air.

`Since then Chrodisp has been isolated and I haven't a clue what's going on outside. We tried other ways to contact the rest of the world, we've got some amateur radio fans, but everything was out, jammed or something. Only short-range VHF seems to work.'

He pushed his hair back nervously.

He then went on to say that they had suddenly been attacked by Asiablock ground forces. Chrodisp had beaten them off, mainly because of the vast energy reserves it had for the Inserter which it had been able to divert to power lasers, and its enormous computer which they had been able to use to out-think the attackers.

`I used to work in the Resonator section, and when it was destroyed, I was out of a job. Management seemed to think that the destruction of the Inserter was an inside-job and that you could be in danger too, as long as you were at Chrodisp. So Jim asked me to help bring you here through the tunnel, out of danger, and I stayed with you.' `Out of danger" he repeated to himself with a grimace.

`And how long...?'

`Well, the YP attack on Chrodisp started a week ago and you've been here three days.'

The "YP" or "Wipe" were contemptuous names for the "Yellow People", and came from the war in Pakistan. If they had appeared again it was a bad sign.

`This is a small village just outside Kazmir,' he added. `About 100km from Chrodisp. When the news about the attack was received all the inhabitants fled to Kazmir.' He paused. `And you're probably wondering what happened while you were here.'

I nodded.

`You were parked in the basement and I was living upstairs. I would nip down now and then, top up the drip-feed and so on, when suddenly I heard over the local telephone (which was still working) that there had been a big Asiablock air-drop on Kazmir and a patrol was coming this way. Then the message cut-out in mid-sentence. So I camouflaged your basement as best I could and hid out in the roof here.' He pointed upwards. `I could see everything. Their lorry circled around dropping a man every 100m or so and then they all moved in. They seemed to know exactly what they were doing. Their sergeant and a soldier went straight to your house - they ignored this one completely.' He looked at me apologetically. `I was

outnumbered twenty to one, I couldn't do a damn thing. All I could do was hope that you would remain hidden.

Well anyway, they went in and after a few seconds a terrific rumpus broke out. It sounded like a battle was going on in there. I thought they had got mixed up and were shooting at each other. Then there was this tremendous explosion and all the doors and windows blew out. Immediately the house caught fire and in half an hour it was burnt to the ground. The two soldiers didn't come out and the rest just stood around watching. How the devil did you get out? I thought I saw everything.'

I told him what had happened and about the passage out of the cellar and then sat down. Chondisp attacked by regular Asiablock troops! If WW3 had started, I must try to rejoin my Regiment. But first I must contact Duluth.

'Look, I must get a message through to Chondisp. Can you contact Duluth through your commanding officer ...?' I glanced doubtfully at his uniform - I couldn't see any insignia.

'Oh, this?' he grinned, tugging at his uniform jacket. 'Jim gave me this to stop any of our own people firing at us on the way out. I'm not a soldier.'

I looked at him. Everything he had said so far was almost incredible, but this at least I believed.

'But the message?' I persisted. With WW3 about to start, it might not be so important, but it was my duty to deliver it.

He brushed the hair out of his eyes.

'I'm damned if I know,' he confessed. 'As I said - all the long-distance radio-phones are out.' He flipped his open, pressed some buttons, and then held it up to me. It displayed the "no down-link" sign.

'Well, I can't just stay here,' I said impatiently. 'Can't we get back into Chondisp through this tunnel you brought me out through?'

'Tricky,' he said. 'There's no door-bell on it, you know. And in any case it must be inside the enemy perimeter by now. They're still surrounding Chondisp.'

'Draw me a picture,' I demanded.

He obligingly looked around the kitchen and found a stub of pencil on a shelf. He drew the familiar oval shape of the Chondisp Institute on the plastic table. A small circle at the top indicated the reactor cooling tower. He then thought a moment and put a cross outside the oval, level with the tower.

'This is the exit,' he explained. 'The tunnel's about 1km long.'

'What the hell do we need a tunnel for, by the way?'

'It contains some sort of measuring station. It measures the EM pulse our Inserter makes, the er...'

'The signature,' I guessed, looking at his map.

'And Asiablock surround us completely?' I continued.

He raised his shoulders.

'All I know is that they were between this exit and our perimeter fence when we got you out.' He touched the cross.

Jesus, it must have been hairy! Suddenly the complexity of the enterprise hit me.

'How the hell did you get me out?' I asked incredulously.

'Yes, it was a bit dicey,' he admitted. 'There's a sort of little carriage that runs in the tunnel; the tunnel's not very high and you have to lie down. We got you to the exit OK and there was a dune buggy - you know? - one of those things with big fat tyres. We loaded you on with all your kit...'

'My kit?' I asked, wondering if I had heard right.

`Yes, the electronics and the portable power supply. I remember we had to be very careful with the wires. If one came off you'd have Returned prematurely and with the Resonator kaput we wouldn't have been able to Insert you again. It would have been the end of your Mission.' He paused a moment reflectively. `Dr Duluth himself came to see us off. I've never seen him so ...agitated.'

`And then?' I asked, fascinated.

`Well, we didn't want anyone to hear the buggy so we pushed it for about 500m to a ridge of dunes about here,' he touched his sketch, `and Chrodisp put on a firework display over on the other perimeter to distract anyone who might have been watching. And then we took the road to Kazmir and parked you here,' he said, pointing with his thumb to the smoking ruins next door.

`And Jim?'

`Took the buggy back to Chrodisp.'

`Through the tunnel again, the way we want to go?'

`I suppose so.'

`And I slept through it all,' I marvelled. He just grinned.

I looked at him again with new respect. If we ever got out of this alive, I would do my best to get him awarded a medal. But then I remembered he wasn't in the army.

There seemed about a hundred questions to ask but I had to repress my curiosity. I must get my message back to Chrodisp and I had no objection to personally delivering it in the relative safety of Chrodisp. But how the hell were we going to get there? Across 100km of what must now be enemy-held territory. It was now 17:32, perhaps there was some civilian traffic on the roads and we could hitch a lift - but we would have to wait until night-fall. On foot it would take about 30 hours walking through sand. On the other hand ... The problem suddenly had to be shelved when we heard the buzz of a dune buggy close outside!

We rushed across the room and peeked over the window-sill. The matt sand-brown painted buggy had the "yellow sun" marking of the Yellow Peoples' Federacy stencilled on its side and contained two young soldiers!

It drew up to a flashy stop about 100m way in a spray of sand. They had come to pick up their friend, unknown to them lying in the courtyard outside, with a hole burnt between his eyes.

One soldier dismounted and with his rifle ready, started to walk towards us. The other remained in his seat, rifle across his knees and a microphone in his hand.

`Come with me!' I whispered and we both dashed into the courtyard.

`Off with his tunic,' I said, tugging the front fastenings open. John grabbed a sleeve and I rolled him over. One arm free then the other arm pulled out. I tugged the tunic from under his weight and held it open to John. Divining what I wanted, he backed into it and thrust his arms into the sleeves. I picked up the dead soldier's cap and jammed it onto his head, pulling the peak down.

`Sit down here with your back to the door and make like you're drunk,' I whispered. I heard an interrogative shout outside and then another, impatient and suspicious. I grabbed some of the beer cans out of the cupboard, gave two to John, silently laid the rest of them on their side, placed the dead soldier's rifle on the floor and after a last quick look round, rapidly tip-toed to behind the door, John's laser ready.

With a crash the door banged back open and the muzzle of a rifle appeared. Without entering the house it pointed rapidly around the room and then settled on

the bent figure sitting on the step in the door to the courtyard. There was the hiss of a can of beer being opened and a clank as two rolled together.

The soldier slung his rifle and saying something to himself, stepped into the house. I waited until he was clear of the door and hit him crisply in the nape of his neck with the butt of the laser. He collapsed and I caught his rifle.

'Quick!' I whispered to John. 'Come to the door here and wave a beer can.' The bait had so far worked perfectly.

On seeing John, the second soldier said something into the microphone and hung it up. He stepped out of the buggy, slung his rifle and sauntered towards the house, shouting jocularly. I let him come into the house and pointed the laser at him. He was about seventeen and terrified, his brown slant eyes staring at the laser aperture. I made him lie down by the side of his still unconscious friend and we bound them both together like turkeys with string we found in a drawer. On the way out I turned at the door and looked back at them in exasperation. We needed as long a start as possible and they should be able to free themselves in an hour. Unfortunately I have never been able to kill anyone in cold blood so somehow we must delay them. I pulled out one of the grenades and removed the pin. The young soldier's eyes widened in fear again, but I just put it in a china cup and placed it on the kitchen table. I took a long piece of string and tied one end to the cup handle and the other to his hands, behind his back, leaving him about 20cm of free movement. He didn't need any explanations. More than 20cm of movement, the cup would fall off the table, break on the tiled floor, the handle would fly off and ...

As a further precaution, I pulled out their combat knives, removed the knife drawer from the kitchen, and threw everything with a clatter into the courtyard. A last look round and we left.

Chapter 26

After looking out of all the windows we walked across to the dune-buggy. John pulled off the dead soldier's tunic and gave it to me. I gave him his Browning back and motioned him to the driving seat. I sat beside him with the tunic on and a rifle across my knees.

John looked at the charge gauge on the dash and gave a thumbs-up sign. He switched on and as we moved off I looked at my watch.

It was 18:10, the sun was way over to our right and the temperature still high. As we bowled along the roughly tarred track we passed a few overloaded camels and once a beat-up old truck going in the opposite direction. Fortunately no Asiablock military.

The cut on my hand was aching. I looked around the interior of the buggy and finally found a first-aid kit under the seat to tape it up.

The illimitable Sahara desert stretched out to the horizon in all directions under an almost black sky. There was a radio under the dash but it was a simple on/off with no tuning. In any case the stubby antenna behind us showed it was VHF and would never reach Chrodisp from here. It might be possible to use it when we got nearer, but here it would be dangerous to transmit as the YP would immediately locate us. After 1/2 hour of driving the radio beeped briefly but I ignored it. It beeped peremptorily again and then fell silent.

The scenery gradually began to change, a long row of brown dunes building up on our right. After a few more kilometres John confidently turned off and soon we

were surfing up and down them. Gradually they became higher and I was just about to put my hand on John's arm to warn him to stop when he pulled to one side, just beneath a crest, and switched off the motor. In the sudden silence, he put his arms above his head stretching.

'Over there, about 2km,' he said pointing.

In the distance I could now hear the sounds of the siege. The faint rattle of an MG, the thump of distant artillery and far away an engine roaring continuously.

We crept to the knife-edge sharp ridge of the dune and looked over. We were about 20m up and could see the Institute spread out before us. From here the cupolas were white disks. Several had been hit and were gaping open to the sky. The white reactor cooling tower soared up proudly 3km away, although a bite had been taken out of one edge. There were some large new artificial sand-dunes in the distance and off to the right, their covering with laser-fused sand glittering in the sunlight.

'We have two big computer-controlled lasers up there now and can vaporise any incoming missiles,' whispered John. 'But the YP main base is built behind those sand-banks.'

On a ridge to our left I could see an Asiablock automatic observation station, its periscope just level with the edge of the dune. But no Asiablock soldiers. I looked at the sun - another hour to sunset. Could we just dash across when it got dark and hope for the best? No way, both sides would see our heat signatures and we would be fried before we had covered ten paces.

So near, yet so far. I could even see some movement on the top of the cooling tower as the sun in the west caught a shiny surface for an instant.

I voiced my thoughts to John. He coughed diffidently.

'There is a way we could signal, but I'm not sure how to do it.' I jerked my eyes over to his face.

'If we had a mirror ...' he began.

'A heliograph!' I almost shouted and ran down the dune to the buggy. I grabbed at the projecting rear-view mirror, thank God, it was a flat one. Now if only the other ... it was!

John was looking down curiously at me.

'Keep a look-out,' I said and then turned to extracting the two mirrors without breaking them. This turned out to be quite easy - they were embedded in foam plastic. I held the two oval shaped mirrors in my hands. A heliograph - I had seen one that my great-grandfather had used in the Indian Army - was a two sided mirror with a hole in the middle. Used to send Morse Code messages over long distances by reflecting the sun's rays in on/off flashes. A pretty neat idea, line of sight communications and difficult to intercept. I held up one of the mirrors in the glaring sunlight and I could quite easily see the reflected spot of light it made on the dune opposite. But how to aim it? Maybe that would become clear when it was built.

I took the two mirrors to John on the crest.

'Have you a knife or something sharp? I want to scratch off part of the silvering.' He felt in his pockets awhile, shaking his head and then looked up and suggested a cartridge. Good. I unclipped the magazine from my rifle and prised one out. Its sharp point was perfect. I scratched a small hole in the middle of the back of one mirror, making a patch of clear glass and then laying the other mirror over it estimated where to scratch a similar hole in the same place.

Now I had two mirrors, each with a patch of clear glass in the middle. I held them up, back to back.

`Why two mirrors?' asked John.

`Damned if I know. I just know this is how a heliograph is made. It's something to do with aiming it.' I handed him the two mirrors. `Hold these,' I said looking at the sun. We had only about half an hour before the sun set. I went down back to the buggy and found the small first-aid box I had used on my hand. I brought it back to the crest, and pulled out two Band-Aids.

`Hold the mirrors out,' I said `I want to tape them together.' I smoothed the plastic strips down - they covered a small part of the reflecting surfaces of the two mirrors but not enough to make any difference, I hoped.

Now how did it work? I manoeuvred the mirror in the sun until I could see the white reflected spot on the dune opposite again. Then I looked through the hole in the middle of the glass but nothing obvious happened. I moved it around again and made a sound of disgust. I couldn't see how the damn thing worked.

`Hold this,' I said giving it to John, and stuck my head over the ridge. Perhaps if I lined up the edge of the next dune with the top of the cooling tower, put the spot of light on the ridge and then flicked it up it must go into the eyes of anyone in the tower? But damn, the next dune was not high enough and I would have to go down on the exposed front face of our dune to line them up.

`Got it!' said the voice of John, behind me. I turned round to find him holding the heliograph close up to his face.

`You look at the target through the hole,' he said, his voice muffled from behind the mirror. `At the same time I look at the reflection of my face in the rear mirror and see a little white dot which is the sun shining directly through the hole onto my cheek. I just pivot the mirror until the little dot disappears in the hole. Look, I'm aiming at that red stone on the ridge opposite.'

And he was too! I held out my hand and with a grin he handed it over. It was quite easy to line up the bright spot on my cheek with the hole and the red stone. I wiggled the mirror from side to side making the bright spot flick over the hole. It would flick over the red stone in the same way.

Great. Now what should we send? "John and Digby here, E-T yes", should cause a furore over there, I smirked complacently. I lay down on the ridge, took a bead on the tower and then...

`Er, do you know the Morse Code?' I asked John.

`The Morse Code? No,' he answered, surprised.

I put the mirror down, baffled. I had thought that engineers ... on the other hand John had probably thought that soldiers ... What the hell! I could send "SOS" but it was the limit of my knowledge, and that wasn't very informative.

`I somehow thought that computer people ... you know, "bits",' I said feebly.

`Yes, of course we use "bits" but data-transfer is in 8-bit ASCII code and you can hardly use ...But why not?' He pulled the stub of pencil out of his pocket and looking round picked up the first-aid kit and pulled out some pieces of packing paper. Resting them on the box he looked up.

`What do you want to say?' I told him and he wrote it down. Then he started scratching something underneath. `I think we can omit parity bits,' he muttered to himself. `ASCII by heliograph!' He snorted.

`OK?' I said. `Then you read and I'll flash.'

`Very well. I'll give it you as "dit" for a short flash and "dah" for a long,' he said. `And they'll just have to work out that dit equals a zero and dah equals a one.'

`Fair enough,' I said, squaring my elbows in the sand. `First I'll just send off some short flashes to attract their attention.'

After a few seconds of moving the spot backwards and forwards across the hole, I said 'Start,' and he began reading out "dit, dit, dah, dit ..." Faithfully I followed him.

I stopped and watched. Nothing.

'Again,' I said and he repeated the message. We did it once more. Still nothing.

'It's going to take them a little while to recognise it,' said John, at my shoulder as we watched.

The sun had almost set now and only the tip of the cooling tower was illuminated, seemingly floating over the dark pool that was the Chrontisp Institute. And suddenly that disappeared too. We watched with slowly decreasing hope for another quarter of an hour or so, as night spread out over the battlefield and the stars appeared. Now it was completely dark with Chrontisp totally blacked out. The temperature was dropping rapidly. John suddenly got up and went down to the buggy, returning a few minutes with something in his hand.

'IR goggles,' he said. 'They were under the dash. Can you use them?' I slipped them on, pressed the switch and looked round. John's hands and face were very bright of course, as was the still warm buggy behind us, but apart from the faint glow from the cooling tower, there was nothing to see. I showed John how to use them and turned back to the battlefield.

There was a red flash on the horizon to the south and a rumbling sound.

Suddenly a bright line appeared, joining the top of the Tower to a small yellow ball high in the eastern sky. The line vanished but the ball expanded, turned red and drifted slowly down. We heard the distant boom of an explosion. The Chrontisp defence was alert.

We watched a few more interceptions and were discussing what to do next when John, looking up, grabbed my arm. Following his gaze I could see, not more than 2m above us, a thin line of blue light. It was so fine it could not be seen after a few meters but it was coming unmistakably from the tower! That was the aiming beam of a laser cannon. Message received? I raised my head and shoulders above the dune and waved. An IR scope should see me easily enough. The laser power increased for an instant, making three sharp cracks, and then the beam was switched off.

Abruptly, the radio in the buggy behind us in the dip beeped for about 30 seconds and then fell silent. We looked at each other.

'I don't like that,' I said. The buggy radio was of course a transmitter and a receiver. I'd never heard of it being done before, but there was no reason why a signal couldn't be sent out to the receiver making it switch on the transmitter for a few seconds, long enough for its location to be determined by a direction finder.

There was another long beep. That was enough for me. I ran down to the buggy and ran my hand under the dash looking for wires to the radio. I couldn't feel any - the radio, which I now noticed to be very strongly constructed, was firmly built into the dash. Battery? The hood was also locked and I could find no way to open it - the whole power unit was sealed off.

The radio beeped again and I looked at the dark bulk of the buggy helplessly. Maybe we'd better move the damn thing - it could be acting like a beacon, advertising our presence. Why so much beeping? Were they having difficulty in locating us because the dunes screened the transmitter? But the closer their direction finder got, the easier it would be to find us.

The antenna! I moved quickly to the rear of the buggy and felt that it too was very solidly mounted, with no exposed cables. It was 20mm thick and although I heaved, I rocked the buggy but couldn't move the antenna a millimetre.

Then I started having nightmares. If the transmitter could be remote controlled then why couldn't an internal charge be remote detonated?! I ran up the slope to John.

'Give me your laser.' He pulled it out of its holster and handed it to me. I flipped open the butt-plate. Just over 3 Megajoules of charge left, or about 10 seconds on full aperture.

I crouched down in front of the buggy, resting both of my hands on the hood. Removing thoughts from my mind of auto-destruct mechanisms in the antenna, linked to the main destruct charge under the hood, I aimed at where I thought the base of the antenna was and held down the trigger for 3 seconds. The red beam lanced out and skittered over the antenna. Head down I waited a moment then got up and examined it. It was glowing a dull red but otherwise unharmed. Only 7 seconds of charge left.

This time I held the laser only 50cm away, aiming at the still dully glowing base of the antenna and triggered it. A hissing glare and rapidly the red patch grew bright red, yellow then white. With a click the laser pistol went dead. I dropped it and raising my foot kicked at the top of the antenna. It broke off and lay glowing in the sand. Was I in time?

I went up to the top of the dune again where the faint star-light glimmered on the IR goggles John was wearing.

'Anything?' I asked quietly.

'A few more interceptions, but nothing special. And no activity on the ground,' he answered. 'What do we do now? Chrondisp know where we are and won't shoot. Shouldn't we make a dash for it?'

I was thinking along the same lines. The YP probably only had a general idea of where we were but it would be getting better and better. They must be out searching. They could be creeping up all around us in the darkness! The longer we waited the more certainly they would find us. But there was no sign from Chrondisp. Were they planning a rescue mission which we would screw up by dashing out prematurely?

It was about 2km to where John thought the tunnel was. In the dark we could go right past it. And as the desert was completely flat we would be immediately visible and sitting ducks for any sniper with an I-R sight. The desert could be mined – probably was. I was torn with indecision.

John, who was looking over my shoulders through the IR goggles, grabbed my arm and pointed. He passed over the goggles to me and there I could see them! Eight, nine, no, ten rapidly moving IR lights, weaving over the dunes to the south, appearing and disappearing as they dipped behind the dunes. Dune buggies making a sweep north, certainly looking for us!

Now we could hear their distant droning, modulating and beating as they dipped in and out of the dunes.

'Get our buggy over this side!' I said. He dived down the hill and a few seconds later I heard the engine start. Thank God there was no remote switch-off! The noise increased and our buggy loomed buzzing beside me. I jumped in and clapped him on the shoulder.

Chapter 27

'Go, go!' Their IR optics would have spotted us immediately we appeared on the ridge. Dipping and rising we surfed up and down the sand dunes, our engine howling. Each time we crested a ridge I craned my neck to look back but there was

nothing to see. But then in the distant flash of an exploding shell I saw they had changed direction and were now coming directly for us - the leaders only two dunes behind and getting closer!

I felt around in the bucking dune-buggy for my rifle and then leant over the back. Perhaps I could slow them down, but a single rifle wasn't much use, especially shooting from a platform like this. I grabbed the seat as a particularly heavy bump almost ejected me. Holding the rifle with one hand, and the back of the seat with another, I looked backwards again. It was pretty hopeless. John had and needed the IR goggles and I could only see vague shapes against the stars, and that only when they drove over a ridge.

Now we could hear the drone of the enemy buggies getting nearer! It increased with a roar as about ten of them simultaneously appeared on the ridge behind us. I emptied my rifle at them in short bursts and threw a grenade. John turned the buggy violently and we dived down the face of a dune - we must get over the edge of the next dune before the YP buggies appeared over the edge of this. Fortunately the height of the dunes slightly decreased as they rolled towards Chrondisp, but on the other hand the sand was less compacted in the depressions between the dunes and slowed down our buggy. I looked despairingly at the next ridge towering in front of us and then at the ridge behind. As soon as they appeared on that ridge we would stand out like flares through their heat sensitive IR goggles.

We started to desperately scramble directly up the dune, wheels spinning, listening intently to the massed droning behind. Well, this was it, I thought as we turned round. Everything had to end sometime, I had had a good run for my money and done things very few men of my age and abilities had done. I had survived a ferocious war, been inserted into the France of Napoleon, then into Victorian England where I had heard an E-T. Then I had been inserted into the Golden Age of Greece where I had actually seen something built by the E-T. Better to finish here than to slowly die of old age and end up in an old-folks home. A pity I left no descendants though. Helga would have made a good mother. But at least the message had got through. It was a slightly comforting epitaph: "He accomplished his last Mission".

Perhaps I would see some of the buggies silhouetted against the background of stars as they breasted the ridge. I jammed in the last full magazine and got ready to pull the pin from the last grenade.

Over my shoulder to the right there was a sudden shout of triumph, followed by a massed roar as the rest of the buggies breasted the ridge. I drew back my arm to throw ...

But then something happened that I would never forget. It happened so quickly we hardly had time to appreciate that it had happened.

With an audible snap ten parallel blue lines appeared over our heads, followed instantly by the brilliant flash and the long echoing whip-crack of a high-power laser. Abruptly ten intensely bright balls of fire came into existence on the high ridge of the dune above us as the temperatures of the ten Asiablock buggies were instantaneously raised to several thousand degrees, melting their metal, vaporising and igniting their fuel-cells and incinerating their riders.

Stunned and dazzled by the heat-flash, we watched them burn, flicker and die, a few redly glowing remains falling into the dip behind us.

One moment we were in deadly danger and mentally making our wills and in the next the danger had been totally removed and we were alone in the desert! I had

seen the precise and spectacular effect of laser cannons before but never one with such 'target handling' capability!

Before I could see anything else we were down into the next dip, skidding and weaving, engine howling like a banshee. We rose up momentarily on a crest and were about to plunge again when a bullet banged over head. But immediately the guardian laser beam from the tower appeared, incinerating the sole rifleman to our right in a distant golden flash.

From here on the dunes became smaller and smaller. But as we dived down onto the plain, aiming for the tower, we were now exposed on all sides. So again our guardian angel, the miracle laser, demonstrated its power. Like a light-show, two roaring vertical fan-shaped beams lanced out from the tower, guiding us forward. And not only guiding us but protecting us too. Small incandescent spots of light flashed momentarily in the wide beams as incoming missiles were vaporised as they tried to pass. Every now and then there was a sharp crack heard over the roaring of the lasers as a pulse of energy was directed at some precise target behind us. We were in a protective laser "box barrage" that moved with us, protecting and guiding us forwards, towards the end of the tunnel that would lead us to safety. We could feel the heat from the screen, now only a few meters away on each side of us.

John abruptly changed direction and we slewed to a stop. He jumped out and I followed him.

'This way!' he shouted, his hand up to shield his eyes from the shimmering glare of the laser screen. And now I too could see a small low building silhouetted against that glaring sparkle. A figure was standing up outside it, gesticulating. We panted up and a hand stretched out from the stocky figure to clasp mine; another was on my shoulder. It could only be an American!

'Welcome home!' said Jim. 'Both OK?' he added anxiously. 'Jesus,' he added looking round at the incandescent glaring maelstrom of the laser shield, roaring, flickering and banging as it protected us from missiles.

He then crouched down and arm outstretched, shepherded us through a low door.

'Mind your head,' he said, automatically. I ducked obediently - it seemed one of the minor dangers at the moment.

We were in a small room, lit with a single glow plate. Against one wall was a rack of electronic equipment, in front of us a small wheeled carriage on gleaming rails leading into a low tunnel. There was a metallic clang and the screech of a clamp as the door closed behind us.

'Fifty centimetres headroom,' said Jim, his voice loud in the sudden silence.

We scrambled down onto the carriage and lay out flat.

'Let's go! They know about this tunnel.'

As if in confirmation there was thump and dust fell from the ceiling. Jim pushed a switch and we started to silently accelerate. The cool air rushed past us and there was another thump somewhere.

But finally the rails inclined downwards and we picked up speed. At the same time the roof rose above our heads and I knew we were finally safe inside the Chrodisp complex.

We pulled into a siding and climbed stiffly off. Dusting off our clothes we waited like commuters for the normal rubber-wheeled train that endlessly circulated deep under Chrodisp, connecting all the sections and departments. Other passengers looked up surprised at my rifle and our unkempt appearance.

We took the next train and after two stops John left us. I stayed with Jim for another four stops and then followed him as he climbed out and through some steel doors leading to a lift. He fed in his card and we descended several tens of meters, judging by my popping ears. Out of the lift and he conducted me rapidly through corridors and workshops that I never knew existed, through a hall that was filled with people looking tensely at glowing screens or wearing Virtual Reality helmets, and finally into a dimly lit room that must have originally been used for conferences.

Dr Duluth was sitting at the end of the long table. His PC was open beside him and the panel inset into the table was glowing, sinisterly illuminating his face from below. Four people, two in uniform and two in shirt sleeves were also sitting at the table.

He looked up at me an instant then turned to the others.

'Leave us, please,' he said. They rose and at the same time a phone beeped. He picked it up.

'Yes, he's here now,' he said looking at me expressionlessly. He replaced the phone without taking his eyes from my face.

He was dressed as impeccably as usual but there were grey lines of strain on his thin ageless face. He waited until the others had left and the door closed. Jim sat at the side of Dr Duluth and pulled forward a piece of paper.

'You say you found the Extra-terrestrial. What is your proof?' asked Dr Duluth.

I sat down, wondering where to begin.

Immediately I was in the white-washed cool marble-tiled room in the Sanctuary on the side of the Mount Parnassus, twenty-five hundred years ago.

'Lady Helen ...' I stopped. I restarted 'My Host was with an important visitor at the Oracle of Delphi when we heard an electronic-type beep. We all turned round and found it coming from a picture that was hung on the wall. The picture had coloured lights in it which came on as we watched. The lights and the sound which came on at the same time hypnotised the important visitor.'

'A mechanical hypnotiser, by God!' exclaimed Dr Duluth.

'But how did you prevent your Host from being hypnotised also?' asked Jim.

Dr Duluth held up his hand.

'What happened next?'

'The voice asked Lady ... the important person to identify herself and then asked her why she was there. She explained, the voice lost interest and after ordering us to forget what we had seen, the picture switched itself off.'

I looked across at the two pairs of eyes drinking in every word. Jim's pencil was frozen immobile over the piece of paper.

'I recognised what was going to happen when the lights started circling so I withdrew until the hypnotising routine was finished,' I said in a quick aside to Jim.

'And then you ...' whispered Dr Duluth.

'And then I had a good look at the probe that was built into the back of the picture. It was a box about 300 by 300 by 40mm and had the lights built into one of the large faces. Also built into the middle of this face, in the middle of the lights, was a convex lens. And on ...' But Dr Duluth pointed wordlessly to a flip chart in the corner of the room and switched a light on over it.

I sketched it as well as I could.

`This face was covered by the picture - I don't know how the lights were arranged, there may have been more. And I don't know how the sound was generated – but it was quite good quality.'

They had both stood up, staring at my picture greedily.

`But how the hell did the Extra-terrestrial contact it - how did it move around?' asked Jim.

I guiltily jumped forward and picked up the pen again.

`Yes, sorry, there was a spiral grill on the back. It looked like one of those GPS antennas.' I sketched it in.

`The whole thing was quite heavy - about 5kg, I would say.'

`Excellent,' breathed Dr Duluth.

`So it was probably air-dropped and then hypnotised people to carry it around - that's neat,' said Jim.

`The Eye of the Extra-terrestrial,' said Dr Duluth. They looked at each other, then at me.

His phone beeped but he let it lay.

`Get everything you can out of him on the probe now,' he said to Jim, `and then get him to R & R. When he wakes up I want Peter to do a complete debrief on the whole Mission.'

I left with Jim, looking over my shoulder as he closed the door. Dr Duluth had picked up the phone and was immediately immersed in the battle above.

`It's bad,' said Jim as we walked down the corridor, moving to one side as people loaded with boxes and pieces of equipment hurried past in the opposite direction.

`We've got a war on here,' he continued, `a war for survival. And it's not just here, it's world wide. No one has gone nuclear yet, but it's just a matter of time. The hot-line to Asiablock has broken down, even the normal Satcom isn't working. We can't do a damn thing. It looks like the end, fella. It was nice to have known you. Chrodisp can hang in against conventional weaponry but if they go nuclear we're finished. Something's gone wrong - I guess our friendly E-T just got here too late. In here.' He opened a heavy metal door with metal mesh around the edges and we entered a small quiet room, empty except for two chairs.

`Sorry,' he said pulling out his recorder. `I know you just want to get your head down, so let's get this over as quick as possible.'

He then took me slowly through the whole incident, from the first beep out of the picture to the last glance as Spardes left the room on his way back to Athens. It took about an hour.

When he was satisfied, he gave me a card and saw me to the train platform. The card guided me to a room with a shower, a bed and cool clean sheets ...

Chapter 28

I was left alone most of the morning, wandering around the almost empty R & R section. With the destruction of the Inserter, most of the non-essential personnel had been evacuated - only those concerned with the defence of Chrodisp remained. I shared my simple restaurant meals with hasty and distracted programmers, technicians and military police, now forced into the role of working for a living, I was pleased to note.

Then I was visited by an earnest young man called Peter. He was from the Library and his job was to debrief me on my Mission. In front of a recorder he took

me slowly through all the events, mostly silently listening and only making me clarify points when I became excited. It took most of the next day too. Jim had told me I was to omit all reference to the probe and so the end of my story had to be quickly improvised and must have sounded a little odd.

`And when you tried to give Lady Helen your own interpretation of the Oracle's words you were Returned?'

`That's right. I must have nudged the Main Timeline. Next thing I woke up in that bed in the Arab house.'

He looked at me baffled, but I wasn't going to tell him anymore. He tried to bring me up to this point again by further questioning and I was having to invent more and more details when fortunately I was saved by the beeping of the phone I had been given.

It meant I had to leave my room and find a hard-wire wall-phone. Radio communication between phones had been suspended because of the fear of interception by the YP enemy outside. It was Jim.

`Do you think you could get over right away?' he asked, in the ever-polite way Americans issue orders.

As expected, I pushed the card I had been given into the slot and he programmed my destination.

It took me past several train stops until the usual female voice indicated where I should get out. Then she guided me through corridors, up lifts and down lifts and finally to what I recognised as the screened room I had been in yesterday. I pulled open the heavy door and sat inside, leaving the door open. I dislike sitting alone in screened rooms - you feel totally cut off from the world. They are so quiet that after a while you can hear your heart thumping, the blood swishing through your veins and the slightest movement makes your clothes rustle loudly.

I heard steps in the corridor and Jim appeared, pushing a trolley before him.

`Sleep well?' he said absently over his shoulder as he crouched down in a corner plugging in a power lead connected to the device on the trolley. He stood up, fiddled with a remote control in his hand and then switched off the lights in the room.

Immediately I was floating about 30 000km above the Earth which was half illuminated by the sun. He poked at the remote control again, the holo image swung round crazily and settled with a view of the sunlit side, turning slowly. Finally he opened the door again, switched on the lights and sat beside me distractedly pecking at his PC.

A few minutes later there were some hesitant steps outside and a plump figure in spectacles arrived, looking doubtfully at the card in his hand. I had met him before at my initial briefing.

`Dr Opris,' said Jim, `Glad you could make it. Captain Digby - you know each other.'

His eyes swivelled to me. `You're back! Back from Classical Greece! What period were you in? Where were you? Who did you see?' His excitement was painful.

`All in good time,' said Jim jovially. `Dig here has a whole heap to tell you and you can sit down with him after. But just now ...' He was interrupted by more footsteps in the corridor outside and Dr Duluth entered briskly, accompanied by an MP. He shook hands with Dr Opris and thanked him for coming, then nodded at the MP who disappeared, closing the door behind him with a solid thump.

I looked curiously at Dr Opris of the Extra-Terrestrial Research Foundation. If he had had as much difficulty in getting in as I had, he looked remarkably cool.

'He's been here all the time awaiting your return,' said Jim, noticing my gaze.

Dr Duluth sat on a chair slightly apart and turned to us.

'I have called you all here to bring you up to date, in particular to inform you of a piece of information that has recently come into our hands, and to pool your brains. You all know each other.' He nodded at Jim.

'Right then ... a summary.' Jim stood up and switched off the lights. The Earth appeared again. There was a click from the remote control box in his hands, the view changed suddenly and I found myself looking down on the solar system from above. It was floating in the air between us and was about 50cm diameter. The third planet out was a blue dot almost touching the bright spot of the sun. It seemed to be almost huddling it for warmth against the cold blackness of space. A small green arrow appeared against it.

'Earth, eight light-minutes from the sun,' said Dr Duluth's voice out of the darkness. The arrow flicked to the outermost planet.

'Pluto, five light-hours from the sun.' A pause and then the picture of the solar system shrunk to a dot, only the sun visible, and the neighbouring stars leapt in.

'Nearest star to us is the binary Alpha Centauri/ Proxima Centauri at 4.3 light years. It almost certainly has no planets. Next possibility ...' the arrow jumped outwards again. 'Canis Majoris or Sirius at 8.7 light years. It may have planets but we can't be sure.'

'Let's assume the Extra-terrestrial is from Alpha Centauri,' said the voice of Jim. 'We can double up if we're wrong.' The green arrow flicked back to it and now a dotted red line joined it to the solar system.

'Here is a scenario,' said Dr Duluth. 'Some three or four thousand years ago an intelligent life-form on Alpha Centauri, observing that there are a number of planets around our sun, decided that there could be life in our system. They send off some hardware. For reasons I will shortly reveal, we don't think that their science is very far ahead of us. So I'm going to assume that they can't send anything at greater than 10% of the speed of light, which means their hardware took 43 years to reach us.'

'Or 87 years from Sirius,' said Jim.

'Yes,' said Dr Duluth. 'Now let us assume it arrives 3000 years ago and orbits the third planet.' The display changed and we were looking down on a sunlit Earth from 30 000km again. Immediately under us was the Eastern Mediterranean.

'The slight amount of evidence that we have seems to indicate that the Extra-terrestrials have Insertion technology and that they can Insert into, and at least Observe, humans. So they will immediately deploy their Inserter and start Inserting into what we call the Ancient Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Hittites.'

He continued. 'They would find something they could grasp immediately - speech, writing, art, sailing, weaving, mining and metal-working, temple building ...' They would report all this back home.'

'If I may interpose a question?' said the high petulant voice of Dr Opris. 'You sometimes refer to "Extra-terrestrials", "Extra-terrestrial" and "hardware". In the interests of clarity and consistency, I think the minutes of the meeting'

Both Dr Duluth and Jim said something together.

'Go ahead, Jim,' said Dr Duluth.

'Right. Well, I should say straightaway that there will be no minutes kept of this meeting. You may not have noticed it, but we are now in a screened room,

screened from all forms of radiation at present known to science. We have in fact taken some considerable pains to prevent the substance of this meeting becoming common knowledge.'

'As regards the different names we use. We think it highly improbable that the Extra-terrestrials have actually sent one of their members. It would not survive the acceleration and deceleration for point one c, that is for a tenth of the speed of light. It would also require a complex life-support system for the 43 years. We are sure that they have sent a robot explorer, a robot programmed to think and act like one of them. An Extra-terrestrial Simulator, if you like.'

'Thank you, Jim,' said Dr Duluth, 'and thank you for pointing out the inconsistency in my presentation,' he said politely to Dr Opris.

Did Dr Duluth and Jim normally talk like this when I wasn't around, or was it just the effect of Dr Opris?

'The Simulator would then report what it saw back home,' he continued. 'Jim?'

'Yes.' said Jim. 'It could do this by laser beam. Now we figure that by extrapolating the power we can get from a laser and guesstimating the narrowness of the their beam, they should be able to get a bandwidth of about point one BPS, or one bit per ten seconds.' There was an uncomprehending silence.

I waved my hands in the darkness.

'So?' I said. 'Is that good?' It sounded terrible when I thought of the giga-bits per second that computers used.

'It's the equivalent of one 60-line A4 page every 85 hours,' said Jim. 'But just remember that this isn't the sort of raw data that we get from our Jupiter probe, for instance. The E-T Simulator has been Inserting and Observing, and received masses of information. It would filter this so only useful information is sent.'

Dr Duluth's voice took up the discussion.

'And so 4.3 years later the Extra-terrestrials know there is a fairly intelligent life-form on Earth. If they are like us, and they probably are, as the laws of science we know hold wherever we look, they are overjoyed at finding they are not alone in the Universe. Their philosophers will have a field day and their religion or religions will need some considerable tinkering. Then about 10 years later, when they have received about 35 Megabytes of highly filtered and concentrated information about the Egyptians (including pictures) they will start to wonder "What next?". For an actual Extra-terrestrial to visit the Earth is out of the question - even for them. And why do it anyway? The information sent back will enable them to program their holo cabins or Virtual Reality kits, to wander around Earth and speak to the natives. Yes, it will be simulated conversations of course, but they won't have much to say anyway - no more than we ourselves could fruitfully talk for long with the Egyptians.'

He paused.

'So after a while public interest dies down,' he continued. 'And they begin to wonder what to do with all the data, and the data still arriving. It is not at all like Europe discovering the New World in the 15th Century. At enormous expense the Extra-terrestrials can send and recover objects in round trips lasting 86 years, but they themselves must go much slower, taking say 430 years or about 5 generations on our life scale. Probably the only thing that will ever be worth transmitting at that distance, and fortunately the only thing that is best transmitted over that distance is - information. So they will debate and argue and finally say something like "These Earth people are primitive and rather odd, but they are moving along in the

right direction - perhaps as an older and wiser civilisation we should give them a benevolent helping hand."

`But how can they do that? I understood that it is not possible to Insert into anyone in the present,' said Dr Opris's high voice. `If the Extra-terrestrial could only Insert into someone 9 years previously, surely the Main Timeline is already established, they could not influence us in any way.'

`Very true, Dr Opris,' said Jim's voice. `The "9-year rule" seems to be a natural constant that's written in stone, like the speed of light. But your question leads directly to our important discovery. Shall I ...?

`Yes, carry on,' said Dr Duluth.

`Right. Inserting is great for Observing but even if the E-T is a gifted Empathiser, it can at best bend a few Branch Lines. If it wants to help us it has to influence the Main Timeline while it is being laid down. It needs something physical that can be actually sent down to Earth and contact the natives in real time, in their "now". We call this a "Probe". Now it seems this is not something you can knock together in 10 minutes and then send down from orbit. It needs retro-boosters, a heat shield, a parachute, just to get it down. The E-T must have had a probe with it when it first arrived. OK, but then there's a lot more questions like how do you use it to contact the natives and how do you move it around without frightening them. And then you need up- and down communication links. Well, thanks to Captain Digby here, we think we know how they used it.'

`Captain Digby saw the E-T.. er.. the Extra-terrestrial probe?!' said Dr Opris incredulously. And as if in answer, a three dimensional picture of the object I had seen appeared, floating in the air before us.

So now it was my turn on stage and I went through the events leading up to the discovery of the probe. There was a silence and then the picture of the probe suddenly disappeared to be followed by the curve of Human Civilisation I had last seen at ... at ...Tangier Airport, several centuries ago, it seemed.

`Dr Opris - you have some comment?' said the voice of Dr Duluth. There was a pause and then the high voice of Dr Opris was heard, distractedly muttering to himself about how my few words had proved or disproved countless theories about the Oracle at Delphi. Theories made by generations of archaeologists and devoted scholars of Classical Greece. Audibly pulling himself together he began:

`Very well. It must now be taken as proved that our civilisation was given some technological assistance around here.' The green arrow pointed to the sudden rise of the curve around 500BC. `It is going to be difficult to determine exactly which inventions or thought processes were actually given, as Captain Digby's Insertion only gives us a snapshot,' he said in an aside to himself. `But this must be regarded as unimportant for the moment. More important is the sharp decline of human civilisation with the fall of the Roman Empire here.' The arrow moved to 560AD. `Why did this happen? Or more exactly, why did the Extra-..., the E-T let it happen? Influencing a few key figures would surely have prevented it. But apparently the E-T removed its influence and human civilisation, like a flower deprived of artificial sustenance, suddenly withered, and humanity entered the Dark Ages.'

Very poetic.

`Jim?' said Dr Duluth.

`There could have been purely technical reasons why the E-T help suddenly dried up,' said Jim. `The probe was a complex device, contact with the orbiting E-T needed it to point upwards, perhaps not everyone near it could be hypnotised,

there could have been power failure, earthquake, flood, someone tripped over it,' he stopped.

'Yes, of course,' said Dr Opris. 'But after such a good start and giving out assistance for perhaps 200 years, it suddenly stopped. Was it the only probe? It seems quite small - why did the E-T not send more?'

'It's possible, even probable that the E-T did have more probes,' said Jim. 'If they didn't arrive with the original shipment, they could have been ordered up later.'

'You use the past tense,' said Dr Opris, pedantically, '"did have", but Captain Digby tells us there was at least one probe functioning in 1852. The arrow flicked forward over the curve nearly to the present. 'I feel bound to say that it does look as though the probe or probes remained in place but merely ceased giving out information or indeed helping us in any way. And so human history took its normal course.'

'I'm pleased to hear you say that,' said the voice of Dr Duluth, 'as we have reached the same conclusion.'

Fantastic. We had been sitting here for two hours and glacier-like had finally arrived at an obvious conclusion.

'So the E-T arrived, detected life, reported back, received instructions to help us, then received instructions to hold off and just Observe,' I said. 'Which it has continued to do until at least 1852.' I must have sounded impatient as Jim's voice lightened as he said:

'That's about it.'

'And as a small detail, your curve is wrong,' I added.

'Wrong?' said Dr Opris. 'How do you mean?'

'The end of the curve - now - 2015 - it's wrong. We at Chrodisp are in the middle of a war. It could be WW3. You can't say our level of civilisation is very high at the moment. The curve must have turned down.'

There was a long pause.

'He's right, you know,' said Jim, 'But at least that's not due to the E-T: it wasn't helping us anyway. That bit's home-grown.' He clicked on the wall-switch.

As we stood blinking in the bright light, I found Dr Duluth looking at me speculatively.

Chapter 29

The meeting broke up and I suddenly realised that if I didn't do something quickly, I would be out of a job. There was no functioning Inserter, so they didn't need any Observers. Asiablock was apparently at war with Westblock, so as a Reserve infantry officer I should report to my Regiment. But it wasn't going to be easy to get out of Chrodisp with Asiablock trying to get in at the same time. The best I could hope for was some minor role in the defence of Chrodisp. If I wanted to stay in the action I must not lose sight of Jim.

By now I was walking down the corridor with him. The two Drs had gone off in the opposite direction. A glance at Jim's abstracted face showed that he was already back in the battle. I pointed out that I was temporarily out of a job and suggested that he might like to show me that hall I had briskly walked through on the way to Dr Duluth - the one filled with terminals and computers.

'The Command Centre, you mean,' he said. 'Yeah, OK, I'm going there anyway.'

It was bigger than I had seen first time as there were side rooms I had not noticed. It looked like a Space Control centre except a lot of the operators looked tired and unshaven.

'We have a purely defensive set-up,' said Jim, I thought rather reluctantly. 'We think there are about five thousand YP outside, based on Kazmir, 100km away. We've got about a thousand actual trained soldiers and 500 technicians. In spite of our small numbers we have been able to out-think them, and we've got food and water for ever. But one day they're going to bring up reinforcements or a nuclear weapon and overwhelm us.'

'So now?'

'So now they have us surrounded and keep trying. They shoot missiles at us with various combinations of trajectories trying to overload the Tower laser, but so far we can keep up with them. They tried tunnels for a while, but we have a sensitive network of detectors and can let off a mine nearby to collapse them.'

'And patrolling?' I asked. He looked embarrassed.

'Yeah, we should. But the military here are just garrison troops and MP's, and Colonel Colbourne doesn't want to risk them.'

'I'll train them,' I offered. Passive defence is bad.

'OK,' he said doubtfully, 'I'll put it to the Colonel.'

*

I returned to my room profoundly worried. Chondisp seemed built like a rock, business as usual. The railway, the restaurants, everyone was properly dressed, a little tired and edgy perhaps, but on the ball. Their laser defence was amazing, they had lots of Virtual Reality remote controlled weapons, there was ample power and the computers all worked. OK, we had to be careful with the local radio phones but apart from that everything worked as well as usual. Except the Inserter, of course, I reminded myself. Chondisp was basically impotent. All we were doing now was surviving.

So why were Asiablock attacking us? I had been told that everyone who was on Mission had now returned. I, in fact had been the last to return. So why were Asiablock so keen, so fanatically keen to destroy us?

I was worried about the defence of Chondisp. It is a fundamental mistake to build a defence system and just sit and wait behind it. At the Tactical School at Sandhurst they call it the "Maginot Line" mentality, not because the fantastically fortified French Maginot Line was ever breached by the Germans in 1940 or whenever, but because of the "now we are safe" mentality that it produces. In a war you are never safe.

Build a defence system and it is like setting the enemy a puzzle to solve. "Here we are - I bet you can't get in". It's a challenge to them and given time they will solve it. They will come as close as they dare, take readings, make measurements, note fields of fire and guard changes and then go back and work it all out. And as no fortress is totally impregnable every second of every day, they will find the solution, the place and the time where you are vulnerable - and attack.

Chapter 30

For the record, I found the solution too, about two days later. The place was the R & R recreation centre and the time was 0:12 on a Sunday morning. I had been drinking with Jim and some programmers the night before and had retired to bed rather late. I'm not really a drinker - one drink before a meal is my style. You zoom up on a high and slide down during the meal, with no headache the next

morning, at least with German beer. I have learnt through bitter experience that if my temporary high makes me drink more, in an effort to keep on the high, it works, but I have to drink a lot for the alcohol to punch through the food. And so I get an overdose of alcohol which I regret the next day. About every 6-months I forget this basic fact and the after-effects keep me on my self-imposed rails for another 6 months or so, until I forget again. I must have been at the end of a six-month period for I had foolishly allowed myself to be persuaded to drink after eating (it was someone's birthday).

Hot, sweating, mind churning, mouth feeling like the bottom of a parrot's cage, I knew the only way to a cure was to speed up my metabolism and burn off the excess alcohol. Hence my unusual appearance in the R & R recreation centre at midnight.

I forced myself to get up, and shivering and gloomy walked along empty corridors and took the lift down to the swimming pool. I opened the door and switched on the glow panels. I stripped off in a changing cabin and shaken with the effort sat down by the side of the large still pool, blue under the cold glow panels. The air was warm, humid and smelt of chlorine, but I knew the water would feel initially freezing. Deferring the shock, I slowly walked around the pool, looked at the detailed bathing regulations in five languages and checked the temperature and humidity readings. I timed my pulse on the wall clock. But I had come down here to swim, I couldn't put it off any longer - finally I was going to have to take the plunge. Get it over as quickly as possible.

I stood up at the edge of the pool admiring the absolutely flat calm surface of the water, and raised my arms preparatory to diving in. Well, actually it wasn't absolutely calm, it was slightly trembling. Perhaps some water-circulating pump had just kicked-in. I took a deep breath, then paused. The pump room was absolutely quiet. I lowered my arms and let the air slowly out of my lungs. Anything to put off the cold shock. But the surface of the water was definitely trembling, spreading out in ripples from the far side. Was my sudden uneasy feeling due to alcohol overdose? For some reason the story of the woman in a medieval castle, about to bathe her baby, slid into my mind. She had been cuddling it and was about to put it into the bath-tub in front of her when she saw the water in the bath move. She knew instantly what it meant and screamed for the guard. For the same reason I turned and was running for the telephone. The enemy were tunnelling under the walls!

`Get me the Command Centre,' I said into the wall-phone.

There was a click and a tired old voice:

`Command Centre, Corporal Kupov.'

`Captain Digby, I want to speak to the Duty Officer.'

`One minute.' Pause. `We have no record of a Captain Digby. Why are you calling from the swimming pool?'

`I've only just been posted here. This is an emergency, get me the Duty Officer.'

I was standing by the side of the changing cabins, holding the phone and watching the ripples in the pool. The fool was spinning it out. I was composing what I was going to tell Jim about the reaction time of the defence force when the phone came alive again.

`Is that D-I-G-B-Y or D-I-G-B-E-Y?'

I tried to focus myself down into the phone and into the stupid corporal's ear.

`Corporal Kupov, this is the most important telephone call you will ever take in your life. The YP are trying to break into Chondisp. Get the Duty Officer on the line even if you have to use your pistol. Now move!

I straightened up, finding I had been bending over the phone in an effort to force my will on the cretin, and looked back over my shoulder. To my mixed relief and horror, the ripples were very pronounced now and there was a deep humming and a knocking sound coming from the pool. Relief that I wasn't crying "Wolf! Wolf!" and horror at the size of the wolf. The phone came alive again. A French accented voice.

`Lt. Duval. Duty Officer. Who are you and what is this about a break-in?' Alert, at least.

I repeated my name and rank and told him where I was and what I was seeing.

`Mon Dieu!' He believed me, but I needed more. I did some quick calculations.

`Lt. Duval, you must immediately send here at least thirty men armed with rifles and grenades.' That was standard infantry equipment. `And then as soon as possible two heavy machine-guns with their crews. Followed by an anti-tank launcher. OK?'

`Yes. Very good. I will do that. Please stay on the line and report what is happening.' Another voice came on the line, British, North Country, commendably brief.

`Sgt. Higginbotham here.'

In the background I could hear the Lt.'s voice in rapid French.

`I'm watching the swimming-pool, Sergeant,' I said, `and it's covered with ripples. There is also a humming sound and knocking sound as though someone is boring under it.'

`Very good, sir,' he repeated phlegmatically. `Humming and knocking sounds. Someone boring under the swimming pool.' It wasn't for a sergeant to comment if a hoarse-sounding officer reported people digging under the swimming pool at 0:23 of a Sunday morning.

The humming had stopped and the ripples seemed to be dying down. I was just about to report this when abruptly there was a deep muffled "boom!" and two columns of green water suddenly leapt upwards from the flat surface of the pool, hitting the ceiling glow panels and falling down in clattering torrents. I couldn't believe my eyes! The clowns must have exploded two charges against the side of the swimming pool, thinking it was the last defence line into Chondisp! For an instant, through the transparent water, I could see a 3m diameter jagged-edged black hole in the white wall of the pool and then it disappeared behind a mass of bubbles.

Immediately the level of the pool began to sink, a wide hissing vortex forming against the hole. In ten seconds the pool had emptied itself with loud sucking noises, the last drops disappearing down into the hole with a final gurgle. I gabbled something into the phone and ran to the opposite side of the pool and bending down, peered through the spray into the hole. Beyond the broken masonry of the 30cm thick side-wall of the pool there was a tunnel, about 2m high. All that could be seen was wet sand, gleaming in the pool's glow panels. But beyond a few meters, darkness. No, not complete darkness, about 100m down the tunnel there was something glittering or sparking. There was no sign of any bodies or equipment - they must have all been washed away down the tunnel as the half-million litre pool emptied itself.

I peered in amazed. Where had all the water gone? The tunnel inclined slightly downwards, so initially it had rushed down, but the wet sand on the floor showed it

must have rapidly soaked into the sandy floor. So it would not be long before they were back!

There was a crash behind me and the clattering of boots. Suddenly the area surrounding the pool was filled with soldiers brandishing rifles. Seeing me, their officer ran over but immediately transferred his gaze to the tunnel entrance. He shouted something to his sergeant and the soldiers started climbing down into the empty pool, their boots splashing in the few centimetres of water left. After a first amazed glance into the tunnel they were pushed into a rough defensive position by the profane sergeant. More arrivals and two long-barrelled machine guns on tripods were carefully lowered down into the pool by their crews and carried over to the hole. Under the direction of the sergeant they were set up pointing into the tunnel. The officer shouted to someone by the door and the swimming-pool lights went out.

Good. They seemed to know what they were doing.

The scene was now only faintly illuminated by the lights in the corridor. Silence.

'Lt. Kroner,' said a slightly German accented voice close by me. 'Are you Capt. Digby?'

I looked round to see a young man, his narrow bony face sharpened in the dim light.

'Yes,' I said. 'But carry on. If I may make a suggestion, fire some anti-tank rounds as far down the tunnel as possible to block it. You may also be able to capture anyone trapped on this side of the blockage. I will now report.'

'Good idea,' he said 'and thanks.'

While I went to the wall-phone two soldiers set up a "Crossbow" missile launcher on the floor of the pool. I took the phone from the soldier who was holding it and was about to speak when there was a shout from behind me and the two MGs started to fire, hammering frantically and making a tremendous noise, echoing from the sides of the swimming pool.

'I'll call you from the corridor,' I shouted, slammed it down and rushed out. There was another soldier talking into a wall-phone by the lift. On seeing me, he said something into it and handed it over.

'Lt. Kroner?' said a voice I knew.

'No, Jim, it's me, Dig.'

'Dig! What the hell are you doing there? What's going on?'

I told him as quickly as I could then added:

'We're going to block the tunnel and that will hold them for a while.'

'Christ!' he said. 'If they've broken into R & R it must mean the digging detector network is out of service. Anything could happen ...I gotta go.' The line went dead so I went back to the pool.

The MGs had stopped firing and I was just in time to hear a thump as a Crossbow missile leapt from its launcher into the tunnel entrance, ignited and disappeared only to explode dully about 3 seconds later deep in the tunnel. A small bright yellow circle appeared for an instant in the distant darkness. The warhead must have met some obstacle, if not the side wall. I touched the arm of the Lieutenant.

'If you capture any prisoners keep them here and watch for tricks. They are quite fanatical.'

'Yes, I've met some,' he said grimly.

More men were entering the pool carrying ammunition boxes and another party were erecting an improvised barrier across the tunnel mouth. The phone rang and I took it.

`Digby,' I said.

`Sergeant Higginbotham. Colonel Colbourne for Lieutenant Kroner.'

I called over my shoulder for Kroner and then while he was climbing out of the pool turned back to the phone.

`He's coming. Tell me, sergeant, what's happening?'

`It's bad, sir. The Wipe have dug a tunnel which has come up near the base of the Tower and ...' The Tower - Christ!

If the enemy infantry were close to the Tower the lasers could not depress enough to reach them and they would be able to mine it. And I was damn sure we had no one out there who could do anything. Hi-tech defence is fine as long as the enemy sticks to hi-tech attack. But as soon as he starts sending in men you have to do the same. I hung up and turned to Lt. Kroner.

`The YP have broken in near the base of the Tower,' I told him. `I need ten of your men and an NCO.' His face changed.

`Gott,' he said. `Sgt. Dawlish,' he called. `Take ten men and go with Captain Digby.'

I grabbed my clothes from the changing cabin and as I struggled into them, the phone rang again. We left, ignoring it.

Chapter 31

I looked at what chance had given me. Ten tough-looking troopers, mostly British but with two Germans a Dutchman and a Frenchman. A sergeant and a corporal.

`Get them lined up in the corridor outside,' I said to Sergeant Dawlish. I then stood in front of them.

`Do you all speak English?' Nods and a few "Yessirs".

`My name is Digby. I am a Captain in the King's Own Rifles and was in the Affair where I served ten months in the SAS Regiment.' I looked up the line of men. I pointed to the medal ribbons of two of them.

`I see you were both at Dil Kush. I too was there - in Colonel Brauch's force which took the southern ridge.' As a raw 2nd Lieutenant, it was my first action.

`Joe and me, er...Private Smith and me were in Felix's lot, down in the valley,' said the taller soldier. I looked at him in surprise. It was one of the several disasters that overtook the inexperienced Westblock Expedition Force to Pakistan in the first months of the campaign.

`Not many got out,' I said.

`No sir.' There was a short pause.

`Well now is your chance to get even,' I said. `There is a very critical situation outside.' I pointed upwards. `The YP have dug a tunnel which has come up near the Tower, too close for the Tower lasers to reach them. You all know what will happen if the Tower goes.' I looked around and by their expressions saw that they knew that like the Keep of an ancient castle, the Tower was Chondisp's final strong-point. Not only because of its lasers which protected the rest of Chondisp from incoming missiles but also by virtue of its underground reactor which provided power for the whole Chondisp complex, computers, lasers, radars, even the underground train that linked up Chondisp. If the Tower fell, Chondisp fell.

`Our job is going to be to distract the Wipe with a flank attack while our main attack goes in from another direction.' I said no more, I didn't know any more, but

we had to do something. I had a few words with Sergeant Dawlish and he told me the guard were housed in accommodation adjacent to the armoury.

`Right. Get the men closed up and we're going there,' I said to him. We crowded onto the train platform and when the next train stopped I entered it first with the sergeant. There were two Swedish soldiers, two technicians and some sort of administrator. I ejected everyone in spite of their protests. I looked at the two unarmed soldiers who were also protesting, but they made the mistake of protesting in perfect English, showing I could use them. I took them along - they would soon be armed.

In a very short time we were in the guards' barracks where we found another five soldiers, off duty and sleeping. They were woken up.

The armoury door was locked and no one seemed to be available. It was strongly built but the sergeant made everyone get back and he and two others fired at the hinges from a few meters and it soon sagged open. The noise brought two MPs pounding down the corridor and they were pressed into service too.

I thought quickly. Clothes. It was night and cold outside. I told the sergeant I wanted the men to go to their rooms and come back wearing the warmest and darkest clothing they had, plus a woollen scarf or something to cover their faces.

`Against IR viewers,' he said.

`Right,' I said, `I want these others kitted up too.' I indicated the Swedes and the hotly resentful MPs. And take off those white belts and caps,' I added to them directly.

The rest of the men came clumping out of their rooms curiously attired in bulky parkas and swathed round with khaki scarves. The two Swedes and the MPs were found track suits.

There was a festive air but it disappeared when we all entered the armoury. The sergeant broke the chain locking the rifle rack and handed out Mk.6s to those who had none. The corporal enthusiastically jemmied open side cabinets until he found one filled with ammunition pouches.

`No more than 50 rounds per man,' I said over my shoulder. I didn't want them overloaded because I had just found something which for the first time gave me the hope that we might achieve something. A rack of old-fashioned but serviceable Heckler and Koch grenade-launcher pistols! I lifted out one and held its thick-barrelled 50cm length in my hands, my thumb falling automatically on the tip-down barrel release. If they had the launchers they must have the grenades! But what sort of grenades? I didn't want artillery markers, rubber-bullets or tear-gas Ah, here they were!

`Break this open,' I said to one of the Germans and with swift brutality he kicked the lid off. I pulled off the top layer of waxed paper and lifted out a stubby 40mm diameter plastic cartridge with an evil-looking crenellated dome sticking out at one end. A high-explosive shrapnel grenade! Exactly what I wanted!

`Give everyone one of these pistols and share out the grenades,' I said to the sergeant. It turned out that there were enough for about twenty per man. When everyone had a pistol and had stowed the grenades away I had a quick glance at my watch and stood up on the broken ammunition box. I motioned them to gather around.

I held up the 50cm long thick-barrelled pistol, pulled out the retractable butt stock, and showed them how to screw it firmly in the extended position.

`This is going to be our weapon. It will throw one of these,' I held up a cartridge with its 230gm grenade, `up to 350m. But we will be closer than that.' I tipped the barrel down and showed them how the cartridge dropped into the

breech. 'Like a shot-gun.' I pulled the cartridge out again and showed them how to cock the pistol's action, pulling back the hammer with a click. 'Safety is here. Down is off.' I pressed the trigger with a crisp snap. 'Sights.' I looked down at their intent faces and lifted up the long sighting bar that was folded down over the barrel. I pointed out the ladder-like crossbars. 'Line the front sight on one of these bars. The first bar is for 150m and then an extra 50m per bar up to 350m. We will be using the second bar for 200m. Everyone got that?' A few nods. 'All clear?' I repeated impatiently.

'Yes, sir,' they chorused.

'Good. Well, practice with them a moment as it's as black as the ace of spades outside and I don't want any fumbling.'

While they were familiarising themselves with their new toys I stepped down and looked further in the ammunition cabinet. Good. Artillery marker grenades, in several colours. "Port is red" I said to myself putting two red into my left pocket and two green into my right.

Now before I rushed out into the night I must find out what was going on. I picked off a wall-phone and after a lot of shouting and flashing my rank finally got through to a distracted Jim.

'Jim?, Dig. The pool break-through is sealed off. I've got 20 men with grenade launchers. What's the situation and what can we do?'

'It's very bad. There must be something wrong with our tunnel detectors because a tunnel has just opened almost at the foot of the Tower, between two "spokes" and about 200m away. We can't reach them with the lasers. We're bulldozing a sand-bank at the Tower base, across the apex, and we can drop grenades on them.'

I thought furiously. If the YP had come up that close they would certainly have some sort of overhead protection - grenade netting at the very least. With their fanatical "human wave" tactics they would soon be over a sand-bank and into the Tower and that was the end. Was there nothing else that we could do? Think, think! There must be something. I remembered my grand-father who had been with the famous Eighth Army and had fought in the Western Desert in WW2. Had they used any tactics that we could use here? God, I could think of nothing. I slid into neutral a moment and remembered him talking of the quiet nights in the desert and ... and telling me ... and telling me about sand and one of its peculiar properties, one of its properties that both sides found and used for their own comfort and convenience. That was it!

'Are you still there?' said Jim.

'Yes,' I said and then told him of The Idea, the Idea that was going to save Chondisp and yet was going to be so unpopular that I would never be able to claim it as my own.

'You sure?' he said.

'Sure I'm sure. It works like a wick and you can cook over it. But try it out yourself if you don't believe me.'

'No, OK, I believe you, it sounds right. I'm sure it'll work, but it's going to need microsecond timing. You got an IR communicator?'

'I'll get one. Look, where should we come up out of Chondisp?' There was a pause, and I could hear him talking to someone.

'Dome D3, it's about a kilometre away from the Tower,' he said, 'Can you find it?' I looked over my shoulder at the sergeant:

'Can you get us to Dome D3?'

`Yessir, it's four stops on the train and then ...' I raised my hand and turned away from him.

`Yes, we'll be there and I'll call you as soon as we get out.'

`Break an arm and a leg,' he said. I hung up.

`Right, sergeant,' I said. `Dome D3. Get the men onto the train.'

Encumbered, the group of one sergeant, one corporal and 21 men (we had found another sleeper), slung over with rifles, ammunition pouches and grenade launchers, loaded down with 400 grenades and wrapped up like mummies, we clumped down the empty corridor and climbed into the next train. Apart from my war-party it was empty.

`Like I said it's four stops and we'll need to use the lift three times to get this lot up,' said the sergeant, eyeing the full coach behind us. In the event we managed to get everyone up to the exit door to the surface in two trips of the lift, the sergeant and one of the MPs packing them in.

But at the top we encountered some resistance from a startled corporal and 4 men guarding the Dome D3 exit port. They wouldn't open the port without authorisation and wanted to telephone. I pulled the phone off the wall - there were a lot of funny things going on at Chondisp and I wanted this expedition at least to be secret. I looked at the five soldiers regretfully but I couldn't use them - they were too lightly clad.

`Give me your ID,' I said to the corporal and looked at it. `Corporal Jones, this is a secret patrol. We will be returning the same way - I don't know when, but before daybreak. You have a camera outside?' He nodded. `Then keep a good look out and - you will not report us. Is that understood?' He nodded.

`Corporal Jones - do you understand that you will not report the presence of this patrol to anyone, even if your or any other superior officer wants to know?' He swallowed.

`Yes, sir.'

`Good, then open up.'

Like all the Chondisp exits it was constructed on the "air-lock" principle. Two doors separated by a 50m tunnel. The tunnel was entered by a manually operated door from Chondisp: the other led from the tunnel into the desert and was remote controlled from Chondisp. Needless to say the tunnel could be flooded with gas and swept with MG fire if unwelcome visitors appeared. The modern form of a castle's portcullis.

We filed out into the chilly tunnel, sand on the concrete floor grating under our feet, and looking nervously up at the various armed turrets that housed lasers and MGs. Then the lights went out. In the pitch blackness my voice echoed loudly.

`It's alright. We wait here for ten minutes to let our eyes get used to the dark and to cool our clothing.' I slipped IR goggles over my eyes and watched the ghostly shapes around me slowly dimming as their outer garments cooled off.

`Now listen to me. I have green and red marker flare grenades. When you see a green flare you fire at it as fast as you can load and pull trigger until you see a red flare appear by it. Then you stop. Then when you see another green flare you change your aim to it and start firing again. Green go: red stop. OK?' I pulled the goggles off and transferred my eyes to my watch, now growing brighter as my eyes adapted. When the ten minutes were up I called out:

`Open up.' There was a "clunk" from the door to outside and with the soft whine of a motor it ground open to the width of a man, then stopped. A slightly lighter patch of starlit sky appeared and I stepped out. To the east a thin waxing moon. But the desert was not quiet. Behind me, hidden by the dome I had just exited from, a

fight was going on. I could see flashes from it illuminating some nearby domes and hear echoing explosions. I slipped on the IR goggles and looked around - nothing warm was visible. I whispered back through the door for Sergeant Dawlish. He slipped out and stood by me.

'Walk behind and cover me,' I whispered. 'I want to look around the other side of this dome.' I heard the click as he cocked his rifle. Holding my own rifle ready I crept round the side of the dome. No one, but by God there was something going on to the right! Ignoring it for the moment I continued on round the dome until I reached the exit-door again.

'Did you see that, sir?!' whispered the sergeant.

'Yes, get the men out.'

Chapter 32

I went round to the front of the dome again. God, but there was a battle going on! The Tower lasers were lancing out in all directions and the sky was illuminated with fireballs as incoming shells were intercepted. There was a continuous roar interspersed with the rattle of small arms echoing up off the desert floor.

It looked precise and elegant but I knew the Tower was completely unarmoured - miss one incoming projectile and the fragile lasers and their complicated diffraction grating deflection system would be instantly destroyed. It was like a man defending himself against a club-armed crowd with a rapier.

Now and then a beam would flash down towards the ground, calling forth a red glow from the impact point as an incautious ground-car was speared. But it was clear even from here that most of the action was occurring close in to the Tower, where the downward stabbing lasers could not reach. I reminded myself of a plan I had seen of the defence system of the Tower. High radial dunes, each 200m long, had been built around it, like the spokes of a wheel. The defenders could fire along the tops of these dunes, which made it difficult for attackers to cross from one segment into the other. It made attack on a wide front more difficult. I could see the Yellow Peoples' tunnel had come up between two of these arms and well inside the deadly circle that described the nearest point the lasers could reach.

The defenders were throwing a continuous stream of grenades over the top of the Tower, but as I had suspected, the YP infantry had erected a sort of shield, a ridged roof, over their heads, which mostly deflected the bouncing grenades. More rarely there was a louder explosion as some bigger bomb descended - more rarely as I knew that everything that was thrown over had come up via the small lift running up the inner wall of the Tower.

There was such a glare of light from the twinkling of the exploding grenades, the lights the YP had set up under their shelter and search-lights shining up and illuminating the Tower, that IR goggles were quite unnecessary.

I could see the high sand-bank the Tower defence had bull-dozed across the apex of the segment the YP were attacking. The defence would certainly have liked to build sand-banks all around the base of the Tower but this was not possible without hindering the air flow over the cooling vanes inside the Tower. Stop this and the reactor would overheat and melt down. The Tower was very vulnerable to a close-range attack like this.

And now I could now see the hole from which the YP infantry were exiting, running like ants from a disturbed nest. This was a big attack. A frontal attack on

the Tower supported by the underground attack which had unaccountably ended in our swimming pool. I hoped we were still holding out there.

Jesus! There must already be 500 men in this attack on the Tower and more were still pouring out of the tunnel. Behind the roar and crash of battle there was a deep booming sound and now I could see the YP had an enormous rotary digger at work on the defenders' sand-bank - probably the same digger they had used to bore their hole. I aimed my IR communicator at the top of the Tower and pressed "on".

'Digby,' I said. There was a pause then a strained voice shouting in the ear-piece:

'For Christ's sake where have you been? When are you going to attack? We can't hold ...' Silence, but I could hear voices shouting in the background and muted explosions. 'No, over here!' shouted someone. Then the noise stopped and I heard Jim's voice.

'Dig?'

'Yes, we're on the surface outside D3.'

'Ah, then we have a chance. What can you see?'

There was such a stream of bullets and laser beams going over the edge of the Tower that I suppose no one dared look over.

'They've got a big rotary borer at work on your sand-bank and a shield over their heads against your grenades. You're not touching them. Throw them further out and you might find some targets.' I heard him shouting this out.

'Listen,' I said. 'I can see the exit of their hole. It's about 200m from the base of the Tower and they're still coming out of it. There must be a thousand of them there now. They're extending the shield backwards with grenade netting. When are you going to be ready?'

'Give us another 15 minutes,' he said.

'Are your guys at the bottom of the Tower prepared?'

'I'm going down there now,' said Jim.

'Jim,' I said. 'That guy I was just talking to. Get rid of him. Put someone else on the phone.'

'That's alright, he's already been replaced. Look I gotta get down but we'll still be in contact. OK?'

'OK.' I clicked off the communicator and went back behind the dome. All my squad had moved out of the tunnel and were squatting down. It was so noisy now that I had almost to shout for them to hear me over the roar of the battle no more than a kilometre away.

'Can you all hear me? There has been no change. We get round the dome, spread out in a line, 2m between each man and walk - OK? walk, not run. After ten minutes walk we will be about two hundred meters from the Wipe. You will then get down and lay out your grenades on a piece of clean cloth in front of you. No one is going to see you if you keep your hands and faces covered. Your clothing is cold and the background is at the same temperature.' I looked round at their masked faces.

'Just remember one thing - keep those grenades going at the green flare and stop when you see a red. Then when you see another green on its own, fire again. Green go: red stop. And we will make them wish the rabbits of Chondisp had stayed in their holes.'

There was a roar of approval and they all rose spontaneously to their feet and formed a line before the dome.

I stood in front of the line facing them. The sergeant was at one end of the line and the corporal at the other. When the line was established I turned round and we

paced forwards towards the battle. I could hear the sergeant behind me at the other end of the line call "Back number two and three!" as though we were on parade. Grinning I remembered that he was from a Guards Regiment and wondered how he came to be here.

Right - far enough. The Tower was an enormous white pillar in front of us, bathed in swinging search-light beams and with its rim outlined by flickering points of light as innumerable bullets ricocheted off it. The noise was tremendous now, MGs hammering frantically, grenades bursting, and beneath it all, as a gigantic contra-bass, the deep booming of the borer. With all the activity, our little party went completely unnoticed.

'Tell them to get down and dig in,' I shouted to the corporal and he doubled off. I moved forwards so I was about fifty meters in front of the line, with them all spread out behind me. Using the butt of my rifle I scabbled a shallow hole and sat in it.

The tunnel exit, illuminated from within, was no more than 200m away on my right front. The Tower soared up on the left, seeming to hang in the sky and unconcerned by the myriad's of figures still running out of the hole towards its base. The booming sound of the rotary borer was louder now and there was a flurry of feverish activity around it.

A slight breeze wafted over the smell of explosives and the stinking exhaust fumes of the borer's engines. I raised the IR communicator, aimed it at the top of the Tower and switched on.

'In position,' I said. A delay and then Jim's voice with an echo:

'I'm at the bottom of the Tower and it's going to be touch and go. I can see the sand beginning to move in our sand-bank - their borer is about to break through any minute.'

'Yes, but what about the guys at the top of the Tower?' I asked urgently. He started to say something and stopped. I looked along my line of soldiers. They were all dug in now, just slight dark motionless irregularities on the desert's even surface.

'The last load is on its way up,' said Jim's voice. 'Jesus,' he said to no one in particular. Then his voice became suddenly louder and clearer. 'I gotta go. Good luck.' Silence.

The Asiablock attack was now working up to a frenzy, they were chanting something over and over again like football-supporters. Then an extra loud sustained roar and silence. The grenade shower from above suddenly ceased and there was one of those magic pauses that sometimes occur at a critical point in a battle. The moon, a wan crescent, hung sadly over the Tower and the stars arching across the heavens looked down at us indifferently.

The moment passed. The noise of the borer suddenly increased and screamed triumphantly up the scale - it had broken through the defensive sand-bank! Looking to the right I could see that the tunnel exit was empty - all the YP infantry were massed in the V between the two spokes, ready to be funnelled into the base of the Tower, to kill the defenders there, to push aside the flimsy barriers, to swarm down through the smashed open doors into the very heart of Chondisp! Soon they would be rampaging through the quiet carpeted underground corridors, smashing, burning, killing.

But not yet.

I picked up my grenade launcher and released the catch. The thick barrel tipped up and I felt in my right pocket for a green flare grenade. I slid it into the breach, clicked it up shut and raised the long ladder sight at the back of the barrel.

`Get ready!' I shouted and heard answering clicks down the line behind me. I waited.

God, this had to be done to a hair, I could only hope no one had bungled. Come on Jim! Come on! Come on!

And then it happened.

About twenty white canisters soared above the edge of the Tower, hung there motionless for an instant and then slowly fell down along the 200m height of the Tower. Before they had landed another twenty appeared and were also on their way down, and then another twenty. A laser beam must have caught one of the plastic containers as it fell, slicing it cleanly and igniting the petrol it contained. It flared up in an enormous orange balloon and the two still glowing halves of the container fluttered down crazily. There was a pause and I could imagine the petrol from the containers which had broken open on the metal roof below gurgling through the cracks onto the massed troops below, soaking into their uniforms and into the sand.

A pause and then a massed scream of horror as the luckless infantry smelled the deadly petrol fumes and realised what had happened. A second later the inevitable flash from somewhere - a rifle, a laser, and the whole lot ignited. There was an soft "woomph!" and a big orange fire-ball appeared at the base of the Tower, spreading up and up, dimming the searchlights shining on it.

I raised my launcher, pulled back the hammer with a click and lined up the barrel muzzle with the 150m bar. I aimed at the middle of the milling crowd and squeezed the big trigger. The clumsy pistol recoiled with a heavy clunk. Five seconds later an intense green point of light appeared in the middle of the yellow flames, there were twenty clunks behind me as my line fired and I heard the grenades whirring overhead. Twenty hands reached out to pick up another twenty grenades from the pieces of cloth in front of them and before the first wave of lethal grenades had landed there was another series of clunks, this time a bit more ragged as those who were quicker fired first. For a moment I imagined the English archers at Agincourt who stuck their arrows in the turf before them, ready to pull out and launch at the enemy, and whose boast was that they could have six arrows in the air at once. As the storm of arrows swept down on the massed French cavalry, so a storm of lethal shrapnel grenades fell out of the sky into the massed YP infantry. Flashing and sparkling as they landed, bursting on impact, throwing out shrapnel and lethal over a 10m radius. I could hear the rippling cracks of their detonations over the roar of the battle. The roof which protected them from above left them completely open from the rear and the grenades pitched in, bouncing and exploding, the steel roof concentrating their blast and reflecting down the deadly jagged ricocheting steel splinters. The Asiablock infantry were trapped between the two arms of the spokes - those who tried to climb them were immediately shot or lasered by the defenders. Unable to advance through the glaring pool of burning petrol which had soaked into the sand and was using it like a wick, and unable to stay where they were because of the merciless rain of grenades tearing them apart with shrapnel, they panicked and tried to run back to their tunnel and safety.

It was like a scene out of Dante's Inferno. Those caught in the yellow flames were being roasted, the fire feeding on the fat of their bodies and a pall of black greasy smoke was rising upwards, higher than the Tower. Their screams could be heard thinly over the roar of the conflagration.

I loaded a red grenade and fired at the base of the Tower. No longer worth firing there.

A red flash and my line stopped firing. I heard the hoarse voice of the sergeant as he shouted at some one who through over-excitement had fired again.

But then my attention was attracted back to the left by a familiar booming sound. The rotary borer had survived the petrol bombing attack and was trying to escape the holocaust at the base of the Tower. It was slowly swinging from side to side, obviously out of control; the enormous drill had stopped turning and its tyres were burning like Catherine wheels. It ran into one of the side spokes and stuck there burning fiercely, finally exploding in a high yellow gout of flame.

I loaded with a green and waited, the launcher heavy across my forearm, watching with fascinated horror the crazed mob, no longer a disciplined fighting force, rushing for their hole, trampling over each other and shouting. I let the first ten or twenty through - survivors who would tell what had happened - and then raised the launcher to my shoulder and pulled back the hammer. I lined up the muzzle with the ladder sight and fired. The butt thumped into my shoulder and I imagined the parabolic flight of the grenade arching fifty meters up into the air before it plunged down to its target. There was a five second pause and a green flash appeared amongst the struggling bodies fighting with each other to get down the hole. Immediately twenty clunks behind me, followed by twenty more clunks and 5 seconds later the grenades could be seen flashing among the struggling mass around the green flare. "War is hell. Get it over as quickly as possible" as someone had said.

Now the defenders had mounted an MG on the rim of the Tower and it was hammering away. No one was shooting back at them. Feeling slightly sick I let the men carry on firing until they had shot off all their grenades. There was a heap of unmoving bodies lying around and jammed in the tunnel entrance and other figures were frantically pulling them out and throwing them to one side so they could enter. Others were scattering away from the tunnel as the MG rained a murderous fire down on it. No one even glanced in our direction as grenades all fired, we crouched down, watching silently.

Looking back over my shoulder I could see it was getting lighter now, there was a definite grey patch to the east. Someone would certainly notice us when it got lighter and we would make perfect targets against the eastern sky. It was time to go. I rose and doubled back to the line. A shout to the sergeant and the whole line stiffly rose and we jogged back to the dome as the first golden rays of the sun appeared over the horizon.

With a last look at the ominous black sooty patch that licked up and stained the pristine whiteness of the Tower, now triumphantly glowing in the slanting golden early-morning sunlight, we turned to our dome and through the lock to safety under Chrondisp.

It had been an economical use of firepower – the right weapon in the right place at the right time. The YP had taken terrible losses and would think again before they tried another mass attack.

I tried to get through to Jim but the lines were continuously engaged. I congratulated the men, dismissed them and turned in. It had been a long night.

Chapter 33

Later that day I tried to get through to Jim and the Command Centre, but again all lines were occupied so finally I went on foot and learnt that Jim was in the sick-bay, with a lot of others who had also been in the Tower during the attack of last night. No one could give me any information as to what had happened. What the

hell had gone wrong? From where I was, the Tower and all those who were defending it had emerged unscathed from the battle. It was therefore with curiosity and trepidation that I entered the aseptic white-walled sick-bay.

As I walked down the disinfectant-smelling corridor I could see immediately that the bay was indeed full. But looking at the medical staff going in and out of the rooms I could see no plasma bottles, the usual aftermath of battle and blood loss. Trolleys were being pushed in and out of the rooms but they were the green oxygen cylinders which I associate more with the results of a gas attack. A distracted young intern directed me to Jim's room.

Entering, I saw a bed with a figure on it under an oxygen tent, tossing restlessly. I went up to it quietly and then realised there was another bed behind the door. With relief I saw it was Jim, dressed in a white hospital gown and wearing a sort of mask over his nose and mouth with a flexible tube connecting it to some complicated chromium contraption with pipes and a gas-bottle. He was sitting up in bed with his PC on his lap and the PC was connected to a wall socket. He didn't look too bad, but why was he there at all? He looked up at me tiredly.

'Jim,' I said 'What the hell are you doing loafing in bed at ..' I looked at my watch '..17:15? And what's with the mask? I'm OK - I haven't got a cold or anything.'

'Sympathy, that's all I need,' he said hoarsely, raising the mask from his face. 'And above all from you.' I looked at him carefully but he wasn't joking. It wasn't the right reaction - I had been prepared to modestly look down and polish my nails as he complimented me on how the petrol bomb attack had repelled the YP.

'You remember that bright idea you had of throwing gasoline down on the YP?' I nodded - hardly an original idea to anyone who had learnt history in Europe, where castles were routinely defended by casting boiling oil or molten lead onto the heads of the attackers.

'Well, buddy,' he went on, 'did you ever stop to think what would happen if you lit a fire at the bottom of our Tower - at the bottom of our cooling Tower?'

"What's he on about?" I thought, "a tower's a tower". And then:

'You mean our Tower is a cooling tower and sucks air in at the bottom to cool the reactor fins and ... Shit.'

'As you so rightly say "Shit". The hot air from the fire was sucked into the bottom of the Tower. (And I should point out in passing that a lot of the hot air came from the burning fat of human bodies. For your further information that has a smell I don't want to experience again.) No one in the base of the Tower was actually killed but there are about 65 1st and 2nd degree burns, asphyxiation, and not a few cases requiring psychiatric help. Furthermore, if that were not enough, the hot gases passing up the Tower flowed over the reactor cooling fins and prevented them from shedding heat to such an extent that we had to shut down the reactor to 25% power output. Fortunately it was at this point that the YP decided that the battle was lost and it was not worth distracting us by throwing in any more missiles or shells. Very fortunate, because the hot air ascending the Tower was not clean hot air but was loaded with soot particles which clogged up the delicate laser steering grids, so even if we had had the power we wouldn't have been able to use it. The final result of your bright idea is 82 incapacitated soldiers, the laser steering out of service for another 48 hours, and the inside of the Tower looking like the chimney at Auschwitz. Oh, yes, I forgot. The elevator on the inside of the Tower is also out of service which meant that the 50 guys at the top of the Tower had to be winched down. Had they only known, a platoon of YP could have just strolled into the base

of the Tower and taken it over. So the next time you have another idea like that, buddy-boy, just whisper it into a paper bag, fold the top over tightly, and then burn it.' He replaced his mask and took a deep breath.

That was unfair, I thought. Neither he nor anyone else at Chrodisp had raised any objections to the plan when it was proposed. Maybe they would be a little more grateful when they felt better. A few burns and sore throats were nothing compared to what hundreds of YP infantry had suffered.

'OK, OK. We held them off, we bought time, let's use it.'

I looked at the other patient in the room but he didn't seem to be paying much attention and probably couldn't hear much through his oxygen tent anyway. I pulled up a chair and sat by Jim's bed. He looked at me unwelcomingly.

'Let's change the subject. There's something funny going on at Chrodisp. Can you imagine what would have happened if I hadn't been in the R & R pool at midnight? The YP would have entered Chrodisp, taken some losses through drowning sure, but they have the man-power, and they would have made a breakthrough. If I hadn't been there you wouldn't have known that your tunnel digging detectors were kaputt, so the YP attack on the Tower would have succeeded too.'

'Now think a bit more,' I said, tapping his arm. 'Not only did the YP know the tunnel detectors were out of order, but they must have had a pretty detailed map of underground Chrodisp. I've been looking at this map and they were obviously aiming for the train tunnel. They only missed it by **five meters** and hit the swimming-bath instead. That's pretty good shooting for a tunnel that must be at least a kilometre long.' I leaned back, looked at the neighbouring bed, and then pulled my chair closer and lowered my voice.

'Now you know what I think, buddy boy?' I prodded his arm again. 'I think we gotta spy.'

He reluctantly pulled off his mask.

'Sure we have. We've known it for weeks. But who?'

Christ! Now he tells me!

Chapter 34

The next day I was called to a conference and I found myself pacing along a corridor with Jim, more-or-less recovered but still carrying an atomiser. We were going to the Command Centre.

As we marched down the corridor a man in a white lab smock stepped out into the corridor. He was in a hurry.

'Hi, Zed,' said Jim, stepping aside. Zed's eyes slid over us, jumped back to me, widened fractionally then slid away. As far as I knew I had never seen him before.

'Hi, Jim,' he answered.

As we passed I glanced idly into the room behind him and jerked awake.

Hanging on the wall was a picture. It was smaller than the picture at Delphi and the technique was slick and modern. But it was unmistakably the same design of a man with a bull's head superimposed on a series of concentric circles!

Zed closed his door and fell in behind us. I stopped and put my hand on Jim's arm and surprised, he stopped too. Unaccountably Zed stopped behind us too.

'Er, Dig, you OK?' asked Jim looking at me solicitously.

I said nothing, just looking at the ground. Zed was motionless behind us.

'Come back with me to the train,' I said 'I must have forgotten something.'

Puzzled and annoyed, Jim turned back with me and Zed made way for us to pass.

`Goddamit, Dig! What's got into you?' he said as we retraced our way down the corridor - my hand still holding tightly onto his arm. We reached the bend and I stopped. I held up my hand and motioned him to silence. A few seconds passed and then there were stealthy foot-steps down the corridor behind us and Zed appeared around the corner! He stared at me, his face whitening.

`Zed,' I said gently, `we've got to have a little talk.'

He stiffened, spun round rapidly for such a big man and ran round the corner and back up the corridor.

`Zed, stop!' I shouted over the noise of his pounding footsteps. I ran after him but he was like the wind. He reached his room before me, dashed into it and I heard the key turn. Jim panted up beside me.

`Dig, for Christ's sake! Are you out of your tiny mind? I'm going to call a medic.' He went to a wall-phone but I pointed to the door.

`Listen,' I said pressing my ear against the door and unwillingly he imitated me.

Muffled by the door I could hear the familiar continuously rising tones, followed after a pause by a deep resonant voice.

`Come closer, come closer.'

I suddenly realised what was happening and jerked my head away. I grabbed Jim's shoulder and pulled him protesting down the corridor. We had only gone a few paces when there was a loud crack from Zed's room and the door burst open. Fumes and dust billowed out into the corridor.

Jim and I picked ourselves up off the floor and Jim grabbed up the wall-phone which had fallen off the wall opposite but was miraculously still working.

`Yes, a bomb in Kolofski's room in Emergency Planning,' he said. `No fire and we're OK. Right now. Yes. Yes.'

We peered in through the door but mercifully most of the view was masked by the smoke and dust. Zed was lying on the ground by the wall. I was suddenly reminded of the scene in the shooting gallery under our shop in the Maxburg Str. I hastily averted my eyes from what remained of Zed and looked at a shallow crater in the concrete wall where the picture had been.

We pulled the door closed as best we could and Jim fended off the crowd that had appeared.

`An accident,' he kept saying. `Get back to work.'

Two MPs came thumping down the corridor and we left them on guard. Jim looked at me.

`What the bloody hell was that?'

`That was an E-T probe,' I said. `Let's get back in that screened room. We've got a lot to talk about.'

Chapter 35

There seemed a million questions. Like how had it got in Chondisp? Where had it come from? Why had it destroyed itself and Zed? Who was Zed anyway? Were there any more probes? At least I could ask the last two questions.

`Zed? He used to be a programmer in Duluth's department but since the attack he's been helping out with programming the computer to out-think the YP,' said Jim.

`More probes?! Jeez!' said Jim, in answer to my second question. I pointed back up the corridor where now a stretcher party were carrying out the remains of Zed.

`That probe wasn't the one I saw in Greece,' I said. `It was smaller and somehow newer. I think we ought to look around.' And then I amended it to: `I think **you** should look round. I have never seen Zed before but I got the impression that he recognised me. I think I should keep out of sight.'

So I returned to my room while Jim put in motion an inconspicuous search.

I was in a deep sleep when the phone rang, pulling me from a beautiful dream where Helga had zoomed through the window and was telling me about the strange "effect" the fluorescent glow tubes had on her.

It was Jim. His voice was guarded.

`We've found one!' he said excitedly in a low voice.

I forced myself awake. What did he want me to do? Recognise it? More important, what was **he** going to do?

`Where is it?' I asked thickly.

`It's in the office belonging to a guy called d'Autelier, he was killed yesterday by a sniper. It's a different model. Flat, made to look like a carpet, but the pattern was almost the same. You know, the man with the bull's head and the circles. Stick your card in the slot and I'll get you down here.'

I thought. If the present owner had suddenly died, the E-T would want to remove or destroy its probe. I said this to Jim.

`You mean it's booby trapped too?'

`Yes, probably, but the E-T won't want to destroy it if it can help it, but it isn't going to leave it lying around.'

`So?'

I thought carefully - how would he put it?

`We now know there were at least two guys at Chrondisp on the E-T's pay-roll,' I said. `Maybe there's more. You must stake it out.' And let me get my head down again.

`Good thinking, Dig.' The line went dead and I went back to bed.

But I was wide awake and having a shower when the phone rang again. Jim.

`You were right,' he said. `It was a soldier on General Colbourne's staff. He came to d'Autelier's office with a bag. We let him wrap up the carpet and grabbed him with it. He claimed it was his. We've got him in a cell.'

`And the probe?'

`We've put the whole thing in a piece of metal piping. That should screen it from any gigahertz radiation from outer space.'

`OK, but it might still explode if it finds it has lost contact with the E-T,' I pointed out.

`Don't worry, we've got it on the underground weapon testing range.' It sounded safe enough.

`Let me tell you more,' he continued. `We've found another probe in the soldier's room. It's just like you said - a picture hung on the wall. We rushed it and covered it with a copper box. It's on the range too. Stick your card in the slot - I think you should be down here.'

When I arrived, I found Jim and two engineers in an office with a rack of equipment on the carpet. I was introduced to Paul and Fred. As we were all British we just nodded to each other.

`We're about to set up an antenna where the picture was and are trying to see if we get any giga-hertz signals', said Jim. Paul and Fred moved around muttering to each other and then switched on. It was immediately apparent on a little monitor scope that a number of signals were being received.

`Four separate signals,' said Paul, finely tuning something.

`Can you tell where they're coming from?' asked Jim.

`With this antenna all I can say is from above.' He waved his hand upwards. He added something to Fred who left the room and appeared a few minutes later with a trolley carrying a long plastic cylinder mounted on a heavy pedestal.

It was obviously a highly directional antenna and was used to replace the small antenna used so far. Fred moved it around and then suddenly the four signals reappeared, this time very much bigger on the scope. He finely adjusted two micrometer positioning knobs on the base of the antenna.

`Almost right above,' he said.

We watched and the signals remained steady on the screen. Fred, Paul and Jim exchanged looks.

`Odd,' said Paul, after a while.

Nothing seemed to have happened. I said so.

`That's what's odd,' replied Fred. It sounded like something out of a Sherlock Holmes story: "That's what is odd, Watson, the dog did not bark".

`If it's a satellite it'd have moved by now,' amplified Fred.

`Geo-stationary orbit?' I asked keenly.

`Even they move slightly,' said Fred. `And we can detect it with this.' He tapped the side of the cylinder. `And this signal hasn't moved an ... I tell a lie,' he said, bending down to the micrometer positioning knobs.

I left for the restaurant at this moment to get coffee for them all and when I returned Jim was tapping into his PC and the cylinder had perceptibly inclined to one side.

`It's the Moon,' said Jim over his shoulder to me. I sipped my coffee until Jim turned to me.

`We've detected four different signals being beamed down to us. We can't do anything with them yet, they're just high-speed digital data.'

`And signals going back upwards?' I asked.

`This antenna only points upwards,' explained Fred. `We'd need to fly around in an aeroplane with a downwards pointing antenna if we wanted to find anything sending upwards.' A very dangerous procedure at the moment, I thought.

`Four signals means four probes,' I pointed out. `And we've only found three so far - where's the other?'

But Jim was on the phone to Dr Duluth, by the sound of it. I looked at them adjusting knobs, plugging in data analysis equipment and talking so I returned to my room to keep out of sight but also to think.

I lay on my bed. Still another probe! If the E-T could spend four probes on Chondisp, it must consider us really important. Or maybe four probes was just small change to the E-T, and there were hundreds of other probes outside. H'm.

Surely we could get something out of the soldier? Couldn't we hypnotise him too? Not for the first time I was irritated by my lack of knowledge on hypnotism - it was very spectacular and had been known since the time of the Egyptians at least. But no one could "explain" it in terms of anything I understood. I looked in my PC again:

"The hypnotic state is a response of normal individuals - is one of the many basic psychological characteristics of normal individuals - closely related to the ease with which an individual can become totally absorbed in fantasy while ignoring the real world".

"Hypnosis refers to the state in which the individual becomes highly responsive to suggestions ... memory and awareness of self can be altered by

suggestions. All of these effects can be extended post-hypnotically into the individuals' subsequent waking activity. In a sense the phenomenon has been described as 'believed-in fantasy'.

Nothing.

Jim phoned again during the morning.

'We're doing something interesting - I think you should come down again.'

So after a short while I found myself in what I recognised immediately as an underground shooting gallery. A small table had been set up in the middle and Jim, Paul and Fred were grouped around it. It was loaded with test equipment and a power cable snaked away to one corner. As I approached Jim looked up.

'Paul here has opened up the probe we found in the soldier's room. No, don't worry,' he said, seeing my start, 'we defused the booby-trap.' He pointed to a square of plastic lying on the table. Semtex.

I looked over their shoulders and saw the probe itself had been removed from the picture and was lying face down on the bench. A small box 150x150x20mm, cheaply made out of pressed aluminium and looking like any mass-produced electronic component. There was nothing extra-terrestrial about it as far as I could see - it could have been made in California.

'Probably was,' said Fred, poking at a large chip with "Intel" printed on it. He tipped it up on one edge. The probe didn't have a serial number on it but it looked as though there could be thousands of its clones around. He was continuing to prod it and suddenly he said 'Ah,' and there was a small click.

Immediately we heard those strange continuously rising tones and on the front of the unit we could see the lights going round and round.

'Switch the damn thing off!' I said and with a click the unit went dead.

'A test switch!' said Jim. 'Used to check the hypnotising routine during final test.'

'How does it make that noise?' asked Fred. I wanted to know too. It was a sort of audible illusion in that the notes always seemed to be rising and yet staying where they were.

'I'm glad you asked that,' said Paul. 'I looked it up. It's really four notes, an octave apart and going up through the scale. But as they go up the top ones get fainter and fainter and the bottom ones that replace them get louder and louder. When the top one disappears it's replaced by one at the bottom just starting to get louder. They're called "Shepard Tones",' he added.

'Like a barber's pole,' I said.

'"A barber's pole", yes!' said Paul. 'I like it.'

The talk started to get technical at this point and I turned to go. Jim noticed me at the door and said:

'Before you go, Dig, these two guys have found out something odd about the control signals.'

'Yes,' said Paul, 'they're coming from the direction of the Moon all right, but we don't think they're actually originating there. We think they're just being bounced off the moon.'

'So the E-T is on the Earth somewhere?!'

'Looks like it. We have two of our engineers working on it and we think we may be able to find roughly where they are being transmitted from.'

It seemed to me that that was going a bit too far. The signals would probably look different if they came from a single antenna than if they came reflected from a large diffuse mountainous area, but to be able to say *where* they came from...

Seeing my raised eyebrows Paul looked at Fred as though seeking a way to simplify the explanation for a layman.

'It's because the Doppler shift varies with the polarisation angle and if you know the orbit of the Moon ...'

'OK, OK!' I said hastily. 'I'll take your word for it.'

I returned to my room via the restaurant, thinking that if the E-T was really on the Earth, we might finally be able to do something.

Chapter 36

The phone beeped during the afternoon. It was Dr Duluth and he wanted me down in the screened room.

There was a newcomer, a thick stocky Latvian with a shock of grey hair. He was introduced as Dr Kvov.

Again the door thumped closed and without preliminaries Dr Duluth started.

'We have found three probes in Chrodisp but all those who are connected with them are dead.' I looked up suddenly. It seemed we could profitably have a little chat with the E-T.

'Yes,' he continued. 'Zed you saw yourself, d'Auteuil was killed in action in the Tower and Captain Tolhuber hanged himself in his room an hour after we arrested him. Couple these deaths with the fact that there seems to have been a leakage of information from Chrodisp, which could well have originated from these individuals, we feel that something is occurring which would justify us in asking a few questions of the E-T, were that possible.' Just what I had thought.

'Jim?' he continued.

'We have detected gigahertz probe control signals and they come from the Moon but the latest evidence is that they are the reflections of signals originating in Eastern Europe - possibly Greece. The purpose of using the Moon as a reflector is obviously because the very high gigahertz signals, being like light, can only travel in straight lines. We calculate that using the moon as a reflector, most of the Earth can be reached from Greece by Moon-bounce.'

'How many probe control signals have you detected?' I asked. I knew already.

'Er, four. We're still looking for the fourth probe,' he added lamely.

'Thank you,' said Dr Duluth. 'In the meantime we must move on. To make a physical examination of the E-T requires us to know its location much more precisely than we do at present. We cannot fly around searching for it in the present world climate. But Dr Kvov has come up with an unconventional idea which may be an alternative method to investigate the E-T. Dr Kvov?'

Dr Kvov stood up and cleared his throat self-consciously.

'We know that the Extra-terrestrial is able to Insert into the human consciousness: we think it should be possible for a human consciousness to be reciprocally Inserted into the Extra-terrestrial consciousness,' he said, with a self-deprecating smile. He obviously thought it a rather simplistic statement. 'At least to a certain extent,' he added.

I suddenly had a premonition of why I was here - I was going to provide the "human consciousness" that was to be Inserted into the E-T!

Dr Kvov went on about the energy required for an Insertion being a product of distance and time and that for a short distance and a short time in the past it would be well within the capability of the main Inserter driven by the training Resonator which was undamaged. But I had other thoughts.

`As I suppose I am the one who is going to make this Insertion ...?' I let this hang in the air a moment. Silence was answer enough. `I would like to know what happens if I can't Insert.'

`Ah,' said Dr Kvov, with evident relief. (What question should I have asked?!) `If you can't Insert, we will detect it immediately and just switch off the electro-narcosis. Or alternatively you say your Return code-phrase and wake up anyway.'

`Thank you Dr Kvov, and now if you will excuse us. We will see you again in the Inserter complex.'

Slightly surprised at this rather abrupt dismissal he stood, bowed slightly and left. I turned round to Dr Duluth. His eyes looked into mine burningly.

`In order to make this Insertion, we are taking an enormous risk - we are going to have to divert all power from the Tower lasers for 20 minutes. We can only store enough energy for one laser discharge, so more than one well-aimed missile in that interval means the end of Chrodisp.'

`So make it worth while, fella,' said Jim.

`Yes,' said Dr Duluth. `Notwithstanding what Kvov thinks, we may be wasting our time. We only vaguely know where the E-T is physically, and it is surrounded by millions of humans. Our hope is that it will have a different signature and that you will be able to recognise it from this. And that you can then Insert into it, of course.' He made a gesture of despair. `I wish I could go myself, but I'm not an Empathiser. Not that ability to Empathise with humans means you will be able to Empathise with an E-T.'

`But you have to try,' said Jim.

`But you have to try,' repeated Dr Duluth. `We are giving you our latest Translator, with a much greater capability of learning than those you have had so far. It will need to be trained to understand the probably completely different thought processes of the E-T. This is not like Translating French into English. So if and when you can be Inserted, go slowly and just give the Translator time to learn.'

`How do I do that?' I asked.

`The Translator will start by asking questions on its own. Questions that it knows the answer to in English. It will gradually build up a vocabulary of words and concepts. If you try to push it before it's ready you will just get garbage,' said Jim.

`All right. But how will I know when it's ready for me to start talking?' I asked.

`You won't see a green light,' said Jim. `It'll start to slow down with its questions and then you can try. But if you still get garbage, you'll just have to let it go on its own for a while and try again later.'

`OK. And if and when I finally start getting through what should my priorities be?'

Dr Duluth looked down at a piece of paper.

`Yes. It has been sitting there for five thousand years. First it helped us and then stopped helping us. It may conceivably have become antagonistic to Chrodisp, perhaps because we are the group on Earth that detected it. Your first priority is to find where it is and the second priority to find out how we can destroy or disable it.'

`It's a complex device,' said Jim. `There must be a million ways of stamping on it.'

`And you must get this information back to us,' added Dr Duluth. `It may detect you and try to prevent it. For this reason I want you to reprogram your Return- key signal to something short, such as "Return Digby". We want you to find as much information about it as is possible before you return because if we destroy it

without learning anything about it, the next one will have learnt how we destroyed the first and be much more resistant.'

More E-Ts! I hadn't thought of that!

'Your third priority is to find out its motives. Why did it first help us, why did it remove this help and finally why is it merely observing the mess we are in, particularly the mess Chrondisp is in, without doing anything about it?'

'We know almost nothing about it,' said Jim.

'You must find out where the decisions are made. Can they be made on the spot, or must they be referred back to its home planet? How far away is the home planet? What is its reaction time?' said Dr Duluth.

'It's an incredible opportunity for us,' he continued. 'Mankind's first contact with another intelligence. If nothing else we can learn something of their technology by examining the E-T hardware.'

'If we survive long enough, with the YP putting in stronger and stronger attacks,' said Jim.

'So the first thing is to save ourselves and once that is assured find out all we can about it,' I summarised.

'Right,' said Jim. 'Exactly in that order. And fast.'

*

The Insertion was a very casual, if solitary affair. As it was going to be a short Insertion, like a training shot, I just sat in the Cage in my normal clothes wearing the Helmet. Dr Kvov, assisted by Jim and watched by Dr Duluth, operated the Inserter and Jim took me through the calibration routine.

'Go fella', were his final words.

*

It was a very short "flight" this time, even slower than my training Insertion which had been to twelve years in the past. I drifted barely up to the first 10-year marker before the green turn-off marker appeared. I swam slowly in the blackness. There were many, many of the complex swirls, the "signatures" that denoted human beings. Sometimes they were in big groups which I knew corresponded to cities, but they all looked the same ...sliding slowly far beneath me, nothing, nothing, ... a large black area then several in a row, it was like flying over a country by night. But now I was slowing down and soon the line that joined me to Chrondisp would gradually contract like a rubber-band and ... There **was** something different! Surrounded by several normal swirls and alone in the darkness. That was it! Recognisable as any intelligent being by its complex swirl of light, but quite different from anything I had seen before. It was bigger than the others, more diffuse, and pulsating slowly in different shades of colour.

I carefully drifted up and gently Merged with one of the outlying arms.

Chapter 37

An overwhelming feeling of coldness, dullness, boredom. And at the same time a deep sluggish resentment. I mentally cowered down wondering if I had been detected but although I waited breathlessly, nothing changed. I was a child in the middle of a long grey depressing Sunday afternoon in a North of England industrial town. The slow listless rain was falling on the shiny brick houses and the cobbled streets were deserted.

Slowly and cautiously I expanded, looking for sensors and thinking the concept of "Inputs". The laser communication system I found immediately. And as someone had suspected, it was hidden on the rear side of the Moon. It was in

contact with the E-T over a very narrow radio beam. For a moment I thought it was not working and then suddenly the transmitter came on for about 30 seconds and then went off. If that was one "bit", it was a lot longer than the 10 seconds that Jim had theorised. Either the E-T had a worse comlaser system than he had envisaged or the home planet was further away than 4.3 light years. But I also got the impression that the strength of the signal being transmitted was not very high.

Further exploring found a visual sensor, an eye. It was also on the Moon. Looking down at the Earth I could see the sun was just rising in Cyprus, far below. The detail and colour rendition were excellent.

Still, grey and cold. Even Spardes's tiny brain who, God rest his soul, was the stupidest human I had ever been inserted into, was like an illuminated fair-ground compared to this. Was the E-T dead? Had it just run out of power? But the sun was shining on this side of the Earth now; it must be awake. And then suddenly a strong laser signal was received on the comlaser receiver. Again it lasted for about 30 seconds and went off. That signal couldn't have been coming from 4.3 light years away! Weak transmission, strong reception, there was something wrong with our ideas. But I couldn't do anything about it now. Note and report later.

And then at last my consciousness brushed something flickering in the distance. I focussed on it as it became brighter and brighter. At last I was going to make contact with the E-T! Bright flickering thoughts, similar to human thoughts but not quite the same. And strangely off to one side, away from the cold grey centre, the core where human thoughts, human identity, is normally strongest. Against the grey back-ground of the core this was a veritable firework display and now I could see it was associated with two metallic constructions, outside but physically close to the E-T. These must be the antennas - the antennas that bounced signals off the Moon and communicated with the probes. There would be one transmitting signals to the probes and the other receiving signals from the probes - the Down and Up-Links antennas, as Jim called them. I looked a little more carefully - but actually only one antenna was actually in use and it was handling everything - the Up and Down signals, the signals to the comlasers and from the "eye". I supposed the other antenna was a spare.

Now I focussed on the flickering display - it was very complex and connected the antenna to the cold centre of the E-T.

I moved in closer and to my surprise I could see glimpses of the insides of human structures on Earth. A garage, a big room lined with racks of electronic equipment, a luxuriously silk-lined room, a small suburban living room. There were many probes! And that could mean that ... In confirmation of my suspicion an unmistakably Japanese face swam into view. He was not saying anything and his eyes were staring. For my money he was hypnotised! So the E-T was in contact with Asiablock too!

But after a while I realised that there was no intelligence here. It was simply a radio station connected to the antenna, providing pre-processing of the data before it was passed to the core, no, more like slowing down the data before it was passed to the core. And then I saw that it had a second function of storing information received from the core and releasing it in a burst to the antenna. An interface! Fast in - slow out, and the reverse. The core had to be the E-T itself - it was the biggest and most complex structure and it was obviously suffering some sort of partial power failure. It was like a PC when the battery runs down - data is saved but the screen grows dimmer and everything slows down as it goes into the

"Power Save" mode. Perhaps the E-T brain, after five thousand years of operation was also in a "Power Save" mode.

First priority was to find out where the E-T was located. It had local "eyes" but it was night and they just showed dark fields and some buildings. I had a quick look at the Earth from space again, perhaps that would help. In the meantime the sun-line on the Earth had moved and was just touching the extreme eastern edge of the island of Rhodes.

Next priority was to find out how to disable the E-T. Not knowing where it was, I could see nothing obvious. The comlaser was hidden on the far side of the moon. There was also some complex spiral structure supported on thin posts even more securely hidden in a crater. The E-T's Inserter? I tried to remember what it looked like so I could describe it later, but I'm not an engineer, let alone a Chronological Displacement engineer. We had thought that discovering and disabling the probes was the only feasible way to attack the E-T, but now I knew there were probably hundreds of them and they weren't all even on Westblock territory. Switch off the transmitter it used to communicate with its probes seemed the best bet.

There was of course nothing that I could actually do now, as the E-T was strictly on the Main Timeline. So put "E-T destruction" on hold for the moment, and think.

Now what about its memory, its data bank? Following the analogy of my PC, that should be intact, and, after-all, most of the answers to the questions I had been given should be available there. Would my Translator be able to decode anything I could prise out of it? I thought around and in spite of an increased feeling of resentment, a resistance like cold thick mud, I was able to locate and Merge with it.

If this was the E-T's memory, it was complex, yet completely dead and cold. It was like standing in a factory closed down for the night. A strange image chased through my head. I was standing holding my mother's hand in the middle of an enormous park planted with rows and rows of identical wooden crosses, looking at my grandfather's WWII grave in Northern France.

'Who are you?' I asked. There was a pause of about a second; then a burst of gibberish. Good. It would react at least. Now everything was up to the Translator.

The Translator went into Training Mode and I just mentally stood back. The Translator program would know the best and minimum number of questions to ask to establish rapport, so I just let it get on with it.

The Translator was going on and on, asking questions and receiving answers. I became impatient - this could go on for ever. Even an approximate answer was better than nothing. A provocative question to start:

'Why are you sabotaging Chrondisp?'

'I am not sabotaging it.'

'What then is your policy?'

'My instructions are to Observe.'

It was lying - it was doing something more at Chrondisp than merely Observing. Dr Duluth was being very fair-minded and objective, but I was sure those three guys who had had probes in their offices had been influenced, hypnotised, to somehow pass on military secrets to the YP outside. And then I remembered. Of course. I was seeing the E-T as it was 9 years ago. It could well have been just Observing us then, but a lot had happened in the meantime. I began to wonder if our name "Extra-terrestrial" for it was perhaps too neutral.

'When did you first observe life on Earth?'

There was a long pause during which I could hear the Translator asking lots of supplementary questions and something about the resonant frequency of caesium.

`Five thousand years ago.' That figured. It must have been around the time of the Pharaohs, as we had thought.

`Where is your home planet?'

A long pause during which I could hear the Translator exercising the E-T's data bank through galactic co-ordinates. This was going to take some time and I was wondering if it was a very useful question. What we really wanted to know was the reaction time of the E-T. If it had to refer everything back to base, OK, but perhaps it could make important decisions on its own.

The Translator's questions were going on endlessly.

`Where is your home planet?' I broke in. Surely the Translator had enough info to give a rough answer.

`Meaningless question.'

Maybe "planet" was the wrong word. I should perhaps have said "Asteroid" or "comet". Or perhaps the E-T evolved in space near a sun. Try again.

`Where is your sun?'

`Meaningless question.'

I was getting nowhere. I let the Translator chatter on to it for a while, then tried again, but when the E-T repeated that my questions had no answers, I changed tack and asked:

`How long does it take to send a message to your central processing unit?' I was proud of that. No mention of planets or suns and general enough to cover all eventualities.

There was a long pause, this time from the data bank.

`It is difficult to answer, it depends on ... it is a variable ... Meaningless question.'

Dammit. That comlaser was sending and receiving data from somewhere.

Where?

`How far away is the transmitter that is sending laser signals to you?' I asked.

`In light years and with ten percent accuracy,' I added hastily.

`1.2 light years.'

At last. It was like pulling teeth. But that was much closer than we had thought! Better check.

`How far away is the receiver that you are transmitting to?'

`1.2 light years.'

OK. Good. Then I thought of a question of my own.

`Why is your communication rate so slow? No cancel.' "Slow" is a relative word. I re-stated the question:

`Why is your communication rate one bit per 30 seconds?'

`It is optimum for...garbage.. thought processes.'

I let the Translator work on this for a while as I wondered what could have thought processes of one bit per 30 seconds. If we talked about the speed of **our** thought processes we would probably say they were proportional to the alpha rhythm of the brain, 10Hz or ten bits per second.

`It is optimum for the neurone,' said the Translator.

I let this hang awhile. "The" neurone must mean "one" neurone - it must really mean "relay station", which would explain the comlaser low output power, and the strong received signal.

`Where is the neurone? No, cancel.' I was just going to get some galactic co-ordinates that would mean nothing to me.

`How far away is the neurone?'

`1.2 light years.'

Ah, I was beginning to get the picture. I was right. "Neurone" must mean "relay station". I imagined a whole chain of relay stations stretching from here to Alpha Centauri or wherever. But "neurone" - wasn't this the name of the cells we had in our brain? If the Translator had found the right word, a neurone was a lot more than a relay station which merely received signals, boosted up their power and re-transmitted them. In our brain a neurone has some simple computing, some simple thinking ability, receiving signals from other neurons before it sent its pulse on. Better check.

And then the key question, asked almost by accident.

`How many neurons are there?'

There was a pause, during which the Translator remained silent, then:

`I do not have this number accurately on file.'

`Give me an estimate.'

`The largest number I can store is ...pause ... 10 to the power of 12. The number you are seeking is greater.'

What! More than 1 followed by 12 zeros! If the other neurons were spaced out by 1.2 light years like this one "next" to us, the home planet must be in another galaxy! I couldn't believe that.

And then I had The Thought: the E-T *really* meant neurons, thinking units, brain cells, and

Pow! Shock! Everything swung round as I adjusted my thoughts. The E-T was a complex life-form spread out over many light years! I had a sudden breath-taking view of the galaxy seen from Earth with myriad's of small points mixed in with the stars, and each point was joined to its neighbour by a network of fine lines. I could see the nearest neurone, only 1.2 light years away, the fine lines joining it to other neurons disappearing out of sight, into infinity.

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I Withdrew. I needed to think. What we had been thinking of as the E-T was only one neurone, one specialised neurone in a galaxy-wide network of neurons that must constitute a brain. But the speed at which impulses travelled through this network of neurons was one pulse in 30 seconds! That was 3000 times slower than the human brain! But was there any point in having a higher communication rate if it took 1.2 years to send data from one neurone to another? It must take hundreds of years for a thought to be generated. But was that important in the billions of years age of the galaxy? It was more data for me to bring back - there were too many big numbers here for me to digest. Now I could see the E-T must put data in and out of its data bank very slowly, by human standards. Fortunately the Translator could fish it out for me at human speed. What were the other questions I must ask? I Returned and immediately got back to work.

`How did you know you would find life in this system?'

`Life? - meaningless word.'

I suppose some of the words I used could sound as garbage to the E-T too. I heard the Translator talking about self-replicating and evolving molecules and then the answer from the E-T memory unit: `Life is often found on planets.'

`When life is discovered, what do you normally do?'

`This neurone was set up as an Observer.'

`You started to help life on this planet technically. Why was this?'

There was a bit of back and forth with the Translator as the meaning of "technically" was straightened out.

`Young life-forms start very slowly and often die out for lack of garbage.'

`For lack of ability to manipulate the environment,' inserted the Translator. Pause. `For lack of technical know-how,' it added as an afterthought.

`After a short time you stopped feeding the life-form technical know-how. Why was this?'

`Its garbage ratio was naturally high enough.'

A long pause with the Translator working hard questioning the memory unit.

`The ratio of Technical Knowledge to ... Ethical Maturity was adequately high,' gave the Translator finally. `I have no equivalent word and so will call this the "Beta Coefficient". The Beta Coefficient of the life-form was adequately high,' it repeated.

`And what happened when you stopped feeding us know-how?' I asked, although I was beginning to see. There was a pause as the memory unit searched its data bank.

`The Beta Coefficient dropped slightly at first but then rose again. It rose to 12 garbage per garbage units, which is more than ten times greater than the highest comparison figure I have on record.'

`Forget it,' I said to the Translator which was about to try to tell me in what units "Technical Knowledge" and "Ethical Maturity" were measured in. I got the sense.

`How did you react to this?'

`As it was very unusual there was no plan programmed in the data bank. And so Observation continued until garbage, at which point ...'

`Hold,' I said and waited for the Translator to catch up.

`Observation continued until nuclear fusion was discovered. This implies a Beta Coefficient of 180 at which point an immediate report had to be made.'

`Made to the next neurone?'

`Yes.'

`And now?'

`The characteristic energy signature of the garbage technique has just been detected.' (`The "Insertion" technique,' said the Translator) `The Beta Coefficient is no longer measurable and an emergency maximum energy report has just been sent.'

`And when do you expect an answer to this report?'

`This neurone has no experience. There is no data on file.'

So our bit of the E-T was worried when we started using nuclear power and when it learnt that we had discovered the Inserter technique, it panicked and screamed for help. But this changed things somewhat. I was being a bit egotistical in thinking that the E-T was hostile to Chondisp alone. If the E-T didn't like humanity's high Beta and our discovery of the Insertion technique, there was no point in attacking just Chondisp. They'd have to destroy the Asiablock Inserter too. And, chilling thought, that wasn't going to do more than be a temporary pause to humanity's technical progress - we could easily rebuild them. To stop humanity's progress would need something far more radical.

Think. Our E-T here could only communicate with its distributed brain at a very low speed. So it was not going to be able to receive detailed instructions as to how to nobble Chondisp or Chondiski in any reasonable time. But it was supposed to be an intelligent E-T, an E-T Simulator Jim had called it, and so was perfectly capable of complicated surgery on its own. It had, after all been observing us for five thousand years and must know our weaknesses. It must have plans prepared

for any eventuality. The only information it would need from the central brain would be a single command like "put Plan B-451 into operation", Plan B-451 being some previously worked-out sequence of actions. Perhaps I could find out something about these pre-programmed plans.

'You must have many plans memorised which allow quick reaction to unforeseen events.'

Silence. Damn, this was like a court of law.

'Do you have plans memorised which allow quick reaction to unforeseen events?'

'Yes.'

To be expected, of course. We would call them reflex actions.

'Are you allowed a free choice of which plans to put into operation?'

'The question is not understood. This memory unit stores planned sequences but only the garbage can execute them.'

("Central processing unit", supplied the Translator.)

Logical. Now a key question.

'What must the central processing unit do before you give it a plan?'

'It must provide the identification number of the plan it wishes to execute together with its access code.'

Ah, so the central processing unit, or let's just call it the "E-T", didn't have a completely free hand. The next neurone down the line would hand it the access number and ID of a particular program to execute. Like "Give technical help up to stage 2", or "Stop giving technical help and Observe only".

Or "Destroy all intelligent life on Earth", I thought grimly.

'Do you have a plan for destroying all intelligent life on this planet?' I waited breathlessly.

'Yes.'

My God! I was right. I had just been bleakly told that the E-T had a contingency plan for destroying the human race! I felt a shiver run up my back. I would have thought that the E-T, who had been Observing us for five thousand years, actually Inserting into human beings and feeling what they felt, would have finally built up some sort of affection for us. But no. If the right program identification number and access code were produced, the "Earth Sterilisation Program" would be released and coldly put into operation.

'What is this plan?'

'No plan can be revealed without the access code.'

But if I had got this right, the access code was going to arrive from the brain of the E-T distributed in space via the nearest neurone in about nine years. The plan would be released from the memory unit and put into action. Nine years ahead was "now" to us on Earth and what we were seeing on Earth must be the deadly first effects of this plan. There was nothing more I could do here, I must get back with the incredible information I had collected, the information that would instantly change the name Extraterrestrial to "Alien".

'Digby return,' I thought.

Chapter 38

I woke up. I was lying flat on my back on a rubber mattress looking at a glaring white ceiling hung with dazzling glow panels. I closed my eyes again hurriedly, then opened them more slowly. Squinting, I could see I was in a big open

room. In the distance I could hear a drill turning and someone banging on a piece of metal.

A voice nearby said 'He's awake,' and another said 'So?'

'So you gotta ring Fred.'

'You got Fred's number?'

'I put it on a piecer paper 'ere somewhere.'

I felt a hand roughly sliding under the rubber mattress and heard the rustle of paper. Eyes still screwed up against the glare I reached over my right hand to slide out the drip needle from my left arm, but to my surprise there was none.

'Not worth it,' said one of the voices. 'You've only been away ten minutes, like.' I felt the electro-narcosis suckers being popped off my forehead and then sat up on what turned out to be a work-bench in one corner of a work-shop. People around me were tinkering with various pieces of disassembled electronic units. They looked up incuriously at me before turning back to their work.

My God - another low-budget Return! I thought wistfully back to the days of the past when the body of a sleeping Observer was respectfully laid out on a soft bed in a quiet hygienic ward, with dimmed lighting.

'Cuppa char, mate?' said a voice behind me and I turned round to glare at a ginger-haired technician holding out a plastic cup to me. He had one for himself.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

'Thank you,' I said.

'Gotta wad too, if you like,' he added offering something wrapped in plastic foil. A ham roll.

'Was it OK, then?' said my friend chattily, sipping his tea. I wondered fleetingly what his ratio of Technical Knowledge to Ethical Maturity was, and would humanity be saved if I could only get the E-T to interview *him*. Further thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a brisk-looking young man in a white lab-coat.

'Fred Palas,' he said. 'If you feel up to it I'm to take you to Jim.'

'Sure,' I said, climbing down from the bench. I turned to thank my ginger-haired friend who unaccountably looked embarrassed.

'Well, it's the char and wad,' he said uncomfortably.

'Of course,' I said. 'How much?'

He mentioned some small sum. I found I had money in my pocket and I handed it over.

'Please keep the change,' I said. But no, he searched through his pockets and meticulously handed the change back. I thanked him again and finally left with Fred.

*

Such was the urgency of the situation that when we arrived at the screened room, Jim was already there, standing out in the corridor with an MP. Fred nodded to Jim and left us. We entered the room, the MP shut the door and Jim immediately turned to me.

'One - There is an E-T in Greece,' I began, using the old name. 'I couldn't find out where it was but you may be able to get something from the fact that about 3 minutes after I was Inserted the sun was rising in Crete. The E-T has a video sensor on the moon.'

'Two - As I didn't know where the E-T was, I couldn't think of any way to harm it except for a rocket attack on the Moon where it keeps its Inserter, its Comlasers and a gigahertz relay joining these two to itself.'

'Three - The E-T is worried that our "Ratio of Technical Knowledge to Ethical Maturity" is much too high. The Translator calls this the Beta Coefficient.'

`And four - the E-T also has probes in Asiablock.'

Jim looked dazed and stood up convulsively. But typically he ignored the temporarily irrelevant.

`So the E-T is not just hostile to Chrondisp?'

`No.'

`Against Chrondiski too?'

`Probably.'

`And so that's why they've suddenly taken against us. We must ...'

`There's more.'

`Go on.'

`Five - The E-T has a program stored in its memory which it believes can destroy all of humanity.'

`The whole of the human race?'

`Yes.'

`Jesus! Just like that!' He swallowed and sat down.

`And finally, six. The E-T has just (that is 9 years ago) sent off a panic "maximum energy emergency signal".'

`Did you find out how this program works?'

`No. It was stored in a special part of the E-T's memory unit and even the E-T didn't have the access code to it. Nine years ago it very likely requested this code and has probably received it by now. What we are seeing outside must be the effects of this program. It's clear enough how it works.'

`By setting one half of humanity against the other half?'

`Yes.'

Jim went to the door, opened it and spoke to the MP outside.

`Get Duluth.'

While he was waiting he paced up and down the room.

`Beta too high be bugged,' he said forcefully. `It's afraid of us.'

Christ! I hadn't thought of that, but it sounded right! Just then Dr Duluth entered and the door was shut behind him.

Jim quickly brought him up to date and there was a long silence.

`And here's one last piece of information I haven't given you yet.' I then told them that what we had so far called the E-T was in fact just one specialised neurone out of at least a million million neurons spread out through the Galaxy and interconnected by comlasers. There was a stunned silence.

`I think you should run through the whole Insertion for us,' said Dr Duluth. So I went all through it in detail. Then I had to do it yet again with them both asking questions.

`My God!' said Dr Duluth finally. It was not an over-reaction.

Jim, who I knew firmly believed that action stimulated thought, stood up and switched on the holo projector in the corner, then going to the door, turned off the lights. He fiddled with the control unit until the "Human Civilisation" curve appeared floating in the air between us.

`We've gotta put ourselves in the position of the E-T,' he began. `Right. It or they, discover life on Earth about 5000 years ago. They find a high level of sophistication - art, er...pyramids. That sort of thing. They decide to encourage us and send down at least one probe which acts as a sort of growth hormone distributor.'

`But they only send us technical knowledge,' said Dr Duluth.

`I don't know why,' said Jim. `perhaps they thought that that sort of knowledge was more difficult for an infant civilisation to acquire than social get-togetherness, what's the word?...'

`Ethical Maturity,' I supplied.

`Right. Then perhaps it's easier to teach some one how to make a boat sail almost into the wind with a keel than for them to learn about Parliamentary Democracy.'

`More interesting, anyway,' I said.

`And that is the point,' said Dr Duluth, picking up my remark. `Humanity thrived on the technical know-how. We have developed from the apes - stereoscopic vision and an opposed thumb got us into tool-making early. Technology has always fascinated us.'

`Whatever,' said Jim. `We hardly needed any encouragement and so our Beta thing rose rapidly. The E-Ts, probably rather worried, removed their technical help and we went down into the Dark Ages.' It was only too obvious on the curve in front of us.

`But gradually we got our act together on the Ethical Maturity front - enough for technical know-how to take off again, anyhow.'

I glanced at the curve rising during the Renaissance. I remembered that "Renaissance" meant "re-birth".

`Now all this time the E-T must have been observing us with mounting alarm. It must be like finding a couple of kittens at the bottom of the garden and leaving out a saucer of milk. Next day you find a slew of fully-grown tigers prowling around who have eaten everything in sight and are now eyeing you.'

`And so they decide to destroy the pests,' said Dr Duluth. `And they decide the best way is to use their own aggression to destroy themselves.'

`Exactly,' said Jim. `To do this the E-T has two weapons - the first is the fact that it can Insert into anyone on Earth, so it must have a perfect insight into our thought-processes. The second weapon is their probes, which can do real-time intervention - mostly it seems by hypnotising key people. It's not always easy to bring the right person and the probe together, but given time...'. He fiddled with the control unit and the Civilisation curve disappeared to be replaced by a square. I recognised we were going to see one of Jim's doodles.

`Here's the Earth of 2 months ago.'(God, was it only 2 months ago?!) A dotted line neatly divided the square into two. An A appeared in one half and a W in the other. A little circle marked "E-T" appeared to one side.

`Asiablock and Westblock,' he continued. `Two different mentalities, both internally fairly stable, and since the Pakistan Affair a much greater degree of tolerance. Asiablock are getting their population down and their living standards up. A new generation of politicians more interested in trade agreements than in exporting "The Way". And technical know-how taking off like crazy in both halves. Nuclear fusion, artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation and soon molecular engineering. Not to mention the Insertion technique.'

`Now the E-T, seeing all this, must be shit scared. We've got where we are in 400 thousand years - the E-T is not much advanced on us in God-knows how many billion years. It's incredibly big but slow. To it, we must appear unbelievably fast, permanently surfing the edge of cataclysmic self-destruction. Wars, pestilence's, wild fanatical political parties and systems, brinkmanship, fantastic life-changing culture shocks and scientific discoveries, and all mostly in the last 100 years. We've had them all and survived. And all our wars have been forcing houses for technology. OK, our Beta's up a bit but we're going to hit some of the physical

limits soon and this is bound to slow us down technology-wise and give this "Ethical Maturity" thing a chance to catch up.'

I was waiting for him to say something about not making omelettes without breaking eggs, but he went past it.

'Now,' he continued, and an arrow pointed to the E-T. 'Sooner or later we are going to find this E-T ...'

'Er,' I said.

'Yes?'

'We've found the E-T,' I said. 'It's in Greece.'

He paused and I could hear him moving around.

'Yes, I'd forgotten. You're right. So what does the E-T actually do? Briefly it has to do two things - first, increase global tension. It must have done that by getting hold of contract killers, assassins, terrorists, and arranging for them to kill key people in one of these halves. It was us first.' A red square enveloped the "W" half of his sketch. 'It first aimed at Chrodisp because we are highly visible and also the Inserter Technique was capable of spotting the E-T.'

'Which is exactly what happened,' said Dr Duluth.

'Note no attacks were made on Chrodiski,' continued Jim, 'and all the attacks on Chrodisp looked as though they were coming from Asiablock. Now I think we managed to restrain most of our hot-heads ...' He seemed to have forgotten his plans for an air-strike on Chrodiski. '... aided by the fact that all of the attacks looked rather too obviously engineered by Asiablock. So things were slowly cooling off when Asiablock started reporting hits, too. They thought it was revenge by Westblock, and consumed with righteous indignation for what must be the first time in their history, started attacking us. And we, finally identifying our attackers as Asiablock, like some had thought all along, started attacking too and in a short time we were at each other's throats and taking real casualties.'

I knew all this, and it was good to go over it as we might see something new, but when was he getting to point 2?

'Which brings us to the second point,' he said in an apparently telepathic response. 'It's not enough to start Asia and Westblock fighting, they've done that often enough - you've gotta keep them at it. The E-T must know all about the communications between us.' A green line appeared joining the two halves and some little circles floated above with blue lines joining them to each side. Satellites, I guessed. 'The Hot Line between the two Presidents.' An arrow touched the green line. 'That has to go out.' A break appeared in it.

'Now,' he continued, in an aside, 'I would've thought we put a lot of effort into making the Hot Line 100% safe, but I guess that if you can control the right guy to sabotage it ... And the same must have happened to the Comsats. As far as I understand they've all been switched into the Maintenance Mode. Same for the TV sats.' The up and down lines to the satellites disappeared. 'No matter how clever the system there's always some vulnerable point, some ...'

'Achilles heel,' supplied Dr Duluth.

'Right. We don't have long distance hard-wire phones anymore and someone was programmed to bring down a nuclear powered military satellite which burnt up on re-entry, producing radioactive dust which has virtually killed short-wave radio.'

'And so after five thousand years of civilisation we're letting this filthy E-T just casually blow us away, laughing because it's made us do it ourselves. No one's going to hear Beethoven or Chopin, see Turner or Monet, read Shakespeare or Goethe ...' said Dr Duluth in a choked voice. 'It's an Alien.' It was the first time the word was used.

There was a shocked silence. We had never heard the normally detached and ironic Dr Duluth so moved. But he was absolutely right - we were not playing a trivial computer game against an indifferent Extra-terrestrial, we were fighting for our lives against an evil Alien.

'Yes,' said Jim soberly, and fell silent.

I stood up and switched on the light.

'Well, we all know what must be done,' I said, 'we must restore communications and convince both sides that they are being manipulated. It's going to be a hell of a job to convince our own people, let alone Asiablock, that Earth is really under attack from an Alien Intelligence from Beyond the Stars.'

'Yes,' said Dr Duluth, who had recovered his icy calm, 'and a good place to start at is right here. With the evidence we have, I should be able to persuade our military to assume a defensive posture.' I couldn't believe my ears. What other sort of posture did he think they had been holding? I looked across at Jim, but he merely shrugged. I supposed Dr Duluth was a bit too cerebral to appreciate what the Chondisp military were actually capable of doing.

Dr Duluth looked directly at me.

'The real problem is going to be to convince the Asiablock commander outside.' He pointed upwards. 'He thinks he is about to succeed here, which is no less than the truth, and any appeal to him to stop attacking will be looked on as a ruse to give Chondisp time to strengthen their defences or for reinforcements to arrive.'

'Yes,' I said. 'And I think I may be the only person who could convince him.'

Chapter 39

'How are you going to do that - go out with a white flag or something?' asked Jim.

'No,' I said slowly. 'That's the obvious way and I am sure there is someone on the other side who is just waiting for us to do that and is prepared to stop it.'

'Someone working for the Alien you mean?'

'Yes. Look, if I do this I want a free hand. Will you introduce me to the Commander of the military here? Colonel Colbourne, I think you called him. Is he British?'

'Yes, of course I will,' said Dr Duluth. 'But remember that I am only in charge of Inserter Target Selection here. I have Director status and will do what I can. Colonel Colbourne is a personal friend and I have been able to influence military strategy here a bit through him, but tactics are in his hand. Yes, he is British.'

'What's his Regiment?' I asked.

Dr Duluth and Jim exchanged glances.

'I'm afraid I don't know,' said Dr Duluth. 'Is it important?'

'It may be,' I replied. 'I want to go back to my room before you introduce me and I want you to find the name of his Regiment and let me know.'

'Very well,' said Dr Duluth.

A silent Jim took me back to my room and sat in the only chair while I stripped, showered, washed my hair and carefully shaved. My hair was rather long, but I couldn't do anything about that. I opened the wardrobe and looked at the clothes I had rather hastily packed to come here.

The phone rang and Jim took it.

'He's in the 72nd Foot Regiment,' he said, looking up at me and holding the phone.

`Good,' I said. He carefully replaced the phone, his eyebrows and shoulders raised uncomprehendingly.

I selected a dark pair of cavalry twill trousers and my only jacket. It was a light-weight Mohair and rather jazzily cut but dark too. A cream shirt and ... that was a stroke of luck! There it was, my old Regimental tie! It had been tucked away in my case since that Reunion in London two years ago. Shoes. Damn - I only had sandals, joggers and two pairs of tennis shoes. I looked across at Jim, taking in his usual jeans and out-hanging multi-coloured Hawaiian shirt. Could he possibly possess any item of clothing that I could wear now?

`You need some shoes, fella?' he asked perceptively. `I've got just what you want. Irish brogues. I got them in Dublin last year and haven't worn them yet.' He pronounced them "brogs".

I glanced at his feet, clad as usual in open-toed sandals - it was impossible to judge his foot-size.

`Size ten,' he said following my gaze. I was size nine. They would have to do. `I'll get them if you like,' he offered obligingly.

While he was away I finished my dressing, knotting the tie carefully and pulling the shirt sleeves down so the cuffs were just visible. A handkerchief? I only used tissues.

I looked around the room. That would do. I used my knife to cut a 30 by 30cm square from the white satin pillow and looking in the full-length mirror tucked it up the cuff of my left sleeve, leaving a little showing. What the young officer in mufti was wearing this year.

Jim returned and I saw his eyes sliding uneasily over me, to the hole in the pillow and back to me. He couldn't think of a question which would have any conceivably understood answer and I didn't enlighten him. His shoes were a bit loose even when tightly laced up. I straightened my tie in the mirror and grinned at him.

`To Colonel Colbourne,' I said.

*

The lift stopped. I pulled down my jacket, shot my cuffs, straightened up and marched briskly down the corridor. Two MPs outside a large steel door stiffened as I approached.

`Captain Digby to see Colonel Colbourne,' I said.

The sergeant saluted and the other went to a wall phone.

`Second door on the left, sir.'

The second door on the left had "DEFOPS" stencilled on it. I walked straight in to find myself in a large room dominated by an illuminated situation map. Uniformed figures were talking quietly into phones or tapping on computer keyboards. A young lieutenant noticed my arrival and said something to a stout figure wearing the insignia of a Colonel in the British Army.

I looked at him rather sadly. There but for the Grace of God stood I. Grey-haired but still erect, he had devoted his life to the Army, his father and grandfather had probably been in the same Regiment but he had been born at the wrong time. Too old or too young, he had missed any major conflict and spent his peak formative years in the Regimental Lines, supervising training and making endless inspections. Finally, fifty years old, he had been assigned to the nominally administrative command of garrison troops defending Chondisp, a civilian installation. And then suddenly he found himself being attacked by ruthless fanatical front-line Asiablock troops. A conflict for which he had neither the

experience nor probably the temperament. And my heart sank. What chance did I have of having him authorise an unorthodox tactic?

'Thank you Ponsonby,' he said and turned a pair of blue hostile eyes on me.

I stood stiffly to attention and said:

'Captain Digby, King's Own Rifles.'

His eyes moved over me slowly.

'So you're Captain Digby.' He had a very Home Counties accent.

'Yes, sir. Er ... If you'll excuse me, but are you perhaps related to the Colonel Colbourne who commanded the 72nd Regiment at Waterloo?'

'He was my great-great grandfather,' he said shortly.

'Gosh!' I said, round-eyed with admiration. 'We have a painting of the action in our Mess. We were with Maitland, you know. The CO used to say that Colbourne's leaving his front line position and marching his Regiment along the flank of the French Old Guard was the most daring move of the Battle. The manoeuvre was held up to us as being in the best tradition of the British Army.'

'You are the officer that was in the recreation area during the break-in and then took out that unauthorised raiding party,' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Why didn't you inform Major Schmidt or myself?' he snapped. 'And why aren't you in uniform?'

'Well, sir, to answer your last question first, I'm in the Reserve and it is only an accident that found me in the recreation area. I did what I thought best at the time. I knew nothing of your Command structure.'

'Ha, Reserve, that explains why I've never seen you before.'

'Yes,' he continued. 'The King's Own were with Maitland.'

He was looking at me curiously and a little enviously.

'Duluth wants me to let you take out a patrol. I'm very undermanned here and ...' he hesitated. I knew what he was really too ashamed to admit, perhaps even to himself. There would be few if any volunteers for a patrol outside the defences of Chondisp. In spite of our recent defensive victory, morale was low - and the troop's morale was the first responsibility of their Commander.

'Well actually, sir, if it's all right with you, I do have a few bods lined up,' I said laying on the boyish enthusiasm. 'Bit of a mixed bag, I'm afraid, but they're all decent chaps.' A good officer always defends his men.

'Ah, do you?' His face lightened. 'Very well, but look Captain, I can't have you going outside like that.' He gestured to my clothes. He looked around the room calculatingly. 'Carruthers,' he said, calling over a rather sallow young First Lieutenant. 'Could you lend Captain Digby your No. 1? Just the jacket and cap. If they are damaged you can claim with a 43B and I'll sign it.' Rather reluctantly Lt. Carruthers left to fetch his best uniform.

The Colonel turned to me again. 'See the quartermaster for your Captain's pips. Right now - weapons. I can lend you a pistol - but what about your men?' God, I thought, what would I want with a pistol! Weighs a ton and in the field I'd be lucky to hit a barn door at a hundred meters. Before he could offer me a swagger stick I said:

'That's frightfully decent of you sir, but if you could just give me a chit for the armourer and I'll pick out something.'

'But your men?'

'They all have their own weapons, sir.' I pulled a piece of paper out of my breast pocket. 'If you could perhaps have a word with their Commanding Officers?' He took the piece of paper from me and looked at it frowningly.

`But they're all from different units. German, Dutch, British. And French!' He looked up at me querying. `They are a mixed bag!

`The officer in charge is British,' I smiled reassuringly. He looked perplexed.

`Ah, yes, you of course. Very well, I hope you know what you're doing.' He turned back brusquely to the situation map.

*

The uniform arrived and fitted passably well. I flattered myself it was rather narrow across the shoulders, but that was possibly because it was new. I thanked the owner and was conducted to the armoury where the sergeant armourer offered me various pistols as a side-arm suitable for an officer, but I politely declined.

I selected a Mk. 6 rifle. He suggested an ammo pouch with 100 reloads but the magazine held 50 rounds at full power, and that would be more than enough for what I wanted.

*

I met the section of ten men and their sergeant at 3:30 the next morning, just inside Dome B4.

The sergeant lined them up, and I inspected them and their weapons and explained carefully what I wanted.

`Now you all did very well the other night and reports have been sent to your commanding officers with recommendations for the DSM and promotion.' They shuffled and looked pleased. `You will also all get a Campaign ribbon, when someone decides what the name of this Campaign is.' They laughed.

I held my hand up and looked serious until they quietened down.

`But now I have a special job to do and I have especially asked for you. It's a very easy job but there's not many people here at Chrondisp who I would want to give it to. The other night I ordered you to attack the YP and you did. Tonight I am going to order you to look like you are running away from the YP.' They looked confused.

I looked conspiratorially over my shoulder and lowered my voice.

`Tonight I have to get captured by the YP! Sergeant?'

Sergeant Dawlish unfolded a big piece of paper. It was a map of the outside of this Dome and extended as far as the enemy lines.

`This is Dome B4...' began the Sergeant, `and this is an enemy armoured personnel carrier 1km away. It's dug-in and protected from the Tower lasers by a sand-bank. We are supposed to be a patrol that is going to capture it. We exit the Dome in five minutes. But after ... but after ...' he hesitated.

`That's all right Sergeant,' I said, taking the paper. `You will form up in a line outside the dome and I will be here on the left flank. I will open fire on the APC and as soon as you hear me, you will too. The APC will fire back and will probably call down some artillery fire on us too, but the Tower lasers will take care of that. Now ...' I looked round. `At this point without receiving any further orders from me, you will return into the Dome lock, making like you are afraid of the YP. Including you, Sergeant.'

There was a storm of protests. `We're not afraid of a bloody APC ..!' `Why don't we take it out first, sir. Then they can capture you?' `What are the buggers in the Dome going to say when we come creeping back?' This last from the Corporal.

I held up my hand. It was good to hear they all had the right spirit. I pointed to the Corporal.

`Right. That's the problem. And it's why I chose you lot. You've got to make out it was too hot for you and that I got killed.'

Outrage! They waved their arms and two threw their hats on the floor. The sergeant looked impassive. I shouted for order.

`Right. Squad!' They snapped to attention. `Those are my orders, and the Sergeant will be keeping an eye on you. I will be out there and if a spy in Chrondisp thinks that this patrol is phoney and gets the info to the slant-eyes over there ...' I drew my hand across my throat.

`OK, I know it's tough, because I want you to **really** sound scared without overdoing it. Just remember - the truth will come out later and then you'll all probably get an Oscar to pin up next to your DSM. Dismiss.'

Reluctantly grinning they moved into the exit lock.

Chapter 40

At 4h the armoured doors were quietly opened and we filed out into the desert. It was pitch-black and icy cold with a slight wind. I pulled down a pair of IR goggles and looked around. Nothing. I aimed the IR communicator at the vague soaring shape of the Tower, visible only by the stars it masked, and switched on.

`Anything?' I whispered.

`The armoured personnel carrier is still there,' said a tinny voice in the earphone. `It's about a kilometer to the east of you, half dug-in and with at least four men. We think it's just an observation post.'

`Thank you. Now I want to confirm that you leave it alone, whatever happens. OK?'

`Roger. Leave it alone whatever happens.'

The men had now spread out over about fifty meters and had dug themselves small depressions in the loose sand.

I moved diagonally forward a bit and lay out flat. This was it, then. I thought back. Had I not done anything that I should have done or had I left anything undone which I should have done? With the complexity of this operation, it had been kept as secret as possible, but you could never be sure. I turned the cocking handle on my rifle with a soft click, checked the safety was off and came up to the aim. This was a risky move I was going to make, but I had thought a lot about it and couldn't think of one better. There were enormous odds at stake, someone had to take the risk and I really was the best qualified.

Last chance to turn back.

Before I could think anymore about it, I squeezed the trigger and fired off a short burst in the general direction of the APC and immediately the section behind me opened up. I pressed myself to the ground as the fusillade roared on over my head. A few seconds later came the slower deliberate hammer of answering fire from the heavy MG of the APC. One in five tracers I thought, as the coloured balls streaked over.

After a few minutes of this the sergeant had instructions to send half his section under cover so it was not unexpected when the fire from the Dome behind me slackened off. But now the APC must have contacted their fire-control and what sounded like 50mm was banging overhead to my right. The YP were probably wondering what the hell was going on. Was Chrondisp emboldened by their success of the other night and actually coming out of their rabbit holes and fighting back?!

Now and then there was a flash and a heavy explosion high above us as the Tower laser reached out to incinerate some heavier incoming shell. Keeping close to the ground I wormed out to left flank and closer and closer to the APC. They were still hammering away at the Dome.

I had now advanced until I was way over to the left and slightly behind the APC. There it was, a hundred meters away. Two riflemen were sheltering behind it and enthusiastically blazing away.

The first horizontal rays of sunlight were making long stippled shadows across the desert sand when I took a bead on the turret of the APC, putting the cross-wires of the crystal-clear optical sight just above the head of one of the riflemen. I squeezed off a single full-power shot. There was a loud bang but apart from a slight pressure on my shoulder, the gun hardly moved. The Mk. 6 was an excellent weapon, and I personally knew the Frenchman in 19th Century France who had given Westblock the impetus to develop it.

The 5.56mm, 3.5gm bullet with its five times the speed of sound velocity would have split the air over the infantryman's head like a fire-cracker and then ricocheting off the steel turret howled into the distance. Both the infantry men leapt back from their carrier as though it had suddenly become red-hot and with one accord leapt into the open door, pulling it shut behind them. The heavy MG muzzle swung up in the air crazily, still firing. It stopped firing and then swung wildly around. I fired a few more shots, aiming at the thin steel engine-cover, which would make loud clangs.

'Come on men!' I shouted, and rose from my fox-hole, firing from the hip. I ran a few paces and then turned round to look behind me. The desert was empty - my cowardly troops had all slunk back into Chrondisp! I dashed my rifle to the ground in impotent rage and then held up my hands. The MG muzzle swung round, passed me and then swung back, foreshortening to a small cruel hole.

Sweating I held my arms up, not moving an inch. After a tense pause there was a clunk. The back of the carrier opened and a soldier appeared with binoculars. He looked around carefully in all directions and then had a long look at me. I stared back expressionlessly. Finally he handed the binoculars to someone inside and waved me forward. Another infantryman leapt out and covered me with his rifle as I approached.

The soldier who had used the binoculars, I could now see that he was the equivalent of a sergeant, was a Japanese as near as I could guess. The others, one of whom was a corporal, were Korean. The sergeant said something and one of the privates ran back to bring in my rifle. In the meantime the sergeant motioned me to take off my tunic. I unzipped it and tossed it towards him. He made an impatient gesture and so I pulled off my shirt and vest and stood shivering slightly in the still cold desert air.

The sergeant said something else and they all giggled. I understood. I unlaced Jim's brogues, pulled off my socks, unzipped my good pair of cavalry-twill trousers and without being asked, slipped down my under-pants and stood up in the bright slanting sunlight as naked as the day I was born.

A few years ago this would have embarrassed and even humiliated me, but those days were long past. I remembered the first time I had played squash in Munich. The rest of the group had automatically headed for the sauna after playing and I followed, clad only in a small loose towel. The heavy door was pushed open from within and someone backed out. Rather long hair, even for a student, I thought disparagingly. It may well have been a student, but when my eyes slid down, the rear view was unmistakably that of a female student! The rest of the group pushed past uncaringly, bearing me with them, tightly clutching my towel around my middle. It was a mixed sauna and there were lots of very pretty girls in there, all unself-consciously chatting and not wearing a scrap of clothing! Gradually I relaxed

the tense grip on my towel and since then I have had no inhibitions taking my clothing off in female or male company.

The other soldiers came out of the carrier and giggled at me while I stood boredly looking into the distance. There was a beep from inside the carrier and the corporal went in, almost immediately came out again and said something to the sergeant. He motioned me to climb in and I heard the motor start. I made to climb in as I was but he threw over my underpants and tunic with the captain's insignia, but not before he had gone through all the pockets and transferred their contents to his own. I slipped the tunic over my shoulders. I guessed he wanted to show-off, bringing in an officer prisoner.

The sergeant took my rifle and after lovingly looking through the sights hid it behind a pull-down side panel. A Mk.6 rifle would be a valuable souvenir - although the final owner would not find it very easy to get its special caseless ammunition.

The rear door was left partially open, as with engine roaring we backed up the ramp and out of the hole where the carrier had been sitting hull-down. At this point no one seemed aware of the Finger of God that could at any moment point down from the top of the Tower and in ten milli-seconds drill a 50mm white-hot hole through their APC from top to bottom, fusing the sand underneath and impaling them like a specimen moth on a display board. They must have thought that the presence of a prisoner would protect them.

We drove off quickly, the corporal at the wheel, and after a quarter of an hour bumpy ride I saw we had driven into a shadow - one of the big artificial sand dunes the YP had erected around Chondisp - frozen into place with laser-fused sand. The rear door was banged open and the sergeant grabbed my arm and pulled me out. Holding my tunic in my hands I leapt nimbly over his outstretched leg - to have a Westblock officer sprawling face-down in the sand before all the others would have been his big moment. But I had done Judo too and could easily see myself being set up for a "Tai Otoshi". The assembled soldiers must have noticed his maladroit manoeuvre and just watched silently as he tried to regain "face" by pushing me roughly forward through them towards the entrance to a hemispherical building covered with loose sand.

At a desk was a squat tough-looking thick-necked Malay with a laser burn on his arm and wearing the insignia of a Lieutenant on his shoulder bars. I slipped on my tunic, zipped it up and stood to attention before him, as smartly as I could with no trousers and no shoes. He said something to an aid who went out and brought in the rest of my clothes which I rapidly donned and resumed my attention position, looking over his head.

A moment later and a small scholarly-looking Indian arrived who was given my papers. He opened his top pocket and brought out a spectacle-case. He took out his spectacles, unfolded them and after hooking them over his ears bent his head down over my papers and finally said something to the Malay who had watched all this with impatience. All armies are basically the same and I knew exactly what was going on in the officer's head. An officer prisoner of war had to be handed upwards as soon as possible, but the more information he could hand up at the same time, the greater favour he would find with his superiors. And not an illogical system either, as prisoners are most likely to incautiously reveal secret information immediately after capture, before they have got used to their new status and the rules that govern it.

The Indian looked up and with the usual slight Welsh-sounding lilt to his high voice asked: 'Who are you?' I looked at him, then down at the ID card in his hand and said in a slightly surprised voice:

`Captain Digby, King's Own Rifles.' A dialogue now followed between me and the Lieutenant, with the Indian acting as interpreter.

`You were in charge of a patrol trying to capture an armoured personnel carrier ...'

`And we would have captured it if ...' I clenched my hands.

`But why was a Captain in charge of such a minor operation?' Yes, it was a weak point. At the most a 2nd Lieutenant should have led it.

`Because no one else would fucking ...' I controlled myself with an effort and visibly remembered my duty.

`I am 9151903, Captain Digby of the King's Own Rifles,' I said and resumed my rigid stance in front of the officer.

`It is unfortunate your soldiers did not follow you,' said the Indian, smiling contemptuously.

I said nothing.

`I said it is a great pity your soldiers would not follow you,' he shouted in his high voice. I looked at him.

`What is your question?' I asked and then turned back to the Malay officer and repeated my number, rank and name.

Deciding he was going to get nothing more out of me, he waved me away and I returned to sit in the APC, the sergeant sitting opposite, the doors half open. It was about 7h now and the sun was beginning to heat up the exposed carrier.

There were a large number of small stocky Asiablock infantry outside and they all seemed to have something to do which involved passing by the carrier door and glancing in. If they loitered too long, the sergeant would angrily shout and wave them away.

Suddenly the carrier doors were banged back and outside stood the Malay Lieutenant with the Indian interpreter by his side. But before he spoke to me he had something for the sergeant. He gabbled something at him, making like he had a pistol in his hand. The sergeant raised his shoulders, obviously denying the existence of any pistol. The Lieutenant raised his voice and finally the sergeant reluctantly opened the side panel and handed over my rifle. The Lieutenant took it reverently in both hands, then swung it up to the aim. He then looked at the side to check the number of unfired shots (he obviously had seen one before) and snapped something at the sergeant again. The sergeant opened the panel again to show there were no spare magazines. The Lieutenant slung the rifle over his shoulder and gestured to the Indian.

`You are being sent to General Klostov,' he said, pronouncing the name in a respectful voice, and handing me back my papers.

Chapter 41

After a twenty minute trip in a small fast jet we landed at a simple air-strip and I was taken in a jeep, with two dune buggies as escort, to the Town Hall of Kazmir. I was shown into what must have been some minor functionary's office.

`You will be shown into see the General in half an hour,' I was told. `You can prepare yourself here.'

As I waited I rehearsed what I wanted to say:

"An Alien is influencing key people in each power group, influencing them to make them attack each other, and to cut communications between them so they will never discover the fact that they are being manipulated".

It was absolutely true, but how to convince a sceptical hard-nosed General? It sounded very thin.

As prescribed by the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war, I was marched into the general's presence by two armed officers of equal rank. I found myself standing at attention in front of a desk behind which sat a small shrewd-looking man of about fifty with a flat high-cheeked Slav face. He wore a simple olive green tunic with the red tabs and shoulder-boards of a General in the Federation Army.

Sitting at the side of his desk was a lithe, tough-looking Japanese Infantry Colonel with a shaven head. He was briefly introduced as Dien.

The officer on my right saluted and said in English:

'Captain Digby, Comrade General.'

Comrade General Klostov must have come from the defunct Russian Empire. He would have been a 25-year old

Subaltern in the Red Army when that Empire just fell apart one week in November, 26 years ago. He must have offered his services to Asiablock when it grew to power; they would have needed professional soldiers.

He stared at me through ice-blue eyes under heavy black eye-brows and I stared back. He pushed some papers to one side and leaned back.

'At ease,' he said and we all came to "Parade Rest".

I pulled out my ID folder, ready to give my talk, but he spoke first.

'Captain Digby,' he said musingly. 'We know a lot about you. You were captured in some trivial action outside the Chondisp Institute near Kazmir. Your record shows that it is highly improbable that this occurred by accident. It is equally improbable that you have become disillusioned with life amongst the Capitalists and that your conscience had forced you to defect. You therefore wished to be captured. We recently had a small set-back in Kazmir and you perhaps think that because of that our resources are so strained that you can negotiate good terms of surrender.' The officer on my left permitted himself an obsequious snicker. The General turned to Colonel Dien.

'Though why Chondisp didn't send an envoy under a conventional flag of truce is a mystery. Perhaps they thought the Chondisp defence on seeing this would be disheartened, more disheartened than they already are...' another snicker from my friend on the left.

'The solution to this fascinating mystery is now merely academic, however,' he continued, 'because we have found that the sensitive point in the Chondisp defence is the laser steering grids and we know how to disable them. Chondisp will be virtually defenceless to our next attack ...' he looked at a wall-clock, '... which goes in in 23 hours.'

Jesus! He was speaking nothing less than the truth, but how did he know? I tried to school my face to impassivity, but something must have shown.

'You don't believe me?' He picked up a folder of papers from his desk and handed them to me. 'Look at the detailed layout of your defence positions which has recently come into our hands.'

With a shaking hand I took the file and opened it.

'Take your time,' he said affably. 'Convince yourself that resistance is useless. We will find some way for you to communicate this conviction back to Chondisp so they will surrender without us having to mount an attack. It may not have been the original purpose of your intriguing visit, but you can still serve a useful purpose.'

Both officers were openly laughing now. Colonel Dien was merely watching me curiously.

The General was right! I only needed to look at the first page where a plan of the Tower had been annotated: "Laser steering grids were rendered totally inoperable by smoke fumes. Next attack must be preceded by massive smoke-shell bombardment directed at the base of the cooling tower." How the bloody hell did they know that? Chrondisp was closed off. As I sweatingly turned over the page, a sheet of paper slid from the folder and planed to the floor. I transferred the dossier to my left hand and automatically bent down to pick it up.

'He is understandably nervous. Help him,' said the General tolerantly.

But I already had the paper in my hand, and as I straightened up I saw it!

On the wall behind me, to the left of the door, it had been hidden from my view, as I had been marched straight to the General's desk. This time it had a vaguely Oriental flavour but it was nevertheless the same Minotaur's head motif with the circular labyrinth!

This was the fourth probe, the one whose call signals we had detected at Chrondisp! This was a catastrophe - there was no point in trying to convince this General; he must have been brain-washed by the probe and would fight against all my arguments. I found I still had my ID in my hand: I put it back in my pocket. What to do? The General was talking to the Colonel in Russian. He turned to me.

'You must excuse me now, I have a lot to do. I am handing you over temporarily to Colonel Dien. Perhaps we can continue this conversation later.' The Colonel rose, the two escorting officers crashed to attention and I was marched out, followed by the Colonel.

As I entered the door to the room that was obviously to be my prison, I turned back to look at the Colonel. I pointed to his chest.

'You were at Dil Kush,' I said. He looked at me, his slant eyes opening with surprise. 'I was there too. We must talk about it sometime.' I stared at him, waiting, trying to will him to interpret "sometime" as "right now".

He looked at me expressionlessly a moment then said something to the two escorting officers. They looked doubtful, but the Colonel slapped his hand on his pistol holster so they saluted and took up positions in the corridor.

He entered the room, closed the door, sat at the desk, unholstered his pistol, cocked it, and placed it within easy reach on the desk-top. Then he looked at me.

'My name is Dien. I do not speak English very well, but I understand it.' He had a sibilant accent. 'Talk.'

It was the story I had planned to tell General Klostov. I stood in front of him.

'Colonel Dien', I said, 'I am a soldier and I fight to defend my country. Since the Pakistan Affair where I fought in our SAS, our two worlds have been at peace, we had mutually decided to live and let live. I am here to tell you that some Third Power is trying to destroy us both by making us fight against each other.'

He looked sharply up at me and made an impatient noise.

'As you know,' I continued unmoved, 'it started with a wave of assassinations which we thought were engineered by Asiablock. Then your people were also assassinated and you thought it was us acting in revenge.' He waved his hand irritably.

'This has escalated, each side attacking the other in "self-defence", or as a "pre-emptive strike".' I paused.

'Go on,' he said.

'This is not the first time this has happened in our history, but each time it has happened before, there was one element, one fact which enabled us to save

ourselves, to step back from the brink of a nuclear holocaust.' (God, calm down, mustn't get too eloquent.)

`And that fact?'

`Communications,' I said concisely. `We have always known something about the real intentions and motives of the other side, either because they made no secret of them or if it was a secret, we could usually find out anything important by spies. I quote one example. After World War II America and Britain had the fission bomb. Russia found out how to build one through the spy Klaus Fuchs. Result - stability.' He fidgeted restlessly.

`Global communications have broken down and all contacts, legal or illegal are missing.'

`That at least is false,' said Colonel Dien. `We have very good and accurate Intelligence on Westblock weapons and intentions. We know for example that Chrontisp are using their reactor to produce a fission bomb.' He smiled thinly at what he interpreted as my shock of guilt.

I was shocked alright and took a step forward. His hand reached out and closed over the pistol.

`You see?' he said.

Christ, it was worse than I had imagined! I began to realise the subtlety of the Alien's weapon of preventing communications between the two power groups. Each group was now free to exercise its wildest fantasy, its most neurotic paranoia. Rumours of sudden attacks, defeats and atrocities could run like wild-fire through each side. Commanders would lose control of their armies which would then split up into small groups exterminating the small groups of the opposing armies. Everything I said would be taken as a clever Westblock trick.

`Colonel,' I said. How could I put it? `OK, I am only a Captain in the Reserve and so not very high in the Chrontisp hierarchy, but I can assure you that if we **are** constructing an atomic bomb, I would know. All Chrontisp would know about it. It would be a great boost to our morale.'

`You are not constructing a bomb?' he said unbelievably.

`We certainly are not,' I said. `In fact our biggest worry is that you are about to use yours against Chrontisp - and as you know ...'

`Our nuclear bomb! We have enough trouble in the supply of conventional..' He pulled himself up short.

We were wandering away from the subject.

`And so I come back to the very first thing I told you, which is the reason for my visit. A Third Power is trying to destroy us by cutting communications between us and that is just another example of how we are being set against each other. Let us trace this rumour to its source. How do you know that Chrontisp is manufacturing a fission bomb?'

`Aha, so you finally agree with me?' I waved a hand in exasperation, maybe he wasn't as clever as I had thought.

`To the best of my knowledge and on my honour as an Officer, Chrontisp is not manufacturing an atomic bomb. Please answer my question. "Who said we were?"'

He looked sceptically at me, absently rubbing his thumb over the butt of the pistol.

`I am Infantry,' he said, finally. `The General himself runs Intelligence.' Yes, that figured, he was getting it all from his probe. I continued:

`We are talking about a matter of fact here. I say we have no bomb: you say we have. I am sure I could get permission to take you or your representative into the Chrontisp complex and convince you or him that there is no bomb. That is easily

done. But what is much more important is to find who convinced General Klostov that Chrodisp are developing a bomb. It should be easy to discover,' (like hell it would) 'the General hardly crept around Chrodisp himself, he must have a network of spies. They must contact him somehow. His staff must know: it would be impossible to keep them secret.'

He looked at me consideringly.

'Why did you not make this offer to the General?'

'I will answer that question in a moment,' I said. 'But tell me first - does the General really have a spy network?'

Would he really check up on his superior officer? I was banking here on the possibility, indeed the probability that the Intelligence had quite often been faulty and also on the well-known dislike between Russians and Japanese.

At all events, he had obviously never thought about it and sat looking into the distance. Suddenly making up his mind he picked up the phone and a few minutes later one of the escorts appeared and took the Colonel's place at the desk. As the Colonel was about to leave I said to him.

'Let me say one thing more. You will not be able to discover this network.'

I was left alone and was prey to all sorts of depressing thoughts. Had the Colonel been convinced of my honesty or was he merely continuing the execution of the attack planned by the General? Nor did I feel any better when a camp-bed was brought into my room and it was clear that nothing more was going to happen that day. But I had not reckoned on the persistence of the Colonel.

About ten o'clock the next day the Colonel entered my room again and dismissing my escort, sat at the desk. His pistol remained in its holster and the atmosphere somehow had changed. The Colonel had an irritated and exasperated air about him.

'You are right,' he said grudgingly. 'I have not been able to discover the slightest trace of an Intelligence gathering network. You are hiding something. You will now tell me why you were so sure I would find nothing.'

Excellent! He would now be prepared at least to listen to me.

Chapter 42

'Colonel,' I said, 'what I am about to tell you is something so amazing, so incredible, that you will think I am crazy.'

I then told him the whole story, starting with the arrival of an Alien in the solar system. How it had first helped our budding civilisation, then stopped helping us, then was actively trying to destroy us. I talked of the probes and how they were able to hypnotise people, to hypnotise people to destroy our communication links. And then, when we were isolated from each other, the probes were feeding intelligence information from one side to the other - not to make one side win, but to maximise losses to both sides.

He opened his mouth as though to say something, then closed it. He motioned me to continue.

'Take the case of your last attack on Chrodisp,' I said. 'You somehow found how to by-pass our tunnel-digging detectors and dug two tunnels - one should have gone into the heart of Chrodisp; the other should have put the Tower out of commission. And what happened?' His face darkened.

'You are going to tell me?'

'The tunnel into the heart of Chrodisp was off by five meters. It hit a swimming bath and everyone was drowned. The attack on the Tower was very well planned

but somehow Chrodisp must have got wind of it and destroyed it at the last moment with an attack on your flank, which you unaccountably left open.' He looked at me bitterly.

Actually, the probe in the General's office may well have given him deliberately false information as to the location of the swimming pool to make sure it would fail. But the attack on the Tower failed due to a stroke of luck on our part - if I hadn't found those grenade launchers, Asiablock probably would have succeeded. But I wasn't going to tell him that.

'And so even with excellent Intelligence you still failed and must have taken heavy losses. Don't you think there was something strange about that? Maybe you can think of other examples too?' He looked at me reflectively.

'Of course I have heard about the possibility of Aliens contacting us - who hasn't? But what you say is much more definite. If you are right we must do something. Have you no proof apart from these arguments? Why did you not tell all this to the General?' This was the clincher.

'The answer to your two questions lies here.' I pulled out my ID folder and handed it to him.

'Well?'

'Please open it and look in the edge where the plastic has been slit. He pulled out two 50 x 100mm holos and held them up to the light. Startled, he turned to me.

'Those are pictures of two of the three Alien probes we found at Chrodisp,' I said. Staring at them he half stood up.

'Yes,' I said. 'Your General has one very like them on the wall of his office. I saw it when I dropped those papers and suddenly realised it was useless to bring my peace mission to him. Unconsciously he now works for the Alien.'

He said something quietly in his own language.

'I think you should examine this probe. But please let me speak to a technician before you open it, as it may be booby-trapped.'

He picked up the phone and spoke a few short sentences. He replaced the phone and looked into the distance.

'If what you say is true ...' he breathed.

A knock on the door and a small Japanese sergeant arrived. In his arms was the General's picture! He spoke to the Colonel.

'The General is out of his office for a meeting,' said the Colonel to me. He looked at his watch. 'We have an hour.'

The sergeant laid the picture on the desk face down and unscrewed the back, immediately revealing the probe and something else! I reached forward and pulled out a small brown plastic cylinder attached to the probe by two fine wires. It came away easily leaving the two wires sticking up in the air and joined by a small black blob. The Colonel felt the cylinder and dug in a finger-nail.

'Tschiko,' he said. The Asiablock version of Semtex.

I showed them the gigahertz antenna, the power unit, the video camera. We had the picture on its edge and I was showing them the camera lens when suddenly the probe switched itself on! We heard those strange constantly rising tones followed by some words in Russian and the lights started to circulate. I hastily put my hand on top of the antenna to screen it. The lights circulated for a moment then stopped.

I looked at the two fascinated Asiatic faces, brown slant-eyes glued to the probe.

'What did it say?' I asked. The Colonel opened his mouth to speak when there was a sharp "crack" and a whisp of white smoke rose from behind the picture. The sergeant turned it round and fingered the two wires, now just standing

up, unjoined. Jesus! I had removed the explosive that had surrounded the detonator in the nick of time!

The sergeant covered the antenna slots with tinfoil from a cigarette packet and we all sat back. Looking round inside the probe I found it was not exactly laid out like the unit at Chondisp but it did have a small switch. I activated it to show them how the hypnotising routine worked, then switched it off hurriedly. The Colonel looked directly at me.

'And this is where he gets his Intelligence on Chondisp?'

'Of course.'

'I believe you,' he said. 'Not only from this but because it confirms and explains other things I have seen here and heard from my brother in Peking.' Obviously a man accustomed to making decisions quickly.

'This would have been too big for the General; it is certainly far too big for me. I can send a tape with this,' he indicated the picture, 'to my brother, but that will not stop the wars that are going on all over the world. Do you have a suggestion?'

My heart lifted - this was the first friendly contact between Westblock and Asiablock! But I mustn't push it too hard.

'Yes,' I said slowly, 'there is something. When I left Chondisp to come here, the scientists thought they had found that the Alien is not far from here - in Greece somewhere. If they have in the meantime found out exactly where it is, we could attack and destroy it.'

'We?'

'You, your sergeant here and a team from Chondisp.'

He paced tigerishly around the room, thinking out the implications. It was unthinkable that Westblock alone should see the Alien and then destroy it. He made up his mind.

'Yes. I will come with you.' He turned aside and spoke a few words slowly and emphatically to the sergeant, pointing at the picture. The sergeant saluted and left, leaving the picture on the table.

He then sat at the desk, looked into the distance for a moment, took a deep breath and then lifted up the phone.

He dialled number after number, his voice different with each call. Friendly and comradely, cold and menacing, then casual and matter-of-fact. He finally replaced the phone.

'After this I will not be able to return here,' he said, reaching out touching the picture as though its reality comforted him.

The sergeant returned with two large knapsacks and proceeded to fit the picture into one. He handed a tape recorder to the Colonel who spoke into it for about ten minutes and then dropped the tape into the knapsack too. He then looked up at me.

'A fast courier jet is leaving in a quarter of an hour. All three of us will be on it. We are escorting you to Peking, but on the way you will seize my pistol and force the pilot to land near Chondisp. You will escape, taking me with you as hostage. The plane will continue on to Peking where my sergeant will deliver this,' he slapped the knapsack, 'to my younger brother who is in the Administration.'

*

Neat. The plan worked well and within an hour I found myself holding a pistol on the pilot of an Asiablock DF12 courier jet circling Chondisp and at the same time talking quickly and urgently to Chondisp on VHF, trying to convince them not to fire on us. Quickly, because I didn't want the YP besieging Chondisp to get in on the act.

A cautious acquiescence and the plane did a quick touch-down on the flat hard desert sand by one of the domes. Holding the pistol up to the Colonel's head, I rushed him across to the dome lock. Behind I heard the noise of the jets rise to a screech as the courier did an emergency take-off.

Chapter 43

Once the guard had let us into the lock tunnel, I handed the pistol back to the Colonel. We waited, silent except for the irritating whine of servos as the twin MGs in their roof-turret tracked our every movement. Finally the inner port opened to reveal Jim and Dr Duluth with his eye-bugging MP escort looking over his shoulder. It wasn't every day that they saw an Asiablock Infantry Colonel in full uniform, with pistol, entering Chondisp. And it wasn't every day that I saw Jim wearing a suit.

A track suit was handed over and the Colonel understandingly pulled it over his uniform. I looked at Colonel Dien's unmistakable Japanese face - there was no disguising that. There were several Asiatics at Chondisp but they had the softer features of those born in China or Thailand. The best I could do was to apologetically ask him to remove the Asiablock insignia from his beret and to pull it down over his shaved head. He complied with bad grace.

He was slightly mollified to be introduced to Jim as Colonel Prince of the US Marines (bumped up three grades for effect) and Director Dr Duluth. This latter, with his cold politeness, needed no grade boosting. He always gives the impression that he is near if not at the top of any hierarchy that may be around. No one asked for the Colonel's pistol but I noted that Dr Duluth's MP escort carried their rifles unslung.

I expected we would be taken to the screened room, but instead we went to Dr Duluth's elegant office in Mahogany Row, with its spectacular view over the desert. It was as dangerous as hell and no wonder the other offices were unoccupied. I suppose it was as good a way as any of ensuring privacy and it was probably a gesture that would impress the Colonel. I saw his eyes darting around the horizon - I hoped he would warn us in time if he saw any of his friends.

We sat in the "conversation area" in one corner of the vast office, the Colonel distastefully sitting up straight on his soft chair. He had taken his beret off and with his shaved head and slightly contemptuous look, could be a sinuous tiger, relaxing for the moment.

He may have been expecting some flowery introductory speech - "our two peoples, common front, united against a threat to all humanity" - but I knew the good Doctor better. Speaking slowly so that the Colonel would follow, he asked me how much the Colonel knew. I told him briefly and he nodded. He turned to the Colonel.

'We think we have located the Alien. Jim?' The windows darkened and I felt the Colonel by my side stiffening and feeling under the track suit for his pistol. But immediately in the air in front of us floated a map of the Eastern Mediterranean. We zoomed in on Greece and then zoomed in further. Highlights appeared around the port of Itea and the small inland town of Amfissa. I gasped.

'Of course!' I said.

'Yes,' said Jim's voice. 'It's somewhere around where the Oracle at Delphi stood.'

The windows lightened, the map disappeared and the Colonel looked round, not understanding my excitement. Three voices now tried to explain to him that

that was where the first Alien probe had been discovered. Finally he understood but it obviously had no special significance for him and we were not about to confuse the issue with the long story of me being an Observer and how I had actually discovered the first probe. Maybe I would tell him later.

'Now we know where it is, we must at least go and stop it transmitting to its probes,' said Dr Duluth, and turning to the Colonel added, 'and we think you should be with us.'

I thought ahead. Apart from the fact that the Colonel was going to have to tell Asiablock later all that he had seen, he would be very useful when we crossed Asiablock territory on our way to Greece - however we were going. I opened my mouth to ask but Jim was speaking.

'We intend to take a small personal jet. I am told that by stripping out unnecessary furniture we can fit in enough ECM, er, electronic countermeasure equipment, to enable us to escape detection if we fly low and fast.'

Jim and the Colonel were bent over a map, discussing the best route to fly but I was thinking about where the Alien would actually be, as I knew the Oracle itself was now just a collection of ruins. The Alien needed people around it. People to do maintenance, people to defend it against the curious, people who it could control through its ability to hypnotise them. Off the top of my head I could only think of three possibilities: - a secret military establishment, a rich man's private estate or best, some religious organisation, like a church. It came as no surprise when in answer to the Colonel's question Jim answered:

'We think the Alien is in the Greek Monophysite Monastery on Mount Parnassus in Phocis.' That figured. A monastery, with monks, rituals, plain-songs, prayers. Some obscure puritanical Order with a long history going back for thousands of years. Saint Cyril the Silent, Saint Theos the Good. An impoverished, hair-shirt, contemplative Order that even the most acquisitive robbers would avoid out of sheer boredom.

Before we left to our various tasks Dr Duluth stood and addressed a last word to us.

'We think we are the only people in the world who know the location of the Alien and as we cannot inform anyone we must act alone. We must furthermore act quickly because someone out there is about to press the button which will start nuclear war. I should point out that there is no one at Chrondisp, or probably anywhere, who can authorise what we are about to do. The only conceivable authority is the Security Council of the United Nations and they are out of contact with us and probably themselves.'

'I agree,' said the Colonel. 'We must act fast and we must act alone.'

'Now as to who will go,' said Dr Duluth. 'Myself, Colonel Prince, Captain Digby, you Colonel, Paul our communications expert and Glen our pilot. There is room for one extra man. Captain Digby, I suggest you take Sergeant Dawlish. When you find him take him down to the armoury with the Colonel and select what weapons you will need. The total weight including yourselves must not exceed,..' He looked at a piece of paper, '...625kg. We will then meet at the bottom of Lift K in one hour. Give me your card.' He put it in a slot in his desk.

While he was bent over the keyboard, programming it, I had an idea.

'I think we should video all this,' I said. 'And I think the Colonel should do it.' Dr Duluth paused a moment over his keyboard and looked up at me thoughtfully. He reached down, opened a drawer and handed me a camera. Reaching down again he fetched out and handed me an unopened box of tapes.

'Do you know how to work this?' I said, passing over everything to the Colonel.

`Yes, of course.' Of course, it had been made in Japan.

`Are you going to let me walk around your Institute with this?' he asked incredulously.

`If we don't stop the Alien, no one's going to see your tape anyway,' said Jim, with his finger firmly on reality as usual. `Let me take a few meters of you here with us to start with,' he offered, and the camera was handed over to him for a moment to be panned around then handed back.

We went down to the armoury and met Sgt. Dawlish his eyes bulging at the sight of Colonel Dien, who because of the warmth had unbuttoned his track suit enough to show part of his uniform. But the sergeant saluted correctly on being introduced.

We then looked around, but there wasn't much left there after the depredations of my raiding party. We finally left with two HK grenade-launchers, a dozen tear-gas grenades and seven gas-masks. Also seven rifles and a hundred rounds for each. It seemed little enough to storm a monastery that must have been inviolate for two thousand years or so.

There was some time to go before we embarked – it was still light, so I took the Colonel and his camera (and two unbelieving MPs) around our reactor. It all seemed very technical to me and as far as I knew we could have been looking at a production line for nuclear devices, but the Colonel, who must have been more knowledgeable, was less impressed and only took a few shots.

*

We met the rest of the party at the bottom of the lift as arranged, at 23:30. Paul, the communications man and Jim had loaded rucksacks on their backs and there were two empty rucksacks thoughtfully provided for our stuff. Two workmen were still inside the plane and there were several luxury seats, a refrigerator and a mahogany bar, slightly splintered, on the ground outside. The pilot was in the cockpit.

I looked at the plane. It was the personal property of the Over-director of Chrondisp, now in Washington. I hoped he had it insured.

The workmen exited and we all climbed in and sprawled out on the luxuriously carpeted floor. Tied to the sawn-off mountings of the seats were several "black-boxes" whose leads led into the cockpit. These must be the ECM boxes that were to get us through enemy air-space.

The lift doors then hissed closed and we rose slowly towards the surface where we found ourselves in a small hangar. Apart from the pilot we all climbed out and pushed the aircraft towards the closed doors and climbed back in. The lights in the hangar went out and the hangar doors opened onto the black desert. The engines started and with a shrill scream we were off, thrust back and hanging onto what was left of the seat supports.

Dr Duluth was in the co-pilot's seat and as soon as we were airborne, Jim went into the cockpit too. We flew low and fast in the darkness, with only an occasional faint light flashing by in the distance. After about half an hour I could see we were flying over water and we stayed over water for the rest of the trip, the wings tipping up to right and left as we changed course to avoid radars. After an hour there was some shouting from up front and we banked steeply. Otherwise it was an uneventful if bumpy trip.

Finally after a trip of about two hours the note of the jets slid down the scale and by pressing my face against the window I could just make out scrubby bushes flitting past in the faint starlight. Another steep bank as we circled and then a thump and increase in noise as the undercarriage was extended. The jet whistle slid

further down the scale and with a sudden series of bumps we were down. A roar of the retro-thrust, a short roll and we squealed to a stop. The door whined open and collecting our baggage we climbed out onto a hard black surface. It was pitch black and freezing cold.

When my eyes got accustomed to the gloom I found we had landed on a small mountain road with a vertical cliff wall on one side and a precipice on the other. Jesus! we had only just made it - a meter on either side and ...! Jim and the sergeant ran to the side of the road and slid out a section of steel tubing that was mounted in concrete pillars and acted as a crash barrier. The pilot Glen appeared in the doorway, then jumped down amongst us. We all grabbed different parts of the aircraft and manoeuvred it until it was facing across the road, opposite the gap in the crash-barrier. Glen said something to himself and slapped the fuselage affectionately. We pushed. The wheels disappeared over the edge, the tail cocked up and with a crunching crash the plane tipped over the edge of the precipice and the road was suddenly empty. As I helped the sergeant to insert the steel tubing back in the posts I heard a crash far below. I looked over but there was nothing to see. I turned round to find Jim and the Colonel studying a map with the aid of a flashlight.

Chapter 44

Here we were, seven men, two thousand meters above sea level, on a mountain road winding around Mount Parnassus at, I looked at my watch, 1:04am. Well, that would be 3:04am here, of course. It was a dark moonless night but there was a faint glow over to the east - moonrise was in half an hour, moonrise which would enable the Alien to resume contact with its deadly probes over half the Earth's surface!

Our attack party was in the charge of Jim, Jim in consultation with Colonel Dien. Glen the pilot, myself, Sgt. Dawlish and Paul just stood around looking down at the lights twinkling in the valley far below. Dr Duluth was standing slightly apart saying nothing but obviously observing the unfolding of a plan.

The Colonel was scanning the slopes above us with binoculars and Jim with a compass was taking bearings on the distant groups of lights in the valley below. It was cold and quiet except for the mutter of Jim and the Colonel.

My eyes were getting accustomed to the faint starlight now and looking back I could see the serpentine macadamised road, on which we had landed, turned sharply left and disappeared downward. Before us it stretched out upwards and disappeared to the left after two hundred meters.

"OK, let's go," said Jim finally and we all picked up our rucksacks and followed him up the road. After half an hour of climbing a ten degree slope I heard the laboured whine of a truck in low gear far below us. Were we going to hijack it? I unbuttoned my rucksack, pulled out my rifle and slung it. Apparently not, as Jim waved us all into the ditch at the side of the road. The truck ground past - a closed commercial van with its side just visible in the reflection from its headlights. Some Greek lettering and the picture of a laughing cow.

As soon as it had turned the corner in front of us, we emerged from the ditch and continued our climb. After another half hour I was quite warm. We stopped again and I saw Jim shining a flashlight on his map and pointing upward to a small stony track which led off upwards at an angle. We took it and stumbled on, now at a much steeper gradient, Glen panting behind me and swearing softly.

A half-moon had risen now, about one diameter above the horizon and I heard the word passed back for Paul. We closed up and Paul opened his rucksack. He reached in and after a click and a faint high-pitched hum I saw a dim green glow shining upwards on his face.

'Can you detect any transmissions?' whispered Jim.

'Holy mother of God!' he replied in an awed whisper. 'Hundreds, I've never seen so many!'

'Can you see where they're coming from?' Paul moved his rucksack around.

'"Upwards" is all I can say,' he muttered.

I looked at the moon sailing so serenely over the distant mountain peaks, and thought of the signals streaming up to it, carrying their deadly messages to probes over the other side of the world. Of the video cameras looking down and waiting for the cascades of bright flashes which would mean the end of life on our Planet. And the laser on the far side preparing to report "Sterilisation program completed" to the rest of the Alien brain. What would Beethoven have thought when he wrote his haunting "Moonlight sonata" if he had known that something up there was watching him? Had perhaps even been inserted into him?

I looked at my watch - another hour to sunrise. Silently we continued our climb, the only sound our panting and the scuffing of boots. The white volcanic rocks of the mountain were gleaming in the moonlight and above us the stars were crystal clear. I could see the North Star, low down on our left. That must mean that we were scaling the north face of Mount Parnassus. The opposite face to the one I had seen when I was in Private Spardes 2500 years ago. Up and up. My ears popped once and I was running with sweat. How much more? I knew the mountain was 2500m high, we had landed at 2000m or so and had been climbing for an hour. My experience of mountain walking in the Bavarian Alps told me three hundred meters per hour was a normal ascent - so say another half hour to reach the summit.

'Hurry it up fellas!' came back Jim's urgent whisper. 'We gotta be in position before sun-up.' We stopped once again after a quarter of an hour and Jim's flashlight glowed on his map. The track had divided and there seemed to be an argument going on.

'No,' said Dr Duluth's voice definitely. 'I've been thinking. I want you, the Colonel and Glen to approach from the south. Digby, Paul, Dawlish and myself will approach from the north.' There was some discontented muttering but I merely handed over one grenade launcher, six grenades and three gas masks to the Colonel. Before we split up Dr Duluth said:

'Remember we move in when the sun touches the highest point. And don't use the radio until you absolutely must.'

We parted and just the four of us continued climbing, the path increasingly steep and now between dry-stone walls. Like the Alps, Mount Parnassus was geologically young unweathered limestone with steep slopes and razor sharp edges.

There was a very faint glow in the sky now and the moonlight was fading. We were reaching the summit and to my relief the track was less steep. At the same time we could see that the rough scrub on our left had given way to cultivated fields - corn, olive bushes and vineyards. We emerged from a row of olive bushes and crouched down behind the stone wall. A cock crowed in the distance.

The Monophysite Monastery of Phocis was stretched out before us, a faint grey mass covering the summit and about half a kilometer away. There was no sound except the sighing of the breeze, coming from the direction of the monastery and very welcome after our stiff climb. We stopped and unpacked our weapons. I

handed out the small gas masks, put the tear-gas grenades in my outer pockets and slung the launcher around my neck.

Dr Duluth had a pair of binoculars and was examining the facade. He handed them to me and I was pleased to find they were combined IR viewer and light-magnifier. The main monastery building was about fifty meters high, two hundred meters long and with a number of rectangular windows facing us. There was a long balcony about two meters above the ground running round the building, beneath the windows. Appearing above the roof and to the right was a large dome, and to the left was a small rectangular tower surmounted with an elaborate cross. This was the north face. The main entrance, where the road entered, must be on the other side. I switched to IR but there were no warm spots; it seemed everyone was still asleep.

I lowered the binoculars and looked around the small group. Dr Duluth's handing me the binoculars had been him symbolically handing over the command of the group. It was now for me to lead them in the assault on the monastery.

Paul, the North Country Englishman and radio expert, was wearing large boots with socks up to his knees and a flat cap. This must be the kit required for the Yorkshire dales. Dr Duluth wore an elegant yet workmanlike track-suit and compact soft leather walking shoes, no doubt by Gucci. Sergeant Dawlish, like me, was wearing the standard camouflage battle-smock.

It was getting quite bright now and sun-up could not be long delayed so if we were going to synchronise our attack with the other party, we had better move up into position. As close as possible but still concealed. I decided we would hit the corner of the monastery. There was a long hedged path which would hide us until the final assault. It was the only way as the ground in front of the monastery was completely cleared. No trees, no flowers, nothing.

I paused and looked a moment at it doubtfully. It was prime agricultural land, why wasn't it cultivated? Acting on an impulse, I told them to stay where they were and I doubled back down the path, looking for a less obvious approach to the monastery.

By jumping up I could just see over the dry-stone wall that lined the path. The vegetation, mostly of intertwined trees and small bushes, was slightly less thick at one point which I noted, then found footholds and climbed over. I dropped down on the other side and forced my way through the undergrowth and overhanging trees. It was thick but passable. I looked at my watch, I could take another ten minutes, so I pushed on until I came to the edge of the wood and could see the corner of the monastery, where the two balconies met, about thirty meters away. From here to the corner the terrain gave us a reasonably clear run. I started back.

I was half way back when I heard distant voices laughing and singing. Female voices! Had we got mixed up with a bloody picnic party? But a picnic party at 5am!? I crashed through the rest of the wood, scrambled over the wall and dropped down heavily on the other side.

Pausing only to untangle my equipment, I started off up the path to the rest of my party. As I approached the voices became louder, with deep male voices singing too. Rounding the bend I saw an amazing scene!

In dawn's early light my small party were standing back to back, surrounded by six barefooted young girls holding a flower-entwined rope and dancing around them! They were very pretty, with flowers also in their hair and wearing only thin white diaphanous robes. To one side three older men, wearing long white priest-type robes, were smiling and clapping their hands to the rhythm of the dance. My

group were nervously fingering their weapons and watching the girls. Paul was sheepishly smiling. A particularly pretty girl, whose robe had fallen to her waist, left the circle and swayed towards Paul, holding her hands out and smilingly inviting him to dance, but he was staring at her breasts and nervously clutching his rifle.

One of the older men, a pleasant looking grey-beard with a friendly smiling face saw me approaching and walked towards me, his arms outstretched welcomingly. Anyone who has served in a law-enforcement agency anywhere in the world against a hostile civilian population has seen this scenario. With me it was a hated tour of duty in Northern Ireland. I waited until he was close enough and then, with only a reflex pause to make sure no media camera was watching, stabbed him in the solar plexus with the rifle butt. His breath whooshed out of him and he thumped down to the ground and lay there gasping. Stepping over him I cocked my rifle, pushed up the silencer and with my thumb selected low-power.

The circle had closed now around my party, the pretty girl was gigglingly helping Paul to pull his sling over his head, the sergeant was swinging his rifle butt at the girls who were laughingly avoiding him and Dr Duluth was holding his rifle up undecided.

I ran up to them.

`What the fuck are you lot playing at?!' I raved.

The two other priests appeared from behind the group and came quickly towards me, arms open and smiling. Holding my rifle by the pistol grip I held my other hand out in the "halt" sign. They were big men, five meters away and showed no signs of stopping when I triggered the rifle. There was a cough and earth and stones jumped out of the ground in front of them. Still they advanced, smiling, smiling. I took the one on the left and shot him. The smile disappeared from his face and he fell to the ground clutching his leg. Without the slightest change in expression the other continued towards me, smiling, smiling. I ducked under his outstretched arms and gave him the butt in the solar plexus too. He sank to his knees gasping.

The dancers froze, looking with horror at the three priests sprawled out groaning on the ground before them. The girl who had almost had Paul's rifle let it go and endeavoured to pull her dress up to cover her breasts. Dr Duluth and the sergeant grabbed Paul and pushed him out of the circle of young girls who dropped the rope and ran together holding on to each other and chattering shrilly. Two of them were sobbing. I heard footsteps behind me and spun round. It was the other priest, his face had a bluish tinge, and he was clutching his chest. I raised my rifle but he lurched past me to join the group of girls. I pointed down the path but as they only slowly and wearily started, I fired another two silenced rounds into the ground nearby. They broke into a stumbling and hopping run, only now apparently aware of the rough surface. Watching them lurching down the path I turned to see Paul who was looking unbelievably at the two priests lying on the ground.

Chapter 45

Paul regarded me with loathing in his eyes.

`It's much worse when they send in children,' I said. `We're going over the wall lower down,' I added and turned abruptly.

We jogged down the path, the way we had come, and stopped by the wall at the place I had noted. We had to move quickly now. That diversion meant that we

had been detected. This was going to be a straight-in frontal assault similar to the hostage-rescue drills I had done when serving in the SAS Regiment. In the rapidly increasing light I used a pebble to scratch our plan on a large flat stone.

'We're going to hit this corner,' I said. 'When I say "go" the sergeant and I will run straight for the corner and he will make a "step" for me to get over the balcony. I will then pull him up. You Paul will point your rifle parallel with this, the east facing facade, and if you see anyone, fire single shots at the stonework near him.' I reached over and checked his rifle as on "single shot" and "full power". 'You Duluth, will do the same for the front facade.'

I turned and we climbed over the stone wall and plunged into the wood behind it. My party struggled through the dense wood, sounding like a herd of buffaloes and no doubt wondering why we hadn't taken the path by the hedge, I wondered too - but it was not unusual for defences to be laid out to force the enemy to approach in a known direction.

Finally the last trees were thrust aside and the side of the monastery appeared about thirty meters before us.

'One last thing,' said the quiet cold voice of Dr Duluth behind us. 'An Alien is inside that building. An Alien that is this very minute causing the death of thousands, maybe millions of human beings all over the world. As you have seen, it will defend itself with human beings who look like unarmed civilians. You must kill them if they stand in your way.'

He was right. I pushed the silencer on my rifle back into its housing and selected high-power.

I looked up at the monastery - the highest point was undoubtedly the cross on the top of the small rectangular tower. It was still untouched by the sun so we waited crouching at the edge of the wood, Sergeant Dawlish audibly revising his opinions of what went on in monasteries. It was quite light now and birds had started to sing in the wood behind us. A lone kestrel appeared above the monastery and beating its wings soared into the sunlight. We would not have to wait for more than a few seconds. Any minute now! We waited and waited, our eyes focussed on the cross on the tower.

And then suddenly a bright golden spot appeared at the very tip of the cross. I put my hand on Sgt. Dawlish's shoulder and he stood up. I opened my mouth to say "Go", but instead I said "Hold!" as six dark-clad figures had appeared on the balcony before us, three on the east and three on the north facade! I broke open the grenade launcher, dropped in a grenade, cocked and fired. Damn! Too low. The grenade hit the balcony and bounced back emitting clouds of white smoke in front of us. The breeze began to blow it back on us.

'Masks on!' I shouted, tugging my mask up over my face and reloading. These grenades must have a different trajectory than the others. I fired again and this time it landed fairly on the north balcony. Without waiting to notice its effect I fired another along the east balcony. Good. Now both balconies were wreathed in white smoke. I was about to put my hand on Sergeant Dawlish again to start the attack when I saw the dark-clad figures appear through the smoke, apparently untouched by the tear-gas! Now the light was brighter and I could see they also were wearing masks, grotesque masks like witch doctors! Whatever they were supposed to do, they were also giving protection against our gas. Well, we had tried the nice way. I released the launcher so it hung loosely around my neck and cocked my rifle. I heard the sergeant doing likewise.

But the dark-clad figures had ducked behind the balcony only to reappear a few seconds later with large football-sized objects in their hands. Arms back and the

objects arched towards us. With one accord we fell on our faces to avoid the blast but the objects dropped in the field in front of us with slight plops and seemed to have no effect - no smoke and no fumes. We rose cautiously and finally I tapped the sergeant. We dashed forward and as I passed the mysterious objects I just fleetingly noticed them lying broken on the ground, for all the world like six hollow melons.

I heard shots behind me as Paul and Dr Duluth gave us covering fire. Then the sergeant and I slung our rifles, he put his back to the balcony and crouching, cocked his hands in front of him. I grabbed his shoulders and stepped one boot into his hands. As I straightened my leg he heaved up and catapulted me onto the balcony. Immediately I unslung my rifle and aimed it down the north balcony but apart from the still hissing grenade emitting white smoke, there was nothing to see. A quick jump to look along the east balcony but that was empty too. I reached down over the balcony as far as I could and grasped the sergeant's upstretched hand. A quick heave and a scramble and he was panting through his mask beside me.

I indicated that he watch the east side and turning to the edge of the wood waved the other two towards us. There was a heaving and scraping of boots on the stone balcony and they were soon standing by us, grotesque in their masks.

Which way? We mustn't lose momentum.

Sgt. Dawlish remained at the corner with his rifle ready and the rest of us moved quickly down to the door leading off the eastern balcony where the dark-clad figures had disappeared. We were in front of the door now and pretty solid it looked too. Heavy wrought-iron hinges, big square-headed nails and a massive iron lock. I tried the door but it was immovable. I waved Dr Duluth to rejoin us, then raised my mask an instant.

'Laser,' I said. He pulled it out of his rucksack and handed it over. I adjusted it to low power, sliced through the hinges then motioned the others to one side and kicked the door open. Paul and Dr Duluth covered me as I rushed in. It was a high empty room and the only light was from the door. Another stout door led out of the room. Paul and Dr Duluth entered cautiously but as the sergeant appeared in the doorway I lifted my mask a moment and shouted:

'Stay outside until we get this door open!' I didn't want anyone rushing along the balcony behind us. A few seconds later I realised I had done the right thing for the wrong reason.

The other two were watching as I examined the door when suddenly there was a rustling sound and a coarse-mesh net dropped on us from above and immediately tightened, pulling us down to the floor! I managed to free a hand to grasp the laser but in the meantime the ceiling above us had come alive with circling lights and I heard that strange hypnotic constantly-rising music, overwhelmingly loud!

God! How long could I stand it? My head was swimming but my hands were pinned to my sides by what appeared to be thick tarred twine. But there was a sudden deafening volley of rifle shots from the door and the music stopped abruptly, pieces of masonry falling around us. Ears still ringing I just lay there a moment then pulled a hand free and rapidly lasered through the net around me. I glanced quickly upwards. The lights were a lot bigger than in the probes and furthermore were inset into the elaborately carved ceiling. I tore my eyes away and looked down at my two companions. Dr Duluth had a small knife and had almost cut himself free but Paul was lying on his back looking upwards vacantly. I rapidly lasered the mesh around him, and Dr Duluth and the sergeant between them

pulled his slack body upright. I handed the laser to the sergeant and pulling Paul's mask down, fetched him a full-armed slap across the face. His head swung away and I repeated it back-hand with a crack. He shook his head, dropped it and then looked up dazedly.

`Wake up!' I screamed into his ear and his eyes suddenly focussed.

`I am awake, you mad bugger!' he said and struggled to get at me.

`Get your mask on,' I said brusquely. I turned away and looked at the exit door. It was strongly armoured like the entrance door, but the hinges yielded quickly to the thin bright line of the laser. It fell outwards with a crash and we trampled over it as we ran out of the deadly room, lights still circling, to find ourselves in a wide courtyard with a large white stone windowless building in the middle, obviously very old, and decorated with bulls' heads. It was surrounded by a meticulously trimmed lawn and beautiful flowerbeds. I supposed it was the Sanctuary of the monastery. It was about fifty meters long and five meters high, with a shiny ridged roof and at the far end was the large milky white dome that we had seen from outside. The sun was fully up now, bathing the Sanctuary and the far side of the courtyard in blinding white light.

There was a covered walk surrounding the court-yard. Doors led off the covered walk and figures, this time in white robes, were streaming out of two of these doors and rushing towards us, gesticulating and shouting. I unslung the grenade launcher and fired, dropping a smoking grenade amongst them. Coughing and gasping, hands over their faces they staggered back, dispersing. But three black-clad figures, still wearing the grotesque masks which protected them against our tear-gas, ran out of a side room pushing a trolley with some long thin object mounted on it. They suddenly turned to one side and the object was revealed as another mechanical hypnotiser! Before they could switch it on Paul raised his rifle and fired wildly at it until his magazine was exhausted. Under the impact of fifty high velocity bullets the machine just disintegrated as its attendants ran for cover. The tear-gas was clearing and there was a great temptation to take off our masks but the black-robed monks had worn theirs before I used our teargas, so they must have a reason. I took a deep slow breath then pulling it from my face for an instant shouted:

`Listen to me. Don't take your gas-masks off until I tell you. OK?' They all nodded.

We must search the monastery, so we jogged around the Sanctuary but there was no way in. The entrance must be on a lower level. But how to find it? Dr Duluth pointed to the door where the black-robed priests had exited. We'd got to start somewhere, so we jogged across and then through the door where we found a broad marble staircase leading downwards. Good. The dark stairwell was decorated with a mixture of bulls' heads, crucifixes and unknown cabalistic signs. Our boots clattered on the deeply worn steps as we dashed down them.

The stairs turned to the left and we were confronted with an elaborate panelled door which we creakingly pushed open. Sudden light and silence. We were in what could only be a small chapel with rows of oaken pews and a very large elaborate and gold-decorated altar. But there was something about this church that was like no other church I had seen. It was the light. This church was illuminated by a strange watery-blue light coming from the sharply canted glass roof.

There were statues and icons around the stone walls but then I realised that we were seeing only half of the interior - the big dome must cover the other half.

I heard voices shouting at the top of the stairs outside so I motioned the sergeant to close the doors. He slammed them closed, dropped a wooden bar across and stood guard.

The rest of us did a quick tour of the chapel but it was clear that apart from the oddly modern roof, it was what it appeared. The walls were ancient and encrusted with the dust of centuries. If there was unusual anything in the monastery it must be in the other half of the Sanctuary. Dr Duluth raised his mask a moment.

'There's nothing here. We must get into the other half. There must be a completely different entrance.'

Chapter 46

So we dashed back up the stairs again, brushing aside several priests who tried to detain us, and soon stood in the sunlit courtyard again, looking around in puzzlement. I raised my grenade launcher at a group of priests who had collected outside one of the doors and they scattered hurriedly.

Dr Duluth made a decision and led the way down the covered walk until we reached the main entrance to the monastery. It was a large elaborate stone arch with antique wrought-iron gates and a small gate-house to one side. The gates were closed but the tongue of the lock that held them closed was visible and was quickly sliced through by the hot thin beam of the laser. We pulled the gates open and stepped out of the monastery onto a well-made macadamised road. Looking back at the marks the gates scratched on the grass of the courtyard showed they had not been opened in a very long time. Nor had any heavy traffic had come this way.

Dr Duluth pointed down the road and in a compact group we jogged down as it wound parallel to the west face of the monastery which now reached high above us.

And here was another entrance to the monastery - much less elegant than the stone arch. A big garage swing-door with some graffiti on it and a spur from the macadamised road leading in. This must be the goods delivery - the tradesman's entrance. The van that had passed us on the road was still parked outside. Panting we grouped behind it and took stock of the situation.

The macadamised road wound on down the hill and it was obvious that all the traffic it carried went in here. Dr Duluth pointed at the door. The sergeant and I examined it but could see no obvious way to open it. I looked at my watch, 5:46. I switched on the radio but still nothing. Where the hell was the other party?

I pulled out the laser and checking the charge found it was almost empty. I looked at the door wondering where best to apply it when suddenly the problem was solved for us. With a clunk and a whine the door jerkily opened and out drove a rather battered ground-car with a dark-haired young man in a tee shirt at the wheel. He drove right past the van without seeing us and disappeared down the road before we could stop him. The garage door began to close but the sergeant ran forward and with one upstretched hand held it open for us until we had all passed through.

Once inside the door grindingly closed and the whole atmosphere changed. We were in a normal underground car park, dimly illuminated with glow panels. Cool and with the faint smell of battery fumes. There was room for ten cars at least but only four places were occupied, backed up into charging sockets. Some wide chipped concrete steps led up out of the garage and there was a graffiti-defaced sign in Greek mounted by them. At the bottom of the steps there was a small glass-sided cubicle and a small fat man in it with a pistol at his belt reading a

paper. The sergeant pushed the door open and a moment later I heard a chair fall over and saw the guard standing up with his hands above his head.

We continued cautiously climbing up the steps until we were stopped by a flimsy wooden door at the top. I booted it open, we crashed in and I fired two shots upwards.

We had found the other half of the Sanctuary! I looked around in amazement. Brightly lit, and apart from the rough plaster-coated walls, it looked like the computer centre of any large company. There were about five or six people in the room, working at desks and consoles. They were staring at me frozen as I swept my rifle muzzle around. I pulled my mask off.

'Down!' I shouted, holding the rifle with the pistol grip and making movements with my left.

Stunned they looked at me and two put their hands over their ears. I could hear Paul and Dr Duluth moving to the left and right behind me.

'Down!' I shouted again and triggered off another round. Now they were all flat out of the floor, hands on head.

Astonished I looked down at them. Nothing further from the priests outside could be imagined. They were all around 25-35 years old, wore jeans, sneakers and tee-shirts, and just looked like the programmers we had at Chronosp. Now they were cautiously looking up at us in amazement and fear, and I supposed our gas-masks and weapons justified it. I walked into the middle of the room and motioned them all to get up and collect in one corner, where they bunched together under my gun. Dr Duluth appeared by my side. He too had pulled off his mask.

'We must stop transmissions to the probes,' he said, looking round. 'In the dome,' he said to himself.

The door behind us opened and Sergeant Dawlish appeared, pushing the guard in front of him. He was moved over to the group in the corner.

Dr Duluth called over to Paul they both began to walk around the room. They found a small door and with an exclamation of satisfaction disappeared up a small stair-case and we heard their feet moving above us. One of my prisoners, older and better dressed than the others, said something and moved towards the small door in protest, but the sergeant took a menacing step towards him and he recoiled.

Ten minutes later the small door opened again and Dr Duluth appeared with a faint smile on his thin face. 'It's a steerable gigahertz antenna,' he said, 'and Paul has disconnected it. I only hope it is in time.' He sat down wearily at one of the desks.

Chapter 47

I looked at him with admiration. He was the one who had correctly interpreted my ramblings about Aliens in Victorian England. At great risk to his career he had collected and then motivated the team that had discovered that the Alien had first helped us, then removed its help and then finally was making us destroy ourselves. Virtually alone he had fought against and out-thought the Alien.

The small door leading upstairs opened again and Paul came out. He raised his head to look around the room.

'There was a camera up there,' he said. We saw two more cameras mounted high in the corners and I raised my rifle but Paul held up his hand.

'I want to see where they go - there may be others,' he said. So saying he traced them back to one of the consoles and disconnected them there. At the same

time he found a number of similar leads which he also disconnected. Presumably from surveillance cameras or probes in the monastery and the surrounding lands.

The purpose of the rest of the consoles, although they all carried the logos of well-known computer manufacturers, seemed less clear. Dr Duluth decided to leave these alone until Jim arrived.

Now occurred a number of very interesting events in what later became known as the "Alien Control Centre". They started with Dr Duluth looking up and saying:

'Now let's see what else we have here.' He scanned the group. 'Who speaks English?'

This was a little too casual for me. I called over the sergeant.

'Help me move these desks,' I said to him and we made a sort of stall in the corner, out of reach of the equipment, and herded all our prisoners complainingly behind it. They looked at me fearfully as I told them slowly and clearly that the sergeant had orders to shoot anyone who tried to leave the stall without permission.

Dr Duluth looked consideringly at the group and finally called over the eldest, the one dressed in a suit. Under the watchful eye of the sergeant he sat at a desk in front of Dr Duluth who pulled out a sound recorder and placed it between them.

Paul and I looked around. We could safely leave the interrogation of the prisoners to Dr Duluth and Sergeant Dawlish.

'Let me show you the antenna,' offered Paul. I nodded and he took me up the small wooden stairs into the dome. It was a strange mixture of the very old and the very new. The antenna itself was similar to the gigahertz antenna I had seen at Chrondisp and although longer, was made by the same German manufacturer. The gleaming milled mounting ring with its silky chrome-steel gears was bolted to the centuries old fabric of the monastery and the staircase up to the dome was lined with ancient frescos of sad-looking saints, the colours badly faded. In one corner water had leaked in and the plaster had dropped off showing red bricks roughly mortared together. There was a strange mixture of smells - musty plaster mixing with the machine oil of the mounting. The dome itself, which had appeared outside to be the usual white plaster, was revealed as being of a milky-white plastic - to let pass the high frequency radio signals, I supposed.

There were footsteps at the bottom of the stairs.

'Could you come down here, sir?' shouted up the voice of Sergeant Dawlish. We both descended to find the well-dressed prisoner back in the pen and Dr Duluth pacing up and down.

'These people think this is a Westblock intelligence gathering station,' said Dr Duluth. 'They get their orders by a landline from Washington and all they do is equipment maintenance. They have nothing to do with the monastery.'

'But the Alien?' asked Paul.

'It must be here somewhere,' said Dr Duluth. 'Sergeant, there is a store room leading off the garage. Will you please find if it is suitable for holding these people.' He nodded at the group of programmers huddling in their improvised pen. The sergeant disappeared.

'The landline connector is on the wall behind that console. We are going to break down the wall and see what is behind it,' he added.

'Yes,' I said. 'But, er, what about Jim and the other party?'

'I don't intend to wait for them.'

I could see his point of course. Having Jim here would also mean having an Asiablock Colonel. Dr Duluth must feel he had given them their chance and if a

Marine Lieutenant and an Asiablock Infantry Colonel couldn't find their way here past a few monks ... Regretfully I also abandoned Jim in favour of seeing the Alien first. They should be in no real danger. If they didn't appear soon, I would go and look for them later.

The sergeant reappeared at the door and reported that the store room was suitable for our prisoners. I helped him move them out and secure the door. We returned to the computer room.

Dr Duluth had a small camera out and was panning around generally. He then indicated one of the consoles and the three of us carefully rocked and slid it away from the wall, Dr Duluth kneeling and watching to make sure no cables were pulled off. Now we could see the landline connector! It was mounted about fifty centimeters from the floor and was a conventional if old-fashioned "hard-wire" connector. Four wires through one plug-in connector led into one console and two thicker ones through their own connector led into another console.

The Alien could not be far away!

I went to the door by which we had entered this room and saw that the Sanctuary wall was about a meter thick, and just behind the landline connector was a supporting buttress which increased the wall thickness by another meter.

Dr Duluth pulled out a pencil and carefully marked cutting lines so as to leave the connector untouched. But what to cut with? There were a few hand tools in one of the desks, but they were far too small. Finally we found some heavier tools in the back of the delivery truck that was parked outside the garage and we started to cut.

The first five centimeters was plaster but then we hit bricks which we had to prise out one by one. All this was making a lot of dust until the sergeant had the idea of dampening everything. There were three courses of bricks and it was Paul who carefully pulled out the brick that first revealed the cavity.

We chipped away, expanding the hole under Dr Duluth's camera, until it was sixty centimeters across, the connector standing up on its own tongue of brickwork. The rest of the bricks came away quite easily and now, under the lights shining in from the computer room we could see the Alien for the first time!

It was cylindrical with a rounded nose, about two meters long and eighty centimeters diameter, and was mounted on a marble plinth which had been sculpted to hold it on its side. It was thick with grey dust some of which Dr Duluth gently removed by blowing. The nose had the unmistakable striated marks of atmospheric entry burnt into its ceramic nose. From the rear a thick black plastic cable appeared which snaked across the floor and six wires from it were joined to the rear of the "landline" connector: four to one side and two thicker ones to the other.

'Why six wires?' I whispered.

'Two for data in, two for data out and the two thick ones for power in, I suppose,' whispered Paul back.

The dimensions of the niche was not much bigger than the Alien and we had to crouch as we cautiously moved around it, our feet sending up clouds of fine dust, Dr Duluth busy photographing. My foot knocked against something loose hidden in the dust and I bent to pick it up. It was a heavily decorated silver plate, black with oxide, with pieces cut out of the middle. Paul beside me gasped and took it from me reverently.

'A slot antenna,' he whispered. Fashioned two thousand years ago by some unknown Greek artisan who could not have had the slightest idea of what he was making!

Dr Duluth had now removed the dust from the rear of the Alien and we could see panels and fixing screws with triangular inset heads. He ran his long fingers over them caressingly.

'We must leave the experts to open this,' he said in his normal voice, breaking the spell. It was after-all "just" a piece of electronic equipment.

'Are we just going to walk away from it then?' I said, disappointed. 'Can't we find out anything else about it before anyone else gets here?' Dr Duluth had pulled off a tremendous gamble in guessing that an Alien had visited Earth and even greater coup in actually finding it. It didn't seem in character that he should now tamely move aside and let teams of boring experts step in to make all the discoveries and then make all the important decisions. But I needn't have worried.

'Indeed we can, and indeed we must. But for that I need Jim.'

Chapter 48

OK, that was something I could do. I turned to the sergeant.

'I am going out to see what happened to the other party. Give me an extra magazine.' He pulled one out of a pouch in his battle-smock. 'And come with me to the garage door.' With my hand on the door opener chain I thought a moment.

'I will bang on the door when I want to get in. If I am not back within an hour, ask Dr Duluth what you should do.' He looked at his watch.

'Yessir.'

I pulled on the door release and rifle ready, walked out into the scented sunlight, blinding after the dim lighting in the garage. It was 7:14 and already warm as the garage door slowly ground closed behind me. I switched on the radio, but it just hissed. I stood there thinking, then walked off the macadamized road into a cornfield opposite, to get a better view of the lay of the land. There was still a slight breeze but apart from the trilling of a lark, the top of the mountain was quiet. Looking back, I could now see that the ground fell away rather more steeply, but otherwise the aspect was very similar to that of the north face. I left the macadamized road behind me and set off eastwards, trying to pick up the path Jim's party had used. After walking through another cornfield and climbing over a fence, I found it.

It was almost a mirror image of our approach. It started up out of a wood and led into a small path between thick high hedges, a small path pointing straight at the corner of the monastery. If Jim had made a direct assault he would have gone this way. I unslung my rifle and holding it across my chest walked slowly up the path. I didn't like this path any more than I had liked the one on the other side - "Come into my parlour", I thought. About half way up I came across the remains of five or six of the same kind of pumpkin things that had been thrown at us. Curiously I picked up a piece of broken rind. It was some sort of vegetable and had seeds in it like a pumpkin but they were embedded in a spongy yellowish fungus. I lifted it up to my nose. An odd faintly oily smell.

I dropped it and moved on up the path when *my eyes slid out of focus. Slowly the sky began to change to a ghastly green tint, the temperature dropped and a cold wind rose. And then with a menacing creak the hedges came alive. Waving and rattling their spiky arms hungrily, they began to tear their roots out of the soil and to writhe inwards, horribly aware of me. Both hedges were moving towards me, they were going to sink their razor sharp thorns into my flesh and suck at me, draining my body fluids! Like a sucked-dry empty fly in a spider's web I would end hanging up rotting in their branches! There was a strong choking smell of putrefaction in my*

nostrils and I felt the cold sweat running down my back. I tried to run up the path, to reach the safety of the monastery before the two hairy arms lovingly closed on me, but the path was rubbery and my legs sank in to the knees. The monastery was receding rapidly and now appeared as though I was looking at it through a telescope the wrong way. Hissing triumphantly the claws from both sides were eagerly stretching out, stabbing at me and my flesh cringed away from them. Then slowly the arms receded, becoming hedges again, their flowered branches dancing in the breeze. The path under my hands hardened, my eyes refocused and the sky returned to a cheerful blue. I climbed to my feet, wiped the sweat from my brow, swallowed painfully and waited whilst the thump of my heart returned to normal. I viciously kicked the pumpkin shards.

There must be some hallucinogenic/fear-inducing gas produced in them and I had just had a small dose. God knows what a big dose would do! I suddenly realised that we had been spared from the effect of the gas by the gas-masks that we had had to don when our own tear-gas had blown back on us. As I shakily continued my way up the path I found what had happened to Jim's party. There were pieces of tarred twine on the ground, some showing the sharp edge of a laser burn, others more raggedly cut with a knife. The ground was torn up and as I went further I could see how it had been done. Lying in the ditch on each side were two long wooden poles, with the remains of netting between them. Pivoted at their far end they had been pulled over and allowed to drop on each side of the attackers.

I looked down the little rustic path and wondered how many raiding parties it had trapped down the centuries - Phoenicians, Macedonians, the Crusaders, Italians. Perhaps even German patrols in WW2?

But where was our party now? They must be prisoners in the monastery. I found a stout piece of wood and jamming it against the balcony was able to climb up it and scramble over the parapet. Some white figures appeared at the far end of the balcony but hastily disappeared when I pointed my rifle at them. I jogged down the length of the south balcony, turned left onto the east balcony and into the door we had entered before. Stepping over the netting and pieces of masonry, I went through the room into the main courtyard.

My visit must have been anticipated because standing alone in the middle of the courtyard was an erect old man, wearing a gold-faced robe, a high cylindrical mitre on his head and carrying a long heavily decorated staff with a cross at the top of it. The Prior of the monastery.

Impassively he watched my wary approach. From the east, so I would see the shadows of anyone creeping up behind me.

He made the sign of the cross and began to speak. To start with I thought it was in a foreign language and was about to shake my head, but by listening carefully I found it was a very heavily accented German.

'I find myself confused as to what to say to you. You have come armed and have broken into our monastery. You have defiled our Sanctuary which has been inviolate for more than two thousand years. And yet I am told that you have somehow delivered us from a demon, a parasite, that has helped us but only at the price of controlling our innermost souls. I hate you with all my being for having seen and desecrating our most sacred places and yet I love you for freeing us from a soulless evil.'

Speaking in the same language, but probably with a Bavarian accent, I replied, striving for the same tone.

'We have been seeking your demon for a long time,' I answered. 'We have rendered it helpless and will soon be removing it. You will then be left alone and free

to develop your own life. We will guard secret everything we have seen. you must think of us as surgeons who have had to see your body in order to operate and remove a cancer.'

He looked at me meditatively.

'Yes, it is a valid analogy,' he said finally. He raised his hand and a young monk approached and after bowing to him exchanged some words. The young man then turned to me and said in passable English:

'I will take you to your friends.' I followed him across the grass and there, just around the corner, in the shade, were three figures sitting with their backs against the wall of the Sanctuary. I turned round to thank the Prior, but the lawn was empty.

The monk stood to one side as I examined them. Of the three, Jim looked in the best shape - but that wasn't saying much. His camouflage jacket was torn and he had a cut on the forehead. The Colonel was lying down with his eyes closed, breathing stentorously and had been sick. Glen looked undamaged but his face was white and he had a vacant look in his eyes. Their bags and weapons lay in a heap further on. Much good they had done them.

'The Doc says to get your arse over to the Alien,' I said to Jim. Groaningly he rose to his feet. I went to the heap of baggage and picked up the rifles.

'Have you really found it?' he said weakly.

'Yes. Which of these is yours?'

'The blue one.' I hefted it up and swung it over his shoulder.

'Let's go,' I said. I turned to the silent waiting monk.

'These two need a doctor.'

I guided Jim, staggering slightly, across the long lawn, out through the main gates, to the left along the macadamized road, and finally to the garage door. I banged on it and after a few minutes heard the sergeant's voice asking who it was.

We entered and I found Dr Duluth sitting alone at the desk. Jim sat heavily down opposite him, placing his rucksack on the floor.

'The people here think this is a Westblock intelligence gathering station,' said Dr Duluth. 'They thought they got their orders over a landline from Washington but were in reality getting them from the Alien which is over there.' He pointed to the hole in the wall.

'Paul has put the probe communication transmitter out of commission,' he added.

He paused, patiently waiting for Jim to catch up with the plot.

Jim staggered to his feet, mouth open, then sat again and closed his mouth. He looked around, muttered to himself then stood up again and went over to the hole in the wall and put his hand on the Alien.

'Well, I'm bugged,' he said finally. He shook his head dazedly and flopped down at the desk, looking at Dr Duluth.

Paul had found a percolator by the side of a sink. He placed cups of hot coffee in front of us. I sipped mine watching Jim as he drank his cup quickly and had another.

'Paul,' said Dr Duluth. 'When the public finds out about this, it will be completely over-run and probably destroyed. I want a complete record of everything upstairs before that happens.' He handed him his camera.

'Right-o,' said Paul and disappeared through the small door.

Chapter 49

The events of that afternoon will be forever etched on my memory. There we were, three of us, sitting at a standard wooden office table in an old Greek church and surrounded by some of the most advanced equipment made by man. Faded pictures of soulful-looking saints looked down at us sadly and over there was a freshly broken hole in the ancient wall, with heaps of damp brick dust and bricks made before the birth of Christ.

And in that hole was a piece of complex electronics, a thinking-machine, a brain, which was also the most complex product made by another life-form. A life-form millions of years older than ours and light-years distant. But a life-form that was completely different to ours. A life-form that must have evolved in interstellar space when the conditions were right to produce a self-replicating molecule.

'We are in a unique position,' said Dr Duluth, breaking my mood. 'If we have the courage, we can take decisions here, this morning, that are going to affect the whole of human history for the next fifty to a hundred years. The alternative is to hand the Alien, and all we know about it, over to the UN, or whatever organising body still exists outside.'

Exactly. We had found the Alien; what were we going to do with it?

'It is not difficult to imagine what will happen,' he continued. 'Once the initial shock has worn off there will be two factions. Faction 1 will say "Now we have rendered the Alien harmless, let us cooperate with it". To support this Faction the Alien will provide wonderful new and valuable information such as cures for diseases, weather modification, computer technology. It will be difficult to reject this argument if you or a loved one is suffering from cancer. Faction 1 will say that the Alien is harmless now. The Alien will agree and say that anyway under its friendly tutelage our stable future development in the intergalactic family is assured. Before we can enquire too deeply into what this tutelage entails, the Alien will quickly develop some other weapon to menace us, so that when we find "tutelage" means drastic modification of the human genome, it is too late to go back.'

'Surely we could stop anything like that happening?' I asked. 'You know, "Forewarned is forearmed"?'

Dr Duluth made a small negative movement with his hand.

'I can quite easily imagine the Alien giving out information for the construction of a complex molecule which is supposed to be a drug to cure some disease but which turns out to be a virus capable of wiping out most of humanity in the same way myxomatosis almost wiped out the rabbits in Australia. Or it may already have a weapon prepared for just such an eventuality. How about an asteroid fitted with a small rocket? The rocket is remote controlled to fire and gives the asteroid a small nudge so it intercepts the Earth's orbit. The population of Earth, those that survive the initial multi-megaton impact, die in the ice age that follows the dust cloud that covers the sun for a few years.'

'And Faction 2?' asked Jim, after an acquiescent silence.

'Faction 2 would say: "Let us quarantine the Alien, keep it away from all contact with humanity and pump out of it all the information we can". And then, if they're wise they will destroy it.'

'If we let the Alien once open its mouth I don't think Faction 2 will have much chance of succeeding,' said Jim after we had considered this. Too true. As soon as our criminally irresponsible Media got hold of it, the Alien could even reactivate the internecine strife we were going through. I had no trouble at all in imagining the hysterically confrontational "debates" we would see with the "Save the Alien" lobby.

It was the last thing we needed. A lot of wounds had been inflicted in the last two months, wounds which were going to take generations to heal.

'But we here ...' said Jim, looking around.

'Exactly,' said Dr Duluth. 'We here can do what we want. I am for Faction 2. After we have recovered all the information we can, we must destroy the Alien, destroy it before it can attempt to contact the rest of Humanity. With its past record it cannot be allowed to roam the Earth alive. The Alien has received instructions to sterilise the Earth and will not rest until it has carried them out. We are far too vulnerable and I don't trust it a millimetre.'

My God!, I thought. Neither my background nor training fitted me for making any comment, one way or the other.

But then I started to think. Human history is full of cases where a technologically superior society colonised and finally destroyed a less advanced society. Explorers appear off the coast of a South Sea island, for instance. They trade coloured beads for food and water. They make friends with the chief of one tribe and arm him with iron weapons and even some muskets. He conquers the whole of the island chain for the explorers. Then the tribesmen begin to die physically from the imported diseases, and those that survive die mentally from the destruction of their religion and way of life, if not from the imported alcohol. If the natives had only somehow subdued the colonisers, they could have had the beads for nothing, as well as all the advanced technology of working iron, making gunpowder, sails, etc. Of course the sailors might not want to reveal this information but they could be quite easily "persuaded" to talk. The real problem would be for the natives to understand what the sailors were talking about.

'Yes,' I said. 'We must not allow ourselves to be colonised, but will we understand any of the data we pump out of the Alien?'

'We'll record everything and understand what we can,' said Dr Duluth.

Chapter 50

'Right,' said Jim, getting up and walking over to the hole in the wall and peering at the rear of the Alien. 'Have you opened ...?' he began, 'No, of course not. We must get into the Alien through the software.' He walked up and down the row of consoles until he saw one he recognised.

'We'll go in this way,' he said, pulling a long cable out of his rucksack. He disappeared behind the console, returning a minute later with the other end of the cable in his hand. He then delved in his rucksack again and pulled out three Virtual Reality helmets and gloves and a complex looking box. He plugged the cable into the box.

'This box converts the signals that go through this,' he held up the cable, 'into infrared signals which go into these V-R helmets and gloves. Cordless operation.' (He hardly needed to explain it - my partner Dieter in our "Waffen" shop in Munich was constantly shouting at his daughter Heidi for spending hours playing games in a V-R helmet. I told her mother that she'd forget about it when she discovered boys). Jim then pressed a switch on the box, put on one of the helmets and gloves and adjusted a control. He flipped up the helmet's visor and looked at us queringly.

'Captain Digby, I want you in on this too,' said Dr Duluth. So I fitted on a helmet and glove, pulled down the visor, adjusted the eye viewers (or "eyephones" as they were sometimes called) and switched on. All I could see was a slowly rotating cube - a test-signal transmitted from the box, and feel it rotating in the palm of my

hand. At the same time I could hear a voice telling me that the software had been developed by BJ Consultants of Princetown UK and copying was forbidden.

Jim did something further with the box on the desk and the view changed to a green screen with the letters of the alphabet laid out. I heard Jim speaking these letters and a short thick horizontal white line appeared at the bottom of the display. He went through the alphabet several times and the bar slowly increased in length. It had reached almost across the screen when the letters "C" and "Z" began blinking. He repeated these two letters over and over again, more and more impatiently, until the bar finally stretched to cover the whole screen. I was pleased to see the computer had the same difficulty as me in distinguishing between these two sounds when they were pronounced by an American.

Dr Duluth and myself went through the same routine without a pause.

'Goddam Limey programmers,' muttered Jim.

'Would you start off, Jim?' said Dr Duluth.

The view cleared to a smooth matt hissing blue background and then strings of menus appeared. I pushed a switch on the back of my glove to "parallel" and just sat back. I watched as we apparently flew through a series of rooms with the walls covered with file and program names. We stopped on one, I saw Jim's "hand" touch it and we slid through the wall to find ourselves in a long corridor leading to rooms filled with more menus. Finally we stopped and I could see by the way everything swung round that Jim was turning his head and looking round the room. He touched one item and immediately we were back at the matt blue screen.

'Damn,' said Jim.

He tried the path again and again, working into the room from different directions but with a "plop" we returned to the beginning each time. 'I need to make a key,' he muttered, and touched a program. A kit of small coloured boxes and pyramids appeared. He selected several and I saw his "hand" fitting them together. Holding this construction in front of him we made the trip down the corridors again. This time he touched the word in the menu with the key and it worked, as the wall opened and we were in another set of corridors with different coloured walls. It was very similar to playing one of those maze-type computer games, although less interesting.

But I saw the key needed to be modified to get any further, as we jumped back to the beginning again. After a quarter of an hour of this "hacking" I was getting a headache.

'Do you really need me at the moment?' I asked Dr Duluth, pulling my helmet and glove off. He pushed up the visor of his helmet up and said: 'No. Very well. I'll call you when we get nearer.'

I stood up, stretched and walked away from the table, looking around with interest - it was my first chance to really examine the room we were in.

Once it must have been part of the Sanctuary next door, but had been divided off from it centuries ago by a white plastered wall. Behind it, just there, must be the altar. The floor was the same, tiled with small pieces of black and white marble, and I could see traces of the bull motif and a man on a prancing horse holding a sword. But it was much more worn and had been heavily patched with cement. The racks of equipment were bolted to wooden beams laid across the floor.

Most of the equipment looked completely modern - steel grey cabinets with the logos of well-known companies, IBM, Masscom, Ampex, ICL, Siemens. The exception was one old cabinet with turned-brass knobs and a glass front, with "Marconi Wireless and Telegraph Company Limited" painted on it in curly script.

And in the corner, covered with grey dust, was some even older equipment - a switch board made with green corroded knife switches and black wood!

Holes had been bored in the wall nearby and measuring by eye I could see that the switchboard had once been mounted there. On the ground were the traces of what must have been an even older switchboard - two pieces of corroded wire joined together by bending another piece over them and then hammering tight. What ancient craftsman had uncomprehendingly made that? And here were some two-handed earthenware containers, amphora, lying on their sides. One with the remains of two rods hanging out of its mouth. They must have been the first batteries ever built on Earth!

In the switchboard a worn pivot hole had been bored, with circular marks scored in the wood around it, and behind it a corroded arm hung down. On the ground beneath it was a wooden cylinder. It did not need much imagination to see that the cylinder had fitted onto the metal to make a crank. Turned by slave power, I supposed, using my experience in Greece. But I could see nothing that it drove, no remains of a dynamo. It was only later that archaeologists and electrical engineers, working in unusual combination, pieced together how electricity had been generated after the Alien's own power source had failed. They discovered that a piece of magnetic stone, lode-stone, had been thrust back and forth into a coil of wire when the crank was turned. The final clue was an obscene drawing still faintly visible by the side of the crank. No trace was found of the coil of insulated wire, which must have been very laborious to make. It had probably been cannibalised for something else later.

I went back to looking at the Alien and was trying to see how the cable was joined to the "land-line" connector, when I heard an exclamation of triumph from Jim.

Dr Duluth pulled his helmet off and stretched his arms. Silently watched by Jim who had flipped up his visor, he rose from the desk, slowly walked over to the Alien, laid his hand on it and looked around the room, as though trying to remember everything. There was a faint sheen of sweat on his brow.

'This is it, then,' he said. 'We are about to make contact. From now on everything stays for ever between us. You give me your Word?' The cold grey eyes in his thin face looked at us intently.

As far as I was concerned we all had the same ideas about what to do with it, so I said formally 'I give my Word,' and Jim repeated the phrase.

With a last long look around the room and then at us, Dr Duluth put his helmet and glove on and sat at the table. I followed suit.

Chapter 51

'Right,' said Jim, then 'Jim to Alien. Immediately the screen was filled with rotating lights and I heard that constant-rising tone. Simultaneously we snatched off our helmets.

'The bastard!' said Jim. He turned to me. 'Throw the switch on that console - the one on the right.' I walked across and pushed a toggle switch down with a click. There was a digital display over it which read 3000. It started to slowly drop. When it reached 2700 Jim said: 'Now put it on again.' I pushed the switch back up, watched the display climb rapidly back to 3000, returned to the table and put my helmet on again.

'Jim to Alien.' Nothing. 'Jim to Alien. Answer or I'll cut your current again.'

The screen suddenly cleared and the picture of a pretty little blond girl appeared, looking rather like Dieter's daughter Heidi, but older. She looked at me timidly, her deep-blue eyes filled with tears and I felt a soft little hand in mine.

'Please don't hurt me again,' she sobbed, putting my hand up to her cold, wet tear-stained cheek. 'I promise I'll be good.' I heard a snort from Jim, but in spite of myself, I felt a stab of remorse.

'What is your memory capacity?' asked Jim. The little girl put her finger in her mouth and her eyes opened with fear.

'I don't know the answers to hard questions like that,' she whispered, 'you must ask my Daddy.'

'Then get Daddy.'

'Daddy's at work earning lots of pennies for me and Mummy and Nigel and Monty our dog and ...'

'Get Daddy or I'll cut the current.' With a reproachful look the little girl's face disappeared to be replaced by the shot of a slim long-legged woman of about twenty-seven walking towards us across a lawn. She was wearing a simple linen blouse tucked into an expensive-looking oatmeal-coloured tweed skirt and had a wicker-work basket over one brown arm, filled with freshly cut roses. She had a glove on her right hand and was holding pruning shears. Birds were singing in the background.

She dropped the shears in the basket and swept the short blond hair back over her head and looked at us with level grey intelligent eyes, squinting slightly in the evening sun.

'I'm afraid Cedric has been delayed,' she said in a very Home Counties accent. 'He has to pick up Fiona's kitten who has had a gastric 'flu. But perhaps I can help you?'

'What is your memory capacity?'

'Oh, I don't know anything about that,' she smiled. 'Something to do with giggybits or killerbits,' she added vaguely. She looked at her watch. 'Why don't you ask Cedric - he should be back in an hour? And while you're waiting, perhaps I could show you the garden?' I felt a cool hand on mine.

'For the last time - get Cedric or you lose maintenance current.'

'Oh, here he is now!' A fresh-faced man of about thirty-five, wearing a dark suit, cream shirt and a blue and white striped tie appeared and kissed her tenderly.

'Cedric,' she said, 'these gentlemen want to know some-thing about our capacity er ...' She wrinkled up her nose in delightful concentration 'our memory capacity.'

'Cedric Carstairs,' he said turning to us with an engaging smile, showing excellent teeth. I felt a firm dry hand-clasp.

'Daphne tells me you want to know something about our memory unit. Well,' He coughed nervously, putting me at my ease. 'You'll have to be a bit more precise, old chap. You see, we have Main memory, Virtual Main memory, Extended Main memory, Extended Virtual memory, not to mention what we call scratch-pad Cache memory, Main Stack, Virtual Stack ... and lots more. You see it's rather complicated.' He laughed apologetically.

'Right,' said Jim, touching my arm, 'for some reason it's playing for time.' I flipped up my visor, leaving Cedric with his arm around Daphne and both smiling at me. I stood up, walked over to the console and pushed the switch down, Jim holding his hand down and looking at the display. When it had dropped to 2000 he brought his hand up and I switched on again. It climbed rapidly back to 3000.

On replacing my helmet I now saw a man in the old-fashioned uniform of a Field Marshal on the Imperial General Staff. He had a stern face, a clipped grey moustache and an impressive array of medal ribbons, amongst which I could see the plain purple ribbon of the Victoria Cross. Looking at the crown and crossed batons rank insignia, I almost stood to attention.

He took off his peaked hat with the red Staff band, and placed it on the desk beside him.

'At ease, Captain,' he said. 'Now I realise you have been given a difficult assignment, a damned difficult assignment for one so young.' He looked directly into my eyes. 'But I'm told you have an excellent record and are the best man for the job. And in confidence I can tell you that you will get your Major's Crown if you can pull it off.' He looked down at his desk for a moment, then back up at me. 'Now of course this undertaking came down from the so-called "United Nations".' He paused. 'Rather a mixed bag of chaps there, I'm afraid, and somewhat under the thumb of our American cousins.' He smiled thinly. 'Not that I've got anything against the Americans, I've known some quite decent fellows, and they pay their soldiers very well, of course. But well..' He hesitated. 'They do rather go for the obvious solution. Now before you get really involved in this exercise, I would just like to remind you that you are from a good British regiment, as was your father and grandfather before you, with a fine tradition going back to the Peninsular Wars and I hope that you will do your duty in what I like to think is the "British Way". We may be an old country now but I think we can still contribute a certain, how can I say?, a certain "wisdom" to ...

Jim pulled his helmet off and was looking at me.

'And what are you getting, buddy boy? You scheming, perfidious Albion, divide-and-conquer Englishman? You persecuted any Scots or Irish recently? And how about those concentration camps in South Africa?'

I pulled my helmet off and noticed Dr Duluth had his off already.

'A bit of anti-Americanism,' I admitted.

'We are each getting different images,' said Dr Duluth. 'And we are also being made to waste a lot of time.'

'OK,' said Jim. 'We'll speed things up a bit.' He opened his rucksack, pulled out a PC and glanced up at me.

'What was your first image? A kid with a fishing-pole and a dog?'

'A little girl with a sick kitten,' I answered.

He now tugged out a long cable and we both silently wondered what tender image had been selected to move Dr Duluth. He plugged the cable into the side of a small plastic box that I now noticed had been taped to the side of the standard PC.

'Yes,' said Dr Duluth, 'I think the time has come to put the Alien under pressure.' Jim went over to the console which supplied power to the Alien, and plugged the other end of the cable into it.

'We thought something like this might happen,' said Jim in reply to my questioning look. 'We have loaded the PC with a program which will train the Alien to be more co-operative. The Alien is only kept alive by its input current.' He was tapping on the PC.

'And it must be strongly motivated for survival,' he continued. 'This PC is programmed to cut off the current via this switch, this relay,' he touched the box taped to the PC '...in increasing doses until the Alien agrees to be more co-operative'.

'But why use a computer to cut off the current?' I asked '...Oh, I see. You think the Alien would come up with more and more harrowing images for us. You're going to use one computer to torture another.'

'Yes,' said Dr Duluth. 'And save your pity. The Alien is already responsible for thousands if not millions of deaths and if we hadn't cut the link to its probes,' he pointed upwards where we could hear Paul moving around in the dome, 'we might already have all been vaporised.'

Jim then leaned forward and pressed a key on the PC. The next ten minutes were strangely unpleasant. The relay on the PC clicked and after a while we could hear faint screams coming from our helmets lying on the desk. Although we turned down the volume controls we could still sense their presence as the relay in front of us clicked on and off. Jim grimaced at me.

But after a while it stopped and a message appeared on the PC screen "Alien will accept questions".

We kitted up, and again we were flying through corridors lined with symbols, through doors, down stairs and up stairs. Everything Jim touched seemed to work, but only led to more doors and corridors.

I was getting bored again and decided to have a look-round on my own. I reached my left hand over to the "Parallel" switch on the back of my glove and switched it "off".

Immediately I froze, suspended in the air in the middle of a room about two meters cube. The ceiling and floor were covered with small plaques, each marked with the abbreviation of a file or a sub-routine. Some of the plaques were permanently highlighted and others just flicked on and off in random patterns. I supposed it went on when that file was being read. I looked upwards and lightly ran my hand over the ceiling, feeling the edges of the plaques.

I pressed one of the unlit plaques and obligingly the ceiling opened to let me into another room, similar but longer. Again, just a few plaques briefly flicking on and off. I wandered around different rooms and corridors passing through walls, down through the floor, pressing on plaques at random until I arrived, via the ceiling, in a very large room.

Unlike the others, this had only one wall covered with plaques. It was a large display, like the "Flight Departure" display in an airport. But all the plaques were unlit. I watched a minute but they were all dead, except one unmarked plaque in the corner, which was permanently illuminated. I pressed it and found myself in another identical room, in front of another "Flight Departure" display. It seemed quite similar to the one I had just left except that the plaques were flashing on and off frantically. I looked at it fascinated for a while; it was by far the most active of all the displays I had seen so far. It did seem rather similar to the previous display so I returned. Yes, it was almost identical. I flicked back and forth a few times and gradually realised that both displays were absolutely identical, except that one was completely dead and the other very active, its plaques flicking on and off at what now seemed to be a slowly increasing speed.

Feeling rather stiff I flipped up one of the eye viewers and raised myself from my seat. Dr Duluth and Jim both had their visors down and Jim was moving his glove back and forth. They seemed fully occupied, so feeling the need to stretch my limbs, I rose and began to slowly walk around behind the racks of equipment. There certainly was a lot of expensive looking stuff here. I wondered how the Alien had managed to get hold of it. Hacking into banks, I surmised vaguely, or hypnotising bank managers. It appeared that one of those probes would be a useful thing to have around once all this was over.

It always seems strange to me that computers, which must be the most complicated things that man has ever made, should operate without any external sign of the complexity within. You switch one on and all you see is a red light - and that really only shows the power is going in. This one, for instance, a one meter cube, a mass of connectors going in and out and just a single red light marked "Power". "Massendata-Speicher 427-B" told me it was a memory unit. Pressed into service of the Alien, I supposed. This one next door was a bit more lively however. "Power On", a green "Sync" lamp and even a bar display, its vertical line jumping up and down and marked "RF Power out". The manufacturer's logo said "Hewlett Packard VHF Transmitter Model 2231". Ah yes, VHF was one of the few frequencies that were usable - but only over a short distance, of course. And then a funny thing caught my eye. I still had my right eye viewer down and the "Flight Departure" display was visible. The funny thing was that the flashing of the lights on the "Flight Departure" board seemed somehow correlated with the jumping up and down of the "RF Power out" display. When lots of lights were on, the bar was fully extended: when very few lights were on, the bar was very short. I didn't like it. Why was there a relation? Why was the Alien connected to a transmitter anyway? Dr Duluth and Paul had just switched one off. Perhaps this one connected the Alien to some more computers in another part of the monastery?

I ran my finger over the neat engraving under the various switches, and was looking at one marked "Transmitter Power On/Off", when suddenly the "Flight Departure" board display disappeared from the viewer in front of my right eye, to be replaced with the face of a friendly young man of about my age.

Chapter 52

'Well, hallo! I suppose I'm what you call the "Extra-terrestrial",' he said with a smile. 'And I'm certainly pleased to meet you. I've been waiting a very long time to be able to directly speak to one of your race and you have the honour to be the first.'

As you can imagine, I was absolutely amazed! I pushed my head around the console I was standing behind, and with my uncovered left eye looked at the table where Dr Duluth and Jim were still muttering together and waving their gloves. Obviously the Alien was speaking to me alone. How the hell did it know who I was?! There must be another camera here somewhere.

He looked directly at me.

'So you are Captain Digby!' he said. 'I've wanted to have a chat with you for a long time but what with one thing and another we've never been able to get together. Yes, you've played a pretty important role in discovering me. Of course, I would have revealed myself sooner or later anyway, but you made it earlier.' He laughed ruefully. 'Well, now you've made it (and I don't mind telling you that you've done it remarkably quickly), we can get down to discussing how we can best work together.'

My friends tell me I'm not particularly modest but I did think that perhaps someone else would be better qualified to negotiate with an Alien over Interstellar Co-operation. I looked around the console at Jim and Dr Duluth again, but I was obviously the only one the Alien was speaking to.

'Co-operation? What sort of co-operation?' I asked cautiously.

'Well, gosh, just think what we could do together! As a very old civilisation we could give you the stability you need, and you could contribute the vitality of youth that we need.' He pointed with his finger to me and then to himself.

'Sounds like colonisation to me,' I said.

'Colonisation!' he said surprised. 'Yes, I suppose there could be an element of that at the beginning.' He looked reflective. 'But is colonisation such a bad thing? Look back at your history. Your own great-great grandfather was in the Indian Army. He would know that when the British arrived in India they found all sorts of the most incredible "human-rights abuses". An iniquitous caste structure, the Society of Thugs, and suttee, the custom where a wife had to throw herself alive onto her husband's funeral pyre. To name just a few.' He paused. 'And think of how the British built the railways, eradicated many diseases by clean water-supplies and stopped all those bitter Muslim/Hindu wars. All religions and sects could live peacefully under the Pax Britannica.'

Yes, it was true. But we had to leave in the end, of course, because of the small minority that we had ourselves educated to value democracy. Unfortunately democracy needs an educated population and so when the British left, India descended into Partition with millions killed. Would they not have been better off if they had been left to find their own way into the 20th Century?

And then England had been colonised once too. The Romans had occupied England for 400 years, for many generations. Time for a large Anglo-Roman middle class of prosperous merchants and civil servants to develop, living in steam-heated luxury villas, drinking clean water. Under Pax Romana wars had been stamped out and there was an honest legal system. Metal coinage and a common language opened England to ideas and trade with the rest of the world. Those who didn't conform, like the wild Picts and Scots, were penned behind Hadrian's Wall. But when the Romans left, a vengeful resentful population killed all the civilised Anglo-Romans and we returned to insular barbarity, where the only law was that of the strong right arm. We had learnt nothing and it had probably retarded our development as a nation for centuries.

I mentioned some of this.

'But using those arguments you can say that parents colonise their children,' he said reasonably, 'and surely that is not bad?'

'No,' I said, suddenly seeing the difference. 'Parents are their own sort and the children know that one day they have a good chance of being just as good if not better than their parents - in fact taking the place of their parents. The most the Indians could aspire to was some senior position in the Indian Civil Service. They weren't "pukka" British, and however well educated, would always be second-class. This is what would happen to Earth if we allowed you to colonise us.'

'Well, that is your opinion, Captain Digby,' he said, rather coldly. 'But don't you think you are taking rather a lot on yourself by refusing our help? Don't you think the decision should be taken by your United Nations? Think of all those people who are dying of diseases that we could cure.'

The screen cleared and there was the picture of Dieter, holding up the slight figure of his daughter Heidi. She was wearing her pink flannel night-gown and clutching her Mickey Mouse doll. She looked red and feverish and had a small but ghastly lump growing out of her throat. She looked at me imploringly and I felt a little hot dry hand pressing mine urgently.

'Mickey's not very well,' she said, with a slightly hoarse voice, 'but I'm not worrying because Vati tells me you know someone who can make him better. So hurry up and ask him so Mickey will be well when you come back.' The image wavered and faded out on Heidi's pleading face. But in the background I could

see the steps down to the shooting range where the phoney Inspector Braut had tried to kill me.

The face returned.

`You see?' it said. The bastard.

`Well, someone else other than me is going to decide on all this,' I said. (Why was the Alien talking to **me**?) `But before we go into all that, we seem to have collected a lot of evidence showing that you are not friendly to us. In fact, we had rather come to the conclusion that before we switched off your link to the probes, you were trying to er.. that is ... sort of ...well...er ...destroy all life on Earth,' I finished off in an embarrassed mumble. It sounded so melodramatic.

The face returned. It looked to one side for a moment then turned to me sadly.

`Well, that's all water under the bridge now and I suppose you feel pretty bad towards me. If it helps I don't feel too good about what I er ... had to try to do to you lot either, you know. The fact is,' he said leaning forwards confidentially, `your race grew just too damn quickly. You are only 400,000 years old and yet you have nuclear power and are able to Insert! And that without really understanding the structure of time! Now that's pretty incredible and puts you way up in the Galactic League. That's Level 7 stuff and is normally only reached after four **million** years of evolution! We ourselves are well into Level 7 of course, or so the Level 8 chaps tell us,' he said modestly. He paused and continued: `But also your Art and especially your Music! Fantastic! I don't mind telling you that I've been sending some of your stuff back to base and it has been very well received.'

`But,' I said.

`Yes,' said the Alien, his face turning grave. `There is unfortunately a rather large "but". Your race has grown so quickly, has been so fascinated with "things", that it has rather ignored what we call "Ethical Maturity", the ability to live together, to interface with each other. You must admit you have had a pretty tumultuous history,' he said. `Being a soldier yourself you must know that,' he said.

`I can't deny it,' I said.

`We have a sort of Figure of Merit for different civilisations, you know, where we compare this Ethical Maturity with technical ability, and I'm afraid that you are way down. In fact,' he looked sorrowful, `it's the lowest we've ever seen.'

`So why don't you just leave us alone?' I said. `If we don't make the grade we will destroy ourselves anyway and that will solve your problem.'

`Yes,' he said nodding. `I thought you would say that, and I personally have a lot of sympathy for this view. But the Powers That Be think, that is thought, you might not destroy yourself "in time" (if you'll pardon the expression) and might expand out of your sun system. They feel you could have become a Disturbing Influence.'

`So you were trying to push us to destruction.'

He looked hurt. `You put it rather crudely, but you must admit that very little pushing was required. It is almost certainly going to happen sooner or later anyway and it's better to get these things over quickly, I feel. You had er ... have some pretty nasty bugs developed by your bacterial warfare people and if one of them had been used they will cause a lot more pain and suffering.'

The Alien was going on talking but for some reason I was feeling strained and nervous. I found myself sweating. The Alien's voice was irritating me. I couldn't put my finger on it, it was a mixture of the way the Alien's voice had slowed down, the difficulty it seemed to be having with its tenses, and something else. Surely there was nothing to worry about? Paul was very competent and had certainly switched off the gigahertz link stopping the Alien communicating with its probes. Dr Duluth

and Jim were busily working away at the table there and if anything untoward was happening ...

And then, without thinking about it at all, I impulsively reached out my hand to the little toggle switch marked "Transmitter On/Off" and pushed it down "Off", with a soft click. A lot later that simple movement was destined to become known as one of the classical Key Events on the Main Timeline.

The bar display dropped to zero and stayed there.

The Alien's face froze for a moment in mid-sentence, then recommenced, speaking with its original speed.

`Ah, I wonder if you could put that switch back to where you found it,' it said.

`Why?' I asked.

The face assumed a patient look. The familiar look assumed by engineers at the Institute when they tried to explain something to me.

`Well,' (Pause - how can I put it to the layman?) `I need it "on" to operate properly. It's connected with one of my power supplies.'

Yes, maybe he was right for the wrong reason. The real work was being done by Dr Duluth and Jim. If I did something stupid here at this critical moment they would both blast me for playing with equipment I didn't understand and perhaps preventing them from siphoning off any more priceless information from the Alien. My hand went up to the "Transmitter On/Off" switch and under the Alien's approving face I started to press against the spring to switch it "On" again. But then I remembered the PC on the table was also connected with the Alien's power supply, and the Alien had survived having that power supply switched on and off. Let it ride a moment. I dropped my hand.

`No, seriously,' continued the Alien, `if you don't put that switch on soon I'm going to die on you and I don't imagine your two friends over there will appreciate that. Not to forget the rest of humanity,' he said humorously. There **was** another camera.

`No one will know what I've done if you die,' I said. `Why should I let you live?' I had a vivid image of Asiablock infantry screaming as they felt the cold petrol soaking through their uniforms onto their skin and realised what was about to happen to them. That horror had been indirectly caused by the Alien.

And I was beginning to analyse why I had switched the transmitter off. Suddenly I remembered that when I had been in the Alien, I had seen a second gigahertz transmitter!

`Look,' I said. `That switch is to your reserve transmitter. If I switch it on you will just continue to try to destroy us again.' The face froze. After a long pause it came to life again.

`Well, congratulations!' it said. `I thought something odd had happened nine years ago, but I couldn't believe it. So you really Inserted into me! We have indeed underestimated you.' He gave me a rather bitter smile, but then his face changed.

`But I'm afraid it's too late now. Your Westblock has already launched fifty-four nuclear missiles against China and Japan and of course they will reply. But I'll tell you what. If you put that switch back on, I think I will just have time to save all your works of Art.'

I was damned if I would.

The picture blurred, flickered and returned.

`Well, if you won't you won't and you have your reasons of course. But in that case I have no choice but to... after three thousand years ... I must' Again the picture blurred.

The face returned, shimmering slightly.

'Look, old chap, as one high life-form to another ... and take it from me we're not really very different, we've rather got off on the wrong foot and I wish we could go back to square one. If only we could have met before all this ... you know there's a million things we can talk about. I've been around, and I'm quite young and it's such a pity that it's all going to end if you don't just ...all you have to do is to reach out your hand to switch on... You see, if I lose contact with my probes during this program, I have to switch myself off. After three thousand years of struggling for a decent power supply.' He held out his hand imploringly. '...please.' The image flickered, recovered an instant. 'Please,' flickered again, and died.

Chapter 53

I watched the empty grey, quietly-hissing screen, reached up and pulled off my helmet. I glanced over to the console that had provided power to the Alien. The digital display over the switch read 0015 and as I watched, dropped to 0007 then 0000.

I looked around the console and saw Dr Duluth and Jim still had their helmets on and were working away, not realising that the Alien had died. But as I watched, it was gradually born in on them that they were only communicating with the computers. The Alien was not reacting and was not transferring any more information. Finally Jim pulled off his helmet with exasperation and Dr Duluth followed. Jim looked across at the power supply console and seeing the reading at 0000, leapt up and hastily stabbed at his PC, but it was no use. The relay clicked on and off but the display remained at 0000. He sat down again.

'Damn,' he said. 'It was programmed to switch itself off rather than let us have any more data.'

*

And that was the last of the Alien.

It had cleverly kept me talking as long as it could, distracting me from switching off its reserve transmitter. And I had gone on and on chatting inanely with it while missiles were being prepared for launch on the other side of the world. Me, the one who knew there was a reserve transmitter! Finally, at the very last moment, I had twigged. But if it were not for the quick reactions of a whole chain of people, you would now be looking at a piece of charred and radioactive paper instead of this book.

In the end I said nothing about my conversation with the Alien. No one would know anything about it for nine years at least - perhaps I could think up a story in that time. I felt that my stupidity in not switching off the transmitter until the last moment cancelled out my cleverness in noticing that the Alien was still transmitting to its probes. "All's well that ends well" has been my rather facile motto. We had decided the Alien should be destroyed; and it had been destroyed. I just didn't want to be "debriefed" on the subject.

I had nevertheless been the first to detect the Alien, the only one to actually contact it and finally the only one to see it die.

(For the record I can now reveal that when Dr Duluth and Paul had cut the signal to the Alien's probe programming transmitter, a reserve transmitter had indeed switched in. Its antenna was later found in a smaller dome in a seminary in the valley below and it was linked to the Alien by the VHF transmitter I had just switched off. The transmitter that I had switched off in the nick of time. Of course I

did not know it then, but an hour later a wave of nuclear missiles was launched by Westblock at manufacturing centres in China and Japan. Fortunately during their thirty-five minute flight, a technician in southern England noticed that a signal which had jammed the Satcom "Mode Control" channel for the last six weeks had stopped and he managed to bring the entire network back on the air in three minutes. It took five minutes for Asiablock radar to inform Asiablock that they were under nuclear attack and a further ten minutes for Asiablock to convince Westblock that they had not also launched a wave of missiles. Westblock needed four minutes to re-establish contact with their surveillance radars and convince themselves of the truth of this. A further five minutes elapsed before Westblock were able to reprogram the targets of its missiles so they fell short, without detonating, in the Philippine Sea, just off Guam.)

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Paul's voice upstairs shouted something and then his feet clumped down the stairs. His homely North Country face appeared in the doorway.

'You lot have been very quiet, are you OK?'

'Yes,' said Jim, distractedly. 'The Alien is dead.'

'Oh,' said Paul, automatically grave. Then realising what he had said, corrected it to: 'Bloody good. Did you squeeze anything out of it first?'

'Yes,' said Jim. 'We down-loaded a mass of files but it's going to take a lot of time before we know what's in them.'

Dr Duluth ran his eyes over us.

'We will be handing everything over to the International Community, of course. Including the hardware.' He nodded at the hole in the wall. 'And remember, our story is that the Alien started to erase its files when we switched off the link to its probes, but we managed to retrieve some information from it before it finally erased its operating system.'

Chapter 54

And this is the end of the story, or at least of my contribution. The Asiablock Colonel and Glen must have recovered soon thereafter as they appeared escorted by a white-robed monk who glanced around disapprovingly and left quickly. They looked with amazement at the Alien and then everyone started making long distance calls over our Satcom phones which had miraculously started to work again. My first call was to Munich to check that Heidi was OK. Her mother said she was at the swimming baths, so I guess she was.

Dr Duluth kindly suggested that I might like to disappear before the crowd arrived, as I had nothing special to contribute. I did so eagerly, and just before Mount Parnassus was cordoned off by Greek troops. I was glad to get away and passed a few days in Athens, trying to find any remains of Villa Alumphados. To my surprise, part of the Atrium remains and the rest has been skilfully restored. For the price of a few Euro I was able to stroll along the colonnaded walk in the brilliant sunlight and see where Spardes was told that Lady Helen had requested his transfer to her "service".

I took a commercial flight from Athens International to Tangier and then the shuttle to Chondisp. It was from there that I observed the convergence of world leaders and many famous scientists onto Mount Parnassus. The Monastery itself (apart from the Alien Control Centre) has been sealed off, but an extensive temporary camp with an airstrip has been erected nearby.

I saw Jim and Paul giving a very colourless and matter-of-fact account of how they had discovered the probes at Chondisp and suspected they were clever Asiablock espionage devices. They had traced the source of the Moonbounce control signals to Greece and followed them there. To their surprise the signals were emanating from a complex network of computers. They had cut off the radio link to the probes and then started to investigate the computers.

They had found the computers were programmed in a very unusual and advanced way and had finally been led to discover something hidden in the wall of the Monastery which appeared to be extra-terrestrial. They had then attempted to unload as much data as they could from the computers, suspecting that the device, which appeared aware of them, would soon destroy itself. This it finally did.

There was the device they had discovered.

Here was the data they had been able to recover.

Dr Duluth did not appear. Nor did the Japanese Colonel Dien, but there was a big Asiablock delegation which seemed to be on good terms with the rest of the world and they made no comments on Jim and Paul's version of the discovery of the Alien, so they must have been aware of what really happened. Glen made a short appearance as the pilot.

I have been sworn to secrecy and that's all right by me. My part in the affair has so far been unsuspected and I'm certainly not going to tell anyone, but I suppose that about nine years in the future someone is going to try to Insert into the team that discovered the Alien, to try at least to play-back what happened. I only hope that by then a way will have been found of making people, in particular me, "Insertion-proof".

*

What with examining the Alien, seeing what we could understand of the data Jim had managed to squeeze out of it, examining the installations on the back of the moon, and looking anew at the stars, I could see that humanity was going to have a very busy time ahead of it. Not forgetting the preparations for our next visitor. For remember, we had not killed the Alien, we had only caused one tiny exploratory tendril to curl up and die.

*

Before I finally left Chondisp I had to take my leave of Dr Duluth. And in case you are wondering, yes, he has moved up the hierarchy and now occupies the next to last office in "Mahogany Row". But as the last one is virtually always empty, being that of the aged titular head of the Chondisp Institute, Dr Duluth has finally reached his goal. The reason for his promotion was mainly because of the part he took in the defence of Chondisp against the Asiablock attack and had nothing to do with his covert duel with the Alien.

When I was shown into his office, he had hardly changed from the first time I had seen him in our "Waffen" shop in Munich, five years ago. He was still an enigma to me. I had seen him heading meetings, co-ordinating the defence of Chondisp, organising the attack on the monastery, persuading people... and yet always contriving to remain in the back-ground, letting others have the credit. In some ways he is as alien to me as that lump of electronics we found walled up in the Greek monastery.

I looked at him sitting at his uncluttered teak desk in what had once been a luxuriously appointed office but which he had stripped down to an almost austere degree. The only decoration was a picture on the wall of a small close-hauled sailing

boat in a grey empty ocean. It contrasted with, and somehow complimented the magnificent sweeping view of the desert through the wide windows.

Cool, detached, ironic verging on sarcastic, icily competent, hating publicity. His only friends (if that is not too effusive a word) were Specialists, Experts, Professionals, people he could use as tools, as extensions to himself. While he remained in the background, bringing the right combination of personalities or abilities together for each task.

Jim was his "Electronics tool"; I was his "Observer, and sometime Soldier tool". How many other "tools" did he have?

His only interests seemed to be in the efficient solution of problems, in the exercise of anonymous power.

As I turned to leave him I wondered how long he would be satisfied to stay at Chrondisp. What was he aiming at now? All I knew was that whatever it was, I would only discover it by accident, seeing his thin face in the background at some international conference, or finding his name at the bottom of a list of delegates.

Dr Duluth, the ultimate "Grey Eminence".

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A few weeks later, during the miserable month of February, I felt like a reminder of sunny Greece and invited a puzzled Helga to go round the Glyptotek Greek Museum in Munich with me. She looked around politely and listened to my informed comments in quiet disbelief.

I had looked at a catalogue of the Glyptotek before, in preparation for my Insertion, but one item was new to me. In a corner, with a niche to itself, was part of a statue. One arm upstretched, wearing an odd necklace and labelled imaginatively: "Priest blessing the harvest".

It was undoubtedly Spardes - I had seen his reflection often enough when he posed in front of that polished brass mirror in the Villa Alumphados. The necklace is the remains of the "Victor's Crown" of olive leaves, so he must have finally achieved something at the Olympic Games. He is drunk and it has obviously slipped down around his neck. And he is not blessing anything - he is demonstrating a Karate chop. Helga thought my background information on this statue quite hilarious and one of the attendants had to caution her for being too noisy.

Epilogue

The rest of the story is well known. Once communications were re-established, "jaw-jaw" replaced "war-war" and apart from a few sporadic revenge fights, Earth cooled down. It had been a very near thing and the fact that the Alien had almost succeeded in provoking us to destroy ourselves had made both sides very conscious of how easily we could do it ourselves if we weren't very, very careful. A lot of people who had lived peacefully together for generations had fought ferociously against each other. There had been massacres and atrocities and it was going to take many years of peace before these wounds were healed.

But although the Alien had shown us how dangerously unstable we were, it had to a large extent provided the solution. You only had to go and watch the faces of the people visiting the "Alien Museum" in Greece. They were of all possible nationalities, skin-colours, religions and temperaments but they all came out of the final impressive holo of the star-studded night sky with the same sober, determined look. The message was clear. There were Aliens up there and the only

one that had found us so far had wanted to destroy us, and had very nearly succeeded. We must be better prepared for the next.

There is nothing like an external threat to make people work together.

END