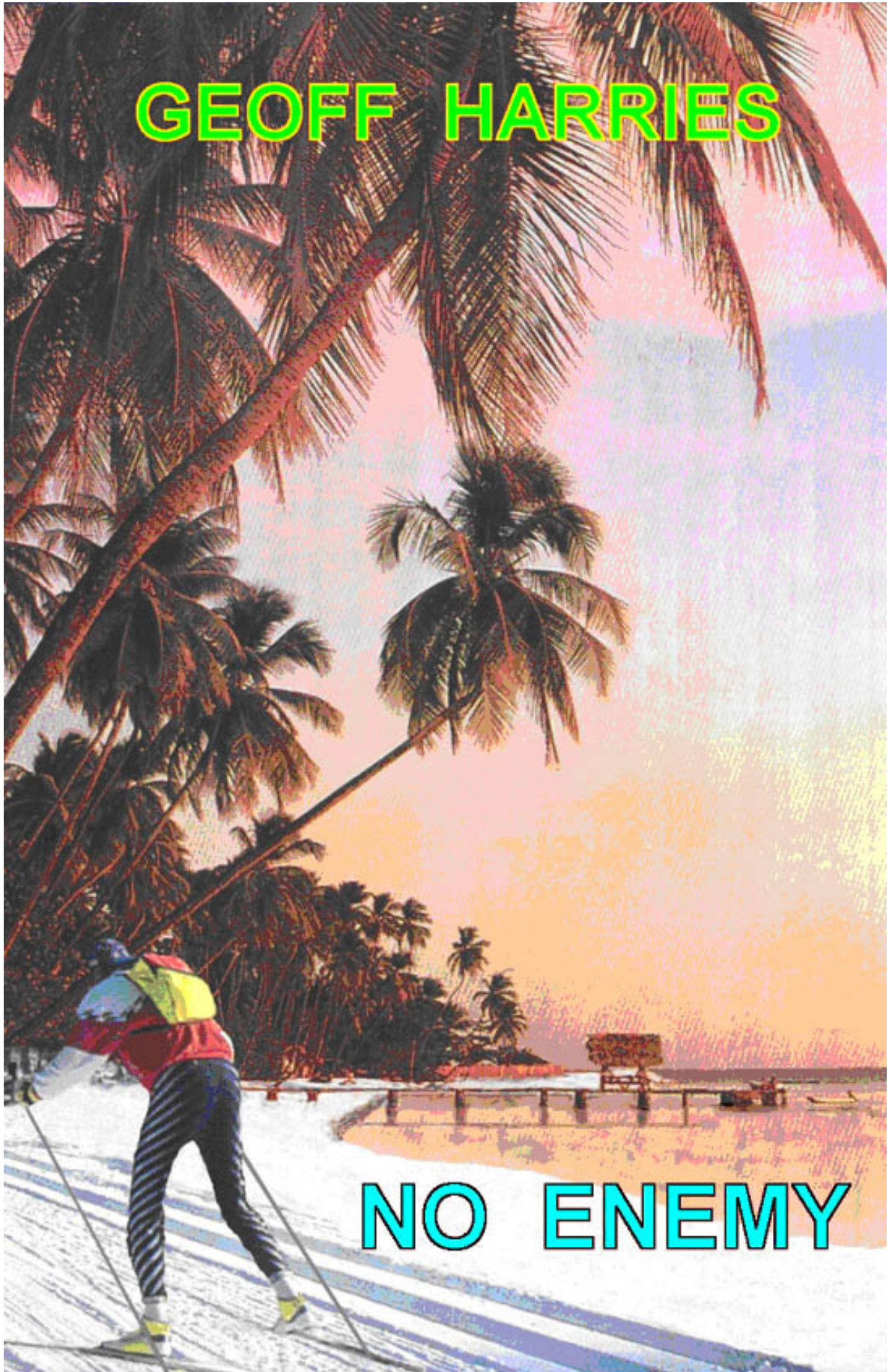


GEOFF HARRIES

NO ENEMY



"No Enemy" – (Chrodisp 3)

"No Enemy" is a follow-up to Chrodisp 2, where Westblock have discovered a way to track when and where the rival Asiablock are sending Observers with their time travel machine.

But Westblock are baffled to find Asiablock are sending out many Observers to study historical events that should apparently have no interest for them. To try to find why they are doing this, Captain Digby is sent out to Observe one in greater detail. Using a young Indonesian boy as his Host, he witnesses the monstrous explosion of Tambora in 1815.

Meanwhile Westblock notice that Asiablock are building a number of curious constructions in Northern China. Digby, with his ex-US Marine friend Jim go out to investigate one.

Still no clearer as to what is happening, Westblock send Digby back to Observe a bizarre naval action between a Royal Navy frigate and a pirate sloop off the coast of North Africa in 1806.

"No Enemy" is a SF/detective/adventure story, describing how Westblock piece together all the odd pieces of information to find that Asiablock are working on an ingenious and deadly new weapon. In the last scene Digby and Ning McGregor, the beautiful half-Scots/half-Chinese interpreter, sabotage it, causing also the deaths of its inventor Dr Lin Chung and his sponsor, the evil Shan Tien.

"No enemy
But winter and rough weather"
("As you like it")

(Chrodisp 3)

Chapter 1

We were driving through a silent white tunnel. Snow was a blinding glare in the twin thrusting halogens, resolving into white dots accelerating at us like flak. The misses zoomed smoothly away and over as they found the boundary layer on the hood; the hits flopped heavily onto the tinted triplex, to be impatiently waved aside by the over-worked droning wipers.

Jim's square face in profile was devilish in the underlighting, eyes hidden in black holes like Torquemada. His hand reached out of the gloom to push yet again at the heating gate.

"10:17pm Friday" the dash clock read; "7:17am Saturday" my wrist watch would read, as jet-lagged I fought hot-eyed against the hypnotic wipers and the warm air blasting back from the windscreen.

Another car slowly overtook us, thrown up sludge slamming on our 467 Merc and immediately we were at the bottom of a black greasy ocean.

'The prick,' Jim muttered, flashing his main beam. The note of the wipers deepened, laboured and gradually we rose to the surface. The overtaking car's green number-plate froze for a moment in our headlights - "California - The Sunshine State".

Pushing technology to the limit, the Airbus 770 had dropped vertically through the blizzard with screaming jets into LA exactly on schedule. But immediately after touchdown we had run out of technology. Lines of Mexicans with shovels were pushing aside the snow and an unknown Edison had clamped a plank to a fork-lift truck. There are no snow-ploughs in Los Angeles.

Hundreds of stranded passengers impatiently speaking into hundreds of cellars had blocked all channels. The display on my phone read: "Welcome CA, hope arrive Gate 4 white Mercedes 467 convertible 8:45pm. Jim." His ETA had slipped three times before I saw him. I had splashed across in the slush outside Gate 4 as he shoved open the car door. I had climbed into the dimly lit warm interior and thrown my luggage onto the rear seat.

'Weather's all shot to hell,' was his greeting. He had invited me from "frozen Munich to tank up with some good old Californian sunshine." I could see he was pissed off that it was snowing here for the first time since records had been taken, and was expecting sarcasm. I had kindly refrained, slammed the door, turned towards him and we had shaken hands.

Scowling he had driven to the downtown Sheraton where I had booked in and showered. I hadn't unpacked; all I had was leisure clothing - in this weather I would stick with the heavy suit I had left Munich in.

Now he was taking me to one of the famous California "Singles' Bars".

An opalescent glow appeared through the blizzard to the right. The automatic changed down and snow crunching under the deep-tread Michelins we shouldered our way off the Santa Ana Freeway into a big parking lot, only half-full. The wipers still working hard, we drove past aluminium hitching rails up to the tall carved portals of a hacienda and climbed out. Yellow flaring torches mounted at each side hissed as snow flakes landed. A keen-face young man in a shiny green cape slid into the seat of the Merc and disappeared with it into the blizzard. Valet parking. You don't see that much in Germany. We turned and a blast of hot air and music ballooned out as the door opened. We entered hastily and the door closed automatically behind us, hissing in the fallen snow.

Thumping 120db disco music slammed at us, edging the pain threshold and resonating in my chest cavity. In front and below us was a vast dance floor filled with

teenagers doing an arm-waving dance under flickering strobes, like an old black and white movie.

I turned round and for the first time had a chance to look at Jim since his visit to me in Munich three months ago.

Ex-US Marine Lieutenant James Prince PhD had peeled off his ski suit and was dressed in blue jeans tucked into cowboy boots, a narrow waisted check shirt emphasising quarter-back shoulders, a thin gold chain with a shark's tooth on it around his neck. Tall and good-looking, blond hair swept back, he looked nothing like the popular image of a computer scientist. Shit. In my dark suit, black shoes, white poplin shirt and striped tie I felt like an undertaker in this vital atmosphere. If I took the coat off and loosened my tie?

'We want through,' shouted Jim in my ear, edge of hand chopping towards the far side of the dance floor. He could have walked round the mass of bouncing dancers but typically he just bulled straight through. Before his tall figure the dancers parted, beautiful teenagers with barely adhering brief dresses smiled up as he grinningly did a few exaggerated steps with them on his way across the dance floor. The dancers closed behind him as he passed but had to double take and resentfully part again for me struggling along in his wake, hot and bad tempered in my thick suit.

Through another door and as it closed behind us the disco music cut off in mid beat. Another world. Bright spots hit our eyes and we were at the top of a broad staircase like the last act in Aida, curving down into a pool of velvet darkness. About fifty people were sitting and standing at a horse-shoe shaped bar and there was a sudden silence as they turned to watch us descend, shading our eyes like suspects at a police line-up. At the bottom thick carpets, dim lights, soft rhythmical music and to the left a small stage on which a couple were doing everything but copulate.

I could see the bar was populated entirely by Hollywood Californians. Confident broad-shouldered gods with sun-bleached hair, torn jeans and leather plaited thongs around their wrists were making smooth passes at slim articulate bold-eyed goddesses. It was hot, my suit was itchy and I felt totally out of place.

Jim was joshing a suave character wearing a dark blue silk tuxedo and with a sparkling jewel mounted in the middle of his goatee beard. He had a cellular phone in each hand and was speaking into them alternately.

'What the hell, Marge. You know I'd be there if I could but we gotta tie up the final draft for Monday ...' he said into his left hand. He listened a moment, held it against his side and spoke into his right hand.

'Yeah, sure I do hon, but I couldn't get too excited about that clown you were sitting with.' He listened a moment, rolling up his eyes at Jim. 'He's into you for 40? So let go that beach hut you've never gotten around to furnishing since you met Marvin ...' He put the left hand phone up to his mouth again but I tore my attention away and turned to Jim who had touched my arm.

'... and this is Kim,' he said, 'we were at USC together.' Before us were two beautiful girls of about thirty-five, made up in geisha-like detail. Kim was small and blond with green eyes, her hair swinging forwards in two high-lighted wings which curled up under a little pointed chin. The taller one, whose name I never learnt, was dark and athletic looking with brown slightly slanting eyes, full lips and wearing a striped leotard. I shook hands formally, automatically nodding my head and saying "Digby" in the German style. I mumbled replies to their politely bored questions until Kim leant forwards and ran one slim manicured finger down my cheek.

'Hey, is that for real?' she asked surprised. I looked at her.

'Are you military?' the leotard asked impatiently.

`Well, yes, I was actually, but now I'm in the Reserve,' I replied. I thought the laser scar would be invisible in this light. Their faces changed.

`I was first,' said Kim, the petite blond.

`Ah, cummon, we always cut,' said the sporty-looking brunette.

Kim asked the barman, obviously gay, for a pack of cards. They cut and the brunette drew high. A quick whispered conversation and some keys changed hands.

The brunette slipped her arm into mine and looked into my eyes.

`I just adore the British pronunciation,' she said. `I gotta grandfather from "Clan" something. That's in England, isn't it?'

`Wales, I should imagine,' I said, leaning on the accent.

`I was a soldier too, ectually,' said Jim, but they ignored him.

After that things moved quickly. So quickly that in less than thirty minutes by my wrist-watch I found myself lying naked on a bed watching while my dark-haired partner, also naked, had her leg up on a chair and was leaning forwards rhythmically touching her head to her knee, doing stretching exercises.

`Not you?' she asked curiously. `Well, I guess you Limey's are always in good shape. We drive around all the time here,' she explained conversationally, stretching out the other leg. She snapped an elastic tube bandage over her left knee like she was about to play squash, and jumped onto the bed with me.

`What's so funny?' she said, `I don't wanna twist it, do I?'

Apart from this interesting regional variation, I am pleased to be able to report that everything went fairly normally and the honour of the British Commonwealth was adequately defended. Normally, that is if you exclude her asking me to repeat various expressions, expressions I was more accustomed to hear from the lips of an enraged sergeant-major on the parade ground.

`Oh, this is like a Bond movie - I just adore that English accent!' she squealed.

*

The next day I was sitting with Jim on a rocky outcrop in Laguna Beach, Southern California, sleepily recovering from the previous evening. The long rollers of the Pacific boomed in, crashed on the beach and slurped out, the pebbles rattling hollowly in the undertow. I looked around the white empty beach and scooped up a handful of tiny granules. The storm had wound itself up into a tight spiral and unwound over San Francisco, depositing a foot of snow over most of California - snow that normally fell on the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. The sun was hidden behind the high ragged remains of the blown out anticyclone.

`Climate's all screwed up,' grunted Jim for about the tenth time, sitting beside me. He pulled up his anorak collar against the freezing wind and I let the cold white granules trickle out of my hand.

Snow! Snow in California. Some eccentric was slowly making his way across the beach in the strange swinging gait of the cross-country skier.

I glanced across at Jim who was looking out to sea broodingly. There had been a long period of calm in the struggle between Westblock and Asiablock and Jim, who spends most of his working hours before computer screens deep underneath the Sahara desert at the Westblock "Institute for Chronological Displacement", or "Chrondisp", had needed a break. He had taken the time off to show me California, where he had gone to College.

But he had brought a problem with him.

`They're up to something, but we can't see what!' he said, slapping his hand down on the rock. A seagull that had been gracefully hovering overhead in the stiff sea breeze jerked backwards, stalled, recovered and departed with an irritated clatter of wings. `We've checked the dates and places backwards and forwards trying to

correlate them with world events, lives of famous families, astronomical records - anything. But zilch.'

He was justifiably bitter. A Time Inserter is a man-made lightning-flash generator, and like a natural lightning flash, produces a radio pulse that could be picked up from space. Chrondisp had found that by analysing this signal, this "signature", they could calculate where and when the rival Asiablock Time Inserter was sending their Observers. But now they had this information, it wasn't doing them any good.

'Okay,' Jim continued, his fine blond hair blowing out horizontally, 'we can see them sending guys back, beavering away on all this historical crap - what Stalin said to Lenin, what Confucius thought about Zen, how much Henry the Eighth paid his gardeners...'

'Duluth once said "The Chinese believe that history is the main store of human wisdom", I quoted. 'Asiablock is driven by their Faith: "Tao". You'd expect them to be researching it.'

He grunted.

'He also said "the materialistic West always under-estimates the power of a faith," I added.

Jim flapped his hand dismissively.

'The slant-eyes are up to something,' he repeated grimly.

And he was probably right. Through their Inserters both Westblock and Asiablock had access to the whole "Databank of History" as the western media called it, but while we were allocating time to historians, geneticists, etc. and in general choosing targets for the greater good, Asiablock was predictably using the Chronological Displacement technique as a weapon - highlighting and virtuously publishing the more juicy feudal and capitalistic excesses of the past.

"Tao", (The Way), the Asiablock state religion, had started like most new religions as a gentle "help your weaker neighbour" creed. But technology, and perhaps the Asian paternalistic tradition, had enabled enormous power to become rapidly concentrated into a few (male) hands and corruption had set in.

Corruption and terror. The Committee for Ethical Reeducation, the dreaded CERE, was the Asian equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition. Its agents were everywhere in the countries of the Federation and any hint of heresy meant a visit to one of its clinics, run by perverts. It was rumoured that those who had been to one would often commit suicide after they were released, unable to forget what they had seen.

"The Way" was now for export and those terrible old beliefs that appeared so often in human history had resurfaced "The world has to be converted for its own good" ... "The end justifies the means"...

Six years ago I had fought in a small but bitter war, the "Pakistan Affair", to defend the sloppy Westblock way of doing things. History has shown many times over that Democracy is a terribly inefficient system of government, but for human beings there is no other.

Today however, I was on holiday and such thoughts were not for me.

'And what proportion of Insertions can't you identify?' I asked idly. Jim looked across at me, squinting in the white glare.

'We've been watching them for three years and to start with we could usually find a reason for each Insertion. But in the last three months they've doubled up their Insertion rate and we can't account for any of these goddamn Missions.' He looked round surreptitiously but we were quite alone. 'All this is top secret by the way, Dig,' he said seriously, 'I shouldn't really have told you.'

I made a gesture of acceptance. I was surely one of the last to betray Chrondisp's secrets.

`So what are Chrondisp going to do?' I asked. `If you know where and when they've gone, can't you follow them in with your own Observers?'

`Yeah, we thought of that, but it ain't so easy. A lot of our Insertions, and our budget too, are in the public domain now. Like space shots, we get full media coverage before and after. So if we don't do it on tiptoe Asiablock are going to put two and two together and realise we can look over their shoulders. Bugger it.' He made a snowball and threw it far out to sea.

We stood up and squeaked back through the snow, past a beach hut closed and shuttered, a small drift of snow piled against the sign advertising "Ice-cream 22 flavors" and made for the car park. We sat in his car with the heater roaring.

The next day the weather brusquely flipped back to normal. I tried to contact the brunette again but Jim said she had gone back East. So he drove me around showing me the sights or we just lay around on the now almost normally warm beaches, played tennis, chatted and ate sea-food.

A few days later we parted, he back to his computers, me back to a small "Weapons" shop I own in Munich in partnership with a Bavarian, Dieter. But by the way Jim absently said goodbye to me at the airport I had a feeling I would soon be seeing him again.

Chapter 2

The invitation came to me in Munich about three weeks later. Chrondisp takes considerable precautions to preserve the anonymity of their specialist Observers, and I do all I can to cooperate. If it became known I worked for Chrondisp, my whole life-style here would change and I would also probably become the target for various bits of random violence from Asiablock.

But it was with surprise that I received the invitation from the hot little hand of Heidi, Dieter's 9-year old daughter. I was doing some window-shopping and was standing looking at computers as I felt her hand leave mine. Schiller Strasse is one of those streets, common to most cities, which is totally dedicated to masculine tastes. Electronic shops alternating with sex shops/bars. I thought Heidi had left me to peer wide-eyed into the dark doorway of the nearby "Sexorama". But not this time.

`A man put it in my hand and said "Give it to your Dad", she said, handing over a plastic air-ticket.

`Thank you,' I said.

`Sometimes I wish you were my father,' she said, looking up at me intently with her disturbing blue eyes. It was like watching a child play with a loaded revolver and one day she would realise the effect they had on males.

`But then I remember, and I'm glad you're not,' she finished.

`Look at this new battery,' I said, tapping on the window. `It holds twice as much power as an ordinary one.' She made a contemptuous noise and tugged my hand.

`Let's go in this shop. It looks dark and interesting and it sounds like everyone's having lots of fun.'

She said something in Bavarian to the two pretty 18-year old girls in red dresses who were leaning against the door-frame. They replied gigglingly.

`Come on, they say we can go in for free,' she said, switching back to High German for me.

I really shouldn't have brought her here. Heidi already has a strong character and was as bright as a new pfennig. Jim had met her once and grinningly diagnosed a "gender related personality disorder". My grandmother would have called her a tomboy. Her parents didn't know how to handle her and said with annoyance I was the only one she listened to. She could go in the wrong direction; I really should use my influence and try to guide her into some useful career.

`Er, Heidi, those places ...,' I began.

`Yes?' She brushed her blond hair back and her pert little face looked up at me expectantly. I found I was squeezing the ticket. I glanced down at it. Departure was that afternoon. I held it up.

`I have to go on a business trip and I must get back to the shop. We'll talk about them when I return,' I said.

`When you return then,' she said.

Careers for women. There was a notable gap in my knowledge on this subject. I'd have to ask around.

Chapter 3

I arrived at Chrodisp via the usual shuttle from Tangiers, went through Security and had hardly installed myself in my room before there was a tap on the door. It was Jim. I hadn't seen him for three weeks, but he had already lost the relaxed air he had recovered in California and in spite of his usual bright Hawaiian shirt, slacks and sandals had taut lines of tension in his face.

While I was towelling myself after the shower he asked after the two sisters he had met in Munich and how was my Waffen shop faring. But it was all rather absent-minded politeness as he sat on my bed obviously waiting. Finally as I combed my wet hair he stood up and opened the door. I looked at him interrogatively.

`Are we sort of going somewhere special?' I asked. He pulled himself up short.

`Gee, Dig, I'm sorry,' he said embarrassed. `Didn't I tell you? We gotta meeting laid on. The Doc told me to bring you up as soon as you arrived.'

He meant Dr Duluth. A ambitious enigmatic man I had met several times before. Aged about 45 he was not much older than most of the casually dressed Chrodisp staff, yet seemed much more serious, more adult. Perhaps because he always dressed in a formal dark suit and had never been seen to smile. He had been in the Chrodisp Institute since the beginning, starting at the lowly position of "Project Co-ordinator" but had levered himself up to membership of the prestigious "Target Selection" committee - the small group of officials who decided where and when Observers should be sent back into the past.

I was employed as a freelance Observer by the Institute and went where sent; so far on Missions requiring my specialist military background. I was intrigued as to why Duluth wanted to see me so urgently; things were always happening around the Doctor.

And so in a mood of anticipation I followed Jim as he briskly walked along the corridors and took the lift to the endlessly circulating rubber-wheeled train in the depths of Chrodisp. Again I smelled that evocative rubbery smell. Off the train, up another lift and at last along a quiet thickly carpeted corridor to a door with "Dr Duluth - Target Selection" on it. A tap and we entered.

The tall thin Duluth had his hands behind his back, looking unseeingly out of the window at a breathtaking view of the desert. He turned immediately we entered.

A cool firm handshake and a searching look from those level-spaced grey eyes under straight black eyebrows. Again that neutral accent as he thanked me for

coming so quickly. I looked at him and saw he had the same air of tension as Jim. The same quick automatic unsmiling politeness.

Already sitting next to his desk was another figure, rising as I entered. Al was a dark mobile-faced man, about twenty-six, from California. He had been one of my instructors when I first arrived at Chrondisp but I knew he was now in "Research". As he ran his fingers through his thick dark hair I could see he also had the same air of distracted politeness. The atmosphere of the meeting was grim as Duluth gestured to us to take seats around his teak desk.

Thick curtains hissed over the window and as my eyes adapted to the darkness I saw a holographic globe of the Earth floating in front of us. And sticking out of the globe at apparently random points were many radial lines, all of different lengths.

Jim had reminded me just before the meeting that he had said nothing to me about the "Unidentified Insertions" so would I please act surprised if Dr Duluth started talking about them. But in fact it was Al who opened the meeting, and explained the holo display.

'It's a fancy display Counter-Intelligence came up with,' he said in a rather disparaging tone. I had learnt to recognise this as the "Not Invented Here Syndrome". 'These lines are where Asiablock sent their Observers on Insertions whose purpose we have not been able to identify. The length of the line shows how far back in time each one went. Zero length is the present; 1cm equals 100 years.'

'Hey, you've got some new stuff there,' said Jim, peering closely.

I too peered at the thin lines sticking out of the Earth's globe - making like it was being treated by acupuncture. There were about twenty, some going as far back as three thousand years into the past. Three of the longest lines originated in what was now Iraq and two in Iran - the seat of ancient civilisations, and so made some sense. But two twenty centimeter long lines climbed up out of the middle of America - surely uninhabited two thousand years ago except for a few Indian tribes and roaming buffalo herds. And three sprouted out of small islands off the coast of Indonesia. Dr Duluth's accentless voice broke into my reverie.

'I've invited you here so you can see the big picture. These unidentified Asiablock Insertions were made over the last three months. We would dearly like to know what is going on.'

We looked silently at this enigmatic grouping of times and places. I stood up and waved my hand over the display.

'Is this all true?' I asked. 'I mean could Asiablock have found a way to scramble their Insertion signatures like we can?' There was a collective gasp.

'Jee-sus, Dig!' said Jim, 'That's Cosmic Secret! You should know better than to even whisper it!' I sat down abashed.

'In answer to your question, the engineers in Research think not,' said Dr Duluth to me. 'Now,' he looked up at the rest of the meeting. 'apparently ...'

'How about finding who their Observers are?' I asked. 'If you know what their speciality is we could get a clue as to what they are doing and then ...'

'Dig,' said Jim, 'We've been trying to do that ever since we first found Asiablock had discovered the Chrondisp technique, five years ago. We've got a whole department that does nothing else.' I brightened.

'Well, that's gotta help,' I said, leaning forwards and pointing my finger. 'Who for instance is that guy over there in Aussieland ...'

'Yes,' said Jim impatiently, 'It would help if we knew, but we don't. Asiablock is a closed society and for obvious reasons we find it difficult to infiltrate.'

'You mean ...' I put my hands up to my eyes and pulled them into slits.

`Of course,' he snapped.

But how difficult was it for Asiablock to infiltrate agents into Westblock? There were plenty of Asians in Munich. Did Asiablock know I was a part-time Observer, for instance? These uneasy speculations were interrupted by AI who picked up the control box and pushed a key on it. A small disk with a number in it appeared at the end of each line.

`This shows in real-time when Asiablock actually made the Insertions,' he said.

We looked silently at the complex display. It was confusing. Not only because of the extra information added to an already cluttered hologram, but also because of the two "types" of time. I walked over, picked up the control box myself and zoomed in on an Insertion at Alice Springs in the middle of Australia 2051 years ago, but made by some Asiablock Observer for two days in December last year. Watched by the others, I drifted around the hologram, looking at other Insertions. There seemed neither rhyme nor reason.

I heard them talking of research foundations, university departments, funding, holo programs - but I knew they were really talking about how they could hide an Insertion - probably an Insertion I was going to do, and probably the reason I was at the meeting.

`It isn't easy to hide an Insertion,' complained AI, `so its gotta be to a target that yields the maximum info for minimum media and budget impact.'

`A calibration run?' suggested Jim. `We haven't done one of those for a while. We could release reams of totally soporific data through the Press Office. They wouldn't publish a word.' There was a snort of amusement from AI.

`But where to start?' asked Jim. He turned to Duluth. `Do we have any special target?'

`Yes, we do have something special for this Insertion,' said AI. He took the control box from me and put a marker ring around a 195-year long spike jumping out of Indonesia. `It's in April 1815 and near the island of Sumbawa. A volcano on this island, called Tambora, erupted in April 1815. Supposed to be the biggest explosion on planet Earth since the asteroid strike that killed off the dinosaurs. We could try for that.' The label at the top of the selected spike showed the Asiablock Insertion had been a week ago.

`That's one of the new ones. Why the hell are they interested in a volcano?' asked Jim, bewildered. `It's got nothing to do with their religion or history. All they'll get is geological data.'

`There must be another reason,' said Dr Duluth, `they never waste a shot. Yes, I think we should try for that one.'

There was a bit more chat until with a scraping of chairs the meeting came to an end. The curtains hissed apart and Dr Duluth and AI left. I was left in Duluth's office with Jim.

`And is that it? It's pretty vague,' I said.

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

`Well, as you see, you're the first. We have to start somewhere.'

I picked up the control box, closed the curtains again and zoomed in on Indonesia. Indonesia is a chain of islands about 4 000km long, running roughly parallel to the equator and crossing it at the westernmost end. Half-way along the chain I could see, just south of the equator, the well-known island of Bali. Next to it was the less well-known island of Lombok. By narrowing the field of view and looking carefully, I eventually found the three Gili islands. About a kilometer apart, they lay in a east-west line off the big island of Lombok. Gili Trawangan was the largest and most westerly. The Asiablock Observer had been Inserted into someone on this

island. Why had he been sent there in 1815? Jim read from the screen set in Dr Duluth's desk that in 1815 Indonesia had been a Dutch Colony. Gili Trawangan had been one of its more remote parts. Only two by four kilometers, it must have been a tiny hot forgotten part of the planet. Especially in April 1815, when all of Europe's attention was focussed on the build-up to what became known in June of that year as the "Battle of Waterloo", and the final fall of the French Napoleonic Empire. Even now in 2016, Gili Trawangan was still a backwater. And part of Asiablock or "The Yellow Peoples' Co-prosperity Sphere", of course.

`It's a part of the world that's just escaped history,' said Jim. I scanned around some more, making doubtful noises, but my Target had been chosen.

`Well, that's it fella,' said Jim in conclusion, standing up. `Just mosey around and see what you can see. We've really gotta find what the slant-eyes are up to.'

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I went to the library and checked out all this in the day before my Insertion, but he was right. Indonesia was a Dutch colony in 1815. I looked at the Gili Trawangan island and wondered what could have been so interesting for the Yellow People to send an Observer there for a whole week. About six kilometers in circumference, you could probably walk around it in a little over an hour. Highest point in the south was at two hundred meters. Its only connection with history had been in WW2; the Japanese had occupied the island and had built a gun emplacement on this high point.

He was also right about the volcano Tambora. It had erupted on an island, Sumbawa, about 150km to the east, so I don't suppose much would have been visible from Gili Trawangan. As I browsed through the copious hypertext headings I looked in vain for a "Beginner's Guide to Volcanoes" as there was a numbing amount of information on the subject, far too much for me to take in, and all couched in technical language: "basaltic lava, caldera, subduction zones, igneous complexes". I've never been much interested in geology.

And again the question - why had Asiablock sent someone there? How was this Insertion connected with their other unidentified Insertions? I hadn't the faintest idea, but like Duluth, I was sure of only one thing: everything Asiablock did was to advance the cause of Asiablock.

Chapter 4

And so the time came for my Insertion. I reported to the Medical Section as usual and after a quick check was issued with a white overall and my personal Helmet.

Lying down on a stretcher I was wheeled out to the Inserter complex and on the way noticed this part of Chrondisp had changed quite a bit since my last Insertion. Elaborate interviewing studios and communication facilities had been installed for the media - but as I rolled past, all the doors were closed and all the cameras dead. Al had sent them Paul, one of his engineers, carefully dressed in a white coat with a row of ball-point pens in the top pocket, and coached to give a slow pedantic presentation of the need to regularly calibrate the Inserter. Jim had grinningly reported that as soon as Pete unfolded a meter-long print-out and started reading out correction figures in a low monotonous voice, "two reporters were trampled to death in the rush to get out of the auditorium." A slight exaggeration perhaps, but at any rate my entrance into the Inserter complex went unnoticed.

Soon I was sitting in the cage, five meters above the ground, listening to the slowly rising hum from the voltage-multiplier columns and looking apprehensively at

the two large discharge spheres, one on each side of me and only a meter away. I don't think anyone ever gets blasé, about being Inserted, if only because you feel you are at the null-point of enormous equal and opposite forces.

My headset came alive. It was Jim, speaking deliberately slowly.

`Dig? It won't be long. Sixty seconds to go. Think of ... and repeat after me ...'
The usual list of emotion-laden words for calibration.

`Okay, off in a few seconds. Don't touch the cage. Break a leg.'

`I hear you,' I said peevishly, `but it would be nice if I had a more precise idea of what ...'

The rest of what I was going to say was lost in the rising drone of the electro-narcosis and I was flying forwards. A wavering white line to one side was the ten-year markers flashing past. The yellow flare of a century marker came and went. More white markers, gradually beginning to pulse individually as my headlong rush into the past slowed down. A separate distinct yellow marker, some clearly defined white markers sliding past, followed by a feminine voice, `Prepare to turn'. And there was the glow of the green turn-off Marker.

But there was no target, nothing obvious to Merge with as I had seen in previous Insertions. I was coasting over a dark landscape with here and there a few of the complex shapes I knew signified life. There was one ahead which looked a little bigger than the others but my momentum was dropping rapidly and I would never reach it.

I knew that in a moment, unless I anchored myself to some life-form in this time, I would drift to a stop and gradually pick up speed in the reverse direction, flying forwards in time faster and faster until I would wake up in the Inserter cage. Anything would be better than that.

I used the last of my momentum to drift up to one of the simple dim shapes and "Merged". I had never seen such a simple shape before. What was it?

Chapter 5

A harsh burst of bright sunlight glittering off choppy water. Yellow sand, pieces of white bleached drift-wood, brown rocks, grey-green bushes. It was warm and humid.

`Hello,' said a child's cheerful voice. `Who are you?'

I froze. Who the hell was this?

`Are you all right?' Another childish voice.

`Yes, a Spirit has just arrived in me.'

`A good one?'

`I think so.' Internally: `Are you a good Spirit?'

`Er, yes,' I said recovering. Damn, a child. It was interesting but not totally flattering that I could so easily Empathise with a child. And I would have liked to have looked around a bit before I made contact with my Host. How the hell had I been detected so quickly?

`Oh, I just felt you arrive,' said the child brightly. `I can feel you're much older than me,' it volunteered.

`It's a man and a lot older than me,' it repeated to his friend.

Jeez. I must guard my own thoughts from this young ... `Boy,' it inserted. This must be the new Translator they'd been talking about. Too bloody quick.

Now I could see the other was a boy too. Dark complexioned, regular rather Indian features, long straight hair. Almost femininely good-looking. No clothes except

for a small embroidered leather bag hanging around his neck. He was carrying a short spear and looking at his friend curiously.

`My name is Mekon and I'm almost ten. This is my friend Aku and he's eight. What's your name?'

`Er, Dig.' "Initial Contact with the Host" was going quicker than anything I'd ever read of in the manual.

`What, you mean like ...?' he made motions of excavating a hole.

`Yes,' I said shortly.

`The spirit says its name is "Dig",' said Mekon and they both went into fits of giggles.

I looked at them in annoyance. How was I going to use this Host to find who Asiablock had Inserted into hereabouts? They were still giggling but Mekon calmed down a bit as I started to ask him about his life.

He was the second son of a farmer who had a small plot on the hill in the middle of the island. His elder brother worked on Lombok, the island opposite. He had two younger sisters called Elpon and Dilka, aged three and four and a bossy older sister called Melak. His friend Aku had three sisters called Lindo, Dilka (also) and Rani. They were aged ...'

`Okay, okay,' I said irritably. Family was obviously a big thing in this culture.

`Does your Spirit have any brothers or sisters?' asked Aku. `Does it have a big nose like the one in the Chief's hut?'

Mekon giggled. `Do you have a big nose?'

I mentally took a deep breath.

`Arrgh!!' I roared in a menacing voice.

The world swung round and Mekon fell on the ground and banged his head.

`What did you do that for?' asked Aku, looking down at him in surprise. Mekon sat up and rubbed his head.

`You did that,' said Mekon internally, with a faint note of fear. He slowly climbed to his feet again. I remained silent.

But Aku was irrepressible.

`You did look funny, falling over like that,' he chortled. Another thought struck him. `Does your Spirit have to go to the lavatory?'

Involuntarily Mekon was about to giggle.

`Arrgh!!' I roared again, and again Mekon fell down and banged his head - this time more painfully. Aku looked at him with clinical interest as he climbed up to his feet, hand on head.

`Maybe your Spirit made you do that,' said Aku, mockingly.

`Don't say silly things,' said Mekon, `my Spirit doesn't like them.'

`I'll say what I want,' said Aku vigorously. `Your Spirit can't hurt me. If I want to say your Spirit is ...' he paused, looking into the distance. I mentally took a deep breath.

`No, maybe it can't, but I can,' said Mekon, threateningly stepping forwards and making a fist. Aku looked at him, nonplussed. Mekon was older and bigger.

`All right,' said Aku nervously, eyeing the fist. `If that's how you feel about it.'

`I do,' said Mekon. `And now shut up as I want to talk to him.'

They both sat down and Mekon started internally asking me lots of questions, wanting to know what it was like to be a Spirit, were there any other Spirits where I lived, why had I visited him and what was I going to do? Now however, there was a pleasing note of respect. I had an idea family discipline was not very strict in Indonesian communities. Life too easy, perhaps.

But after a while I saw him beginning to lose interest in his Spirit, even to think it was an odd waking dream he was having. His mind began to turn back to his normal activities and I felt myself being pushed into the background. I needed to improve my credibility with a practical example. I had an idea.

Both boys were carrying spears and had been playing with them - throwing them at a tree about 10m away.

`How far can you throw your spear?' I asked Mekon.

He was about to mention some vainglorious figure but remembered my disapproval of silliness and said, looking round:

`To that rock there.' About forty meters.

`And Aku?'

Mekon asked him.

`To the end of the island,' he answered boastfully.

`I can show you how to throw your spear to ...' I looked round, `... to that tree there.' About a hundred meters.

Mekon eyed the distance incredulously and relayed this rather doubtfully to Aku.

`I could never throw it that far - even my father couldn't,' he said to me internally.

It had been a long time ago, but at his age I had been able to do it. My father had taught me how one Saturday afternoon.

Aku was jumping around, divided between ridiculing Mekon's statement and boastfully asserting he could throw one to Lombok island (about two kilometers away). Was I like that at his age?

`You'll need a piece of twine,' I said to Mekon. I looked at his meter-long spear. My spear, which I remembered clearly, had been about the same length but made from ten millimeter wooden doweling.

`It'll need to be a bit longer than your spear,' I said. He pulled a piece out of the pouch around his neck. Together with a small wooden-handled knife, some pretty stones, a fish-hook, some live bait-worms, etc. etc. Little boys must be the same the world over. I would have been disappointed if it had been otherwise.

He cut it to length.

`Now tie a knot at one end.' I looked at the knot; it was too small. `Make that a double knot and tell your disbelieving friend to go and stand by that tree.' He did. Aku walked away and stood there, a small figure in the distance, dancing and shouting derisively. I turned my attention back to Mekon and his spear.

`Take the end of the twine with the knot in it and wrap it, just one turn, right at the back, but in front of the feathers. With the knot underneath. No, keep it tight or it'll slip off.'

`You mean make a half-hitch?'

`Yes,' I said gratefully. `Make a half-hitch.' He did so.

`Keeping the rest of the twine tight, run it along under your spear almost up to the point and wrap some around your index finger.' The twine went loose.

`It's dropped off the end!' he said.

`Don't worry,' I said. He'd got the right length now. `Fasten it to the back of your spear again using a half-hitch and, that's right, bring the twine under the spear again, like you did before.' By keeping the twine tight, the knotted end gripped the spear firmly just ahead of the feathers.

`Now we're ready. Arm back and hold the spear as though you are going to throw it.'

`But I don't hold it so far forwards when I throw,' he complained, `I hold it in the middle.'

`Well, don't. Hold it in the front like I showed you.' I remembered that had fooled me too: it had felt all wrong.

`Throw it!' He pulled his arm back as far as it would go and leaping forwards, threw the spear towards Aku.

Amazement!

I remembered vividly the astonishment I too had experienced as I saw my spear disappearing into the far distance. For those interested in such things, and did not have a father who never really grew up, the piece of twine acts like a sling, just about doubling the length of Mekom's arm. The half-hitch automatically disconnects the twine as the spear flies away.

Mekon was a strong little boy accustomed to throwing things, and the spear left his hand with a whirring sound and sailed impressively over Aku's head who open mouthed turned round to watch it carry on another ten meters before it plunged into the sand.

`Now you can teach the rest of your tribe,' I said, `and it'll give them a tremendous edge.'

There was a distinct feeling of surprise.

`Sure,' I continued enthusiastically. `Just think. If you can take out a guy at a hundred meters in battle ...'

`"Take out", you mean "kill"?' The surprise changed to shock and disgust. `Who would we kill?'

`Well, I dunno. Whoever your enemies are. The guys on the next island perhaps. When they try to steal your women or whatever, you'll be ready and the surprise will ...'

`Steal our women?! The people on Gili Meno are our friends and hurting people is wrong.' An afterthought: `And anytime they want to steal my elder sister...'

`All right, all right, forget it.' They had a wimpy set-up here.

`And we call ourselves "families", not "tribes",' he added reprovingly. He folded up the twine, put it silently back in his pouch and refused to tell Aku how he had been able to throw the spear so far, in spite of Aku's most persistent questioning.

I felt chastened. Maybe it was possible to have a society without aggression. But how long was it going to last? The Dutch here were already colonising them.

I pushed these thoughts aside as the boys resumed their previous occupation, walking along the beach, looking to see if anything interesting had been washed up by the tide. But as I listened to Mekom chattering on about his life in the islands, I tried to edge him towards talking about anything unusual he had seen, without revealing I hadn't the faintest idea what unusual thing I was looking for. Being a boy he saw nothing odd in my questions and answered them frankly. But being a young boy, almost everything was unusual to him.

Would his parents know anything? A profound feeling of reluctance to find out. He had managed to escape from his father today by getting up early. His father had planned to have him do some weeding in the family vegetable garden on the hill. So I'd better leave this possibility until later; in any case it was surely not going to be very easy to interview the father via his son.

While we were talking, I could only see the beach as his eyes systematically scanned from left to right. There was a cry from Aku and Mekom lifted his gaze to see what had excited his friend.

`What is it?' I asked. Squinting in the intense sunlight, Mekom was looking out to sea. Aku's keen eyes had spotted an approaching canoe and now I could see it

too. It appeared as a black dot on the burnished sea, tacking in under the gentle breeze, its wide-spread outriggers making it look like a water-beetle. There were two occupants - a white man and a brown-skinned one.

`It's Mr Koos,' he answered.

`Who's he?' I asked.

`He's one of the Dutch Colonial Administration,' he answered. I did a double take, and realised Mekon hadn't actually said that - I was getting a cleaned-up translation. `He comes over from Lombok island occasionally.'

`What does he do?' I asked curiously.

`I dunno. He comes here in a canoe with a servant and they go straight up to Lookout Point.'

`How do you know?`

`Aku and I follow them there sometimes.'

`Don't they mind?`

`No. They just chase us off if we get too close.'

`Close to what?`

`They've got a big box up there and he opens it and pulls out.. a note book and a telescope (alt. surveyor's theodolite). They use them to make observations of natural phenomena.'

This new Translator was very good and really speeded up the dialogue.

`What do they look at?`

`There's a volcano. You can see it from the other side of the island.'

Ah, yes, of course. The volcano, the reason I was here. It had been pushed to the back of my mind. But now I began to notice vague far-away booming sounds and a slight sulphurous smell in the air. I started to question Mekon and soon found the volcano was the main subject of conversation on the island. The sunsets were spectacularly red and the moon at night had a bluish veil over it. All this had produced a general feeling of unease amongst the natives. Yesterday Mekon had been unwillingly dragged off by his mother to participate in some boring religious ceremony to appease the gods.

These phenomena could account for the presence of Koos, the Colonial Administrator. He sounded like an amateur geologist, coming over in the evening after work.

`And how long do they take to make these observations?`

`About an hour. After that they close the box, go back down to the beach and leave in their canoe.'

`What time of day do they arrive?`

`Like now - mostly just before sunset.'

`And how long have they been coming?`

`About a week. Since this period of enhanced seismic activity.'

In the meantime the canoe had arrived and I saw Koos, the Colonial Administrator, for the first time. The canoe came to competently, the sail dropped and the white man stepped out into the shallow water with long white duck trousers rolled up to his knees.

He waded ashore, dried his feet on a piece of towelling, put on his shoes and socks, rolled his trousers down and threw the towel back to the brown-skinned boatman. The servant skilfully caught it, stowed it and after tying the canoe's painter to a tree trunk, stepped into the water and joined Koos on the beach.

The children ran up to the white man excitedly and greeted him as "Mr Koos", hands held out expectantly. Koos was a short, rather portly young man, about 35 years old, with a brown complexion, thinning dark hair and pale-blue eyes. Apart from

his white duck trousers, he was also wearing a white cotton jacket and a coloured tie. Some sort of minor clerk in the Dutch administration of the islands and straight from his office on Lombok, I guessed.

Koos had a tolerant smile on his face as he felt in his pocket and pulled out two small objects wrapped in paper which he tossed to the children. Mekon delightedly unwrapped his and popped it into his mouth. A peppermint drop, as near as I could judge.

`Melak?' said Koos, in an interrogative tone.

Mekon, nodded affirmatively - his mouth was full.

`Melak?' I said. `Isn't that one of your sisters?'

`Yes,' he said internally. Sucking a sweet had no effect on this form of communication. `After he's finished with his work on the hill, Mr Koos sometimes likes to go for a walk with her. She's teaching him to speak our language.'

`Indeed. And how old is Melak?' I asked. He thought a moment.

`She'll be fifteen on the 5th of July 1815, he replied. `She speaks our language well,' he added defensively. `And only yesterday she said Mr Koos is learning a lot,'

`And your mother laughed?' I surmised.

`Yes! But how did you know that?' asked Mekon, surprised.

One of the advantages of the Colonial System, I supposed. Each race learns from the other. And Koos didn't look like the sort of person that had learnt much about regular active verbs in the conjunctive tense from females of his own race. Assuming there were any on Lombok. Well, good luck to him.

But back to business.

Koos, followed by his servant, had in the meantime strolled across the beach and for the first time I saw the village. About twenty huts made of posts driven into the sand and covered with plaited palm-leaves. Most of the huts had decorative pieces of cloth hanging over the entrances. Lots of slender brown skinned people were moving around. The children of both sexes wore nothing, but from adolescence on the boys wore a coloured loin-cloth and the girls a rather sketchy wrap-around skirt. Most of them also had flowers in their hair. Two young men were squatting down making a fishing net and nearby some girls were stirring cooking pots and shouting across to them. The young men were laughing between themselves and shouting back. I looked but I couldn't see any older people. From one hut came a rather monotonous plunking sound, a bit like a xylophone. It seemed a happy community.

Koos walked between the huts nodding and receiving friendly smiles. With his servant he made for a gap in the trees behind the huts, the two children following excitedly.

`He's going to Lookout Point as usual,' said Mekon.

The two adults started to climb up a steep narrow path that went through palm tree groves, bushes with spiky leaves and long luxuriant grass. Koos climbed slowly, frequently pausing to wipe his forehead with a large handkerchief and obviously not very fit. The servant strolled patiently along behind. Finally the trees thinned and we arrived at the hill-top, covered with long grass, sibilant in the cool evening breeze.

Lookout Point was not the highest point of the island, but the highest point with a clear view. It was at the end of a small rocky plateau, about two hundred meters above the bay and being thrust forward, afforded a wide field of view from west to south-east. The highest point of the island, behind us, was hidden under a dense growth of spiky trees.

Mekon was looking over the calm Bali Sea and before us the hill dropped down abruptly to a narrow white beach. There was a line of trees at the top of the

beach and through them I could see the brown roofs of the village huts. The tide was out and sandy flats gleamed in the setting sun. Waves drove into the bay in parallel lines from the east, their edges running along and breaking in a creaming fringe on a submerged coral reef about eighty meters from the shore. The island we were on, Gili Trawangan, was the most westerly of three small islands lying off the coast of Lombok and I could see the nearest, Gili Meno, only a kilometre away to the east. Over it a faint full moon had risen in the cloudless evening sky. I remembered the Japanese had built (er ... would build) a gun position here in 1942.

A calm peaceful scene with just the rustling of the breeze and the cry of some bird in the woods below us. No, there was something else too. A faint muffled rumbling, difficult to locate, sounding to me like distant artillery.

Koos paused a moment with heaving chest to look at the view. Mekon's eyes swung round too and there it was! A small stationary puffy cloud, far away on the eastern horizon, red in the setting sun and almost directly under the rising moon. The volcano Tambora. On the island of Sumbawa, 150km away and therefore way over the horizon.

Panting, Koos felt in his pocket and pulled out a small cigar box. He extracted one and lit it with a flaring match. Puffing gratefully, he made a sign to his servant who bent down and pulled a heavy ship's chest out of a hole behind a small tree and dragged it to the front of the rocky plateau. Koos waved his servant away, fished a big key out of his pocket and kneeling down opened the chest, hinging back the lid. Cigar in mouth, he pulled out a wooden tripod which he set up by the side of the chest. He reached in again and after a while carefully lifted out a brass tube about 50cm long and 50mm diameter which he fitted to the tripod and screwed fast. With a glass lens at one end it could only be a telescope. Next out came a smaller brass tube, the eyepiece, which he polished with his pocket handkerchief and inserted into the telescope barrel. Lastly he pulled out a large loose-leaf note-book, closed the chest and laid the book out flat on its lid. The small observatory was ready.

The servant watched him for a while but bored, went and sat at the edge of the plateau, looking out to sea. Aku ran off to play behind us somewhere. But Mekon needed no urging from me to sit as close as he could to Koos, watching his every move avidly.

Ignoring him, Koos reached inside his jacket, pulled out a pocket watch and hooked it to a small nail hammered into the lid of the chest. He bent forwards, put his eye to the telescope and after ratcheting the eyepiece in and out to focus it, swung it round to examine the volcano cloud.

He muttered to himself, found a pencil in his pocket and after making a few notes in his book, swung the telescope around the bay. This time his observations required his watch, as he picked it off the top of the chest and held it in front of his face as he looked into the eyepiece. Timing the waves, as near as I could see. Some more note writing but now it was getting dark.

After a last look at the distant volcano, seen as a tiny flickering red point on the dark eastern horizon, Koos dismantled the small observatory, packed everything into the chest and locked it. Apparently the session was over for the evening. The servant silently thrust the chest back under the tree, and in the darkening purple of evening the two adults took the path down to the beach, followed by the two chattering children.

It was quite dark and small lanterns had been lit outside the village huts and on nearby trees. Over the wash of the sea there was a soft plunking sound coming from one of the huts and a voice singing to it. Mekon said good night to Aku outside

his parents' hut, and continued on with Koos to his own hut, where a pretty, slender young girl was waiting.

It was Melak, Mekon's sister. Wearing only a small skirt low on her hips, she appeared older than 15 and yet too young to be a language teacher. And no language teacher I had ever known wore a hibiscus bloom behind her ear. Koos put his hands on her hips and smiled down at her affectionately as she stretched up to wrap her arms around his neck. Mekon asked if there was any supper left. Melak removed her arms abruptly and said something tartly about "those who didn't work didn't eat" and obviously would have elaborated on this theme but for the presence of Koos. The group broke up, Koos and Melak left hand in hand through the trees for the language lesson and Mekon entered his family hut with trepidation, hoping to bluff out his father's wrath for not having weeded the garden. The silent figure of the servant disappeared into the trees - perhaps he also had a language lesson.

I heard the raised voice of Mekon's father but I wasn't interested in family arguments so I Withdrew.

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So what did I make of all this? Well, I had arrived without incident and it was sort of interesting to look around an idyllic backwater of the Dutch East Indies Empire in 1815. Yet all I had seen so far were unimportant Branch-lines. The most significant figure was the amiable Koos with his simple observation station, but he hardly seemed worth the trouble Chrongdisp had taken to send me back 200 years in time and more than 11 000km in distance. So I would just have to carry on Observing, hoping information useful to Chrongdisp would turn up.

*

Mekon was asleep and dreaming about the Spirit that had visited him that day. It wasn't a very flattering picture. The Spirit was always asking boring questions, and making him look at uninteresting things and if he didn't answer would knock his legs from under him. And if he wasn't boring him, he was making blood-thirsty suggestions about killing people. In revenge Mekon's sub-conscious had given me a small wizened face, a big nose and a shrill penetrating voice.

My reflections were interrupted by a hand shaking Mekon awake so I quickly Returned.

Chapter 6

It was his mother. A candle had been lit in the hut, casting big flickering shadows on the walls. The rest of the family was awake, moving around, and there was a great sense of urgency. Mekon sat up on his couch yawning and the dark figure of his father thrust a bundle of clothes into his arms and pushed him towards the door.

The whole village was awake. Shadowy chattering groups of people with simple candle lamps, mostly women, children and the elderly were being shepherded up the path to the top of the hill. A child was crying. A moist breeze made the palm fronds rustle and clack. Sleepy and shivering with the cold night air, Mekon clutched his bundle and followed his mother who was carrying a baby and leading another child by the hand. His father was still in the hut.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'I dunno,' he answered sleepily. 'There must be a storm coming.' I couldn't get anything more out of him, but there were two distinct earthquake shocks as we climbed the path to the hill and he staggered. A man's voice behind shouted at us to go faster.

Arriving stumbling at the top of the hill, the groups spread out and Mekon's mother led her family towards the side of a tree. Judging by the number of voices, there must have been about forty villagers already on the hill-top in small groups, some sitting around lanterns.

Mekon was fully awake now and over-excited by the unusual experience of being out of bed in the middle of the night. There wasn't much to see from where we were and Mekon didn't need much encouragement to trot over in the moonlight to the east side of the plateau to have a better look at the volcano. He had excellent young eyes and the volcano was very evident, directly under the blue-veiled full moon. It was a sharp red point surmounted by a small diffuse golden cloud as it illuminated its smoke plume from below. A red threadlike shimmering path crept towards us across the calm Bali Sea.

He watched it for a few minutes and I tried to tell him about how a volcano was the hot material in the middle of the Earth squirting out, but it was too far from his experience. He was becoming uneasy that he was alone in the darkness and wanted to return to his family. I was unable to hold his interest as he turned his back on the volcano and started to make his way to the other side of the hill.

'It's just the hot inside of the Earth popping out. It gets too hot down there and so sometimes it just has to get out,' I continued. The "just" seemed a bit laid back, even to me. 'And so sometimes it squirts out ...'

And at that very moment it happened!

The entire eastern side of the hill was suddenly bathed in an unnatural bright light, as though behind us a distant search-light had been switched on! For two or three seconds each tree and bush, each leaf and twig stood motionless, brightly etched against the night sky and Mekon's long black shadow stretched out in front of him.

Jesus! Mekon spun round and there on the horizon was the source of the illumination. A dazzling yellow fireball, just clear of the horizon, about a tenth the diameter of the moon but thousands of times brighter! Long beams stretched up and out, piercing and causing the low lying clouds above it to glow with a milky iridescent light. Before our eyes and in complete silence the fireball rose quickly, expanding and turning cherry red. It continued to rise and swell until it reached the size of a dull brick-red moon, began to blur, lose its shape and gradually faded. There was a brief crisp blue twinkling of lightning in the sky where the fireball had been. In two minutes it was over - and all that remained was a more intense swollen red glow on the horizon, looking like a tiny setting sun on a clear cloudless evening. There was a chorus of shouts and screams from the villagers on the other side of the plateau.

Frozen and mouth open, Mekon watched the eruption but I knew an explosion like that would make a lot of noise and was making calculations in my head about the speed of sound. A hemispherical shock wave had just been hammered into the air and would be racing out towards us at the speed of sound. Lemme see, 150km divided by, what was it? 330 meters per second, that would be about 500 seconds so any time now...

With an enormous clap like nearby thunder the sound pulse hit us! But unlike thunder it didn't die away but grew louder and louder, rising rapidly to a mad blaring crescendo which seemed to blast at us from all directions at once. It slammed and boomed for fully twenty seconds before it started to diminish slowly and unevenly, with echoing resonances. At the first impact Mekon screamed, closed his eyes tightly and dropped to the ground with his hands over his ears.

'What is it? What is it? Oh, save me Spirit!' he cried over and over, cringing on the ground. Crouching with him, I tried to reassure him as best I could that it was only

a sound and he was safe, but my words must have lacked conviction as I knew the show was far from over.

I had read big tidal waves often followed volcanoes. A "tiramisu". No, no, a "tsunami". But at least we would have plenty of time to prepare for it; water waves would take a long time before they covered the 150km from Tambora.

I spoke to Mekon; he wouldn't answer but as the noise abated he gradually sat up, dazed. I was wondering what to do until I was interrupted in my thoughts by the appearance beside us of dozens of dark figures. It was some of the villagers from the other side of the hill. They had run over to the edge of the plateau, were looking out over the dark sea to the distant bright red point of the volcano and gesticulating excitedly. Mekon scrambled to his feet as he recognised someone.

'Mummy!' he shouted, and ran towards a small figure who was cradling a baby and holding a child with her free hand.

He buried his face against his mother's skirt and she put an arm over his shoulder comforting him.

The shock wave slowly grumbled off into the distance and as it did Mekon recovered his courage. He took his head away from his mother's skirt.

'I wasn't afraid really,' he told me, 'I'd just never heard thunder so loud before.' Still holding his mother's hand to his face he turned to look out to sea. About 20 minutes had passed since the volcano had erupted.

'Of course not,' I said. 'I could see that.' He was a brave little boy really.

'Where's Daddy?' he asked, looking up at his mother. She was telling him he was collecting wood for a fire as I caught sight of a movement out to sea.

'What's that?' I interrupted urgently, and he focussed his eyes seawards. There was the broad silvery path of the moon's reflection, but across it and sliding rapidly towards us, was a thin dark line. As it approached I could see there were also faint lines in continuation on each side of it in the dark water, faint lines which reflected the moonlight. It was a wave, a step in the water no more than a meter high but stretching from horizon to horizon and moving towards us vastly quicker than any normal wave!

Mekon moved to one side to get a better view and now I could see the wave was getting closer. But as it approached I saw I had been mistaken about its size; it was more like 5m high and had slowed down somewhat. In fact it was slowing down even more but as it slowed it visibly increased in size, surging out of the sea and at least 10m high!

The villagers were shouting, their jerking forms making charcoal silhouettes against the grey starry night sky. Mekon released his mother's hand and ran to the edge of the plateau. Through his eyes I watched in fascination as the wall of water steadily approached. Behind it the moonlight was a matt reflection on the disturbed surface of the sea, but in front it still formed a calm clear white path. The villagers around us had stopped chattering and were crouched down watching silently. The monster wave was about 15m high, its top edge fraying and glittering, beautiful and deadly, black and silver in the moonlight. Closer and closer, slower and slower, higher and higher. Now I could hear a slow hollow rattle. It was the tide going out, but going out quicker and farther than any tide I had ever seen before. Dramatically the fierce undertow was rolling boulders over; tumbling them against each other. There was a black angular shape, which must be part of a boat, jerking from side to side in the rapidly retreating water. The monster wave had slowed down to the speed of a normal wave but it was now 20m high, sucking into its base the water that had covered the beach. The rumbling water mountain stretched across the bay, advancing slowly and no more than 50m from the beach. Where the sea had been a

minute ago was just an empty surface, dappled in the moonlight. I held my breath as the crest at the top of the water mountain gradually tipped over, curling menacingly, slowly and majestically crashed onto the beach in a booming flurry of spray, coruscating in the moonlight. The hammer blow of thousands of tons of water simultaneously hitting the beach made a muffled thump that Mekon could distinctly feel through the soles of his feet. A sparkling curtain of water was thrown high in the air, hung there momentarily and then a cloud of spray drove over us, causing the children to run back squealing from the edge of the plateau. In a turmoil of foam the wave flattened, stretched itself out and catlike ran rapidly up the beach, bubbling between the trees. A moment of calm, with flat foam-flecked water reaching half way up the trunks of the trees at the top of the beach until with a immense bass roar the water receded and I heard the villagers wailing as they saw pieces of their huts and boats floating out to sea. Ducking from the spray, Mekon stood bravely at the very edge of the plateau, looking down at the ruin of his village.

He stayed there but there was such a cloud of mist hanging over the scene that it was difficult to see much more. Over the bellowing of the surf I heard more waves arrive at irregular intervals and thunder onto the beach in their turn.

Suddenly Mekon was pushed aside by a wild cursing figure! It was Koos, but a Koos completely changed from the portly, lackadaisical, easy-going Colonial Administrator! This Koos was running up and down the edge of the plateau like a man demented, his clothes soaked and his hair plastered to his head. Startled, Mekon moved respectfully back. Koos had his telescope in his hand and I could see he was in a savage temper, shouting at the natives to get out of his way and give him a clear view over the bay. But he was too late. He had missed the tsunami. He stared furiously out to sea over the edge of the plateau, but there was no more to see. The performance was over. That would teach him to mix science with language lessons.

Mekon turned to look down again. The mist was gradually clearing and he could see the whole of the bay was filled with white milky foam, gurgling and surging from side to side. Fascinated, he stayed watching as the sea slowly subsided.

The wind dropped and calm returned. The various families huddled together and the men went down the path to the beach to see if they could salvage anything. They could be seen as black figures against the still agitated water, trying to pull in pieces of huts and boats. Mekon glanced upwards to see the blue-tinted moon sailing high above us, looking down indifferently. By its side was the unimpressive diamond of the Southern Cross, endlessly pointing to where a south pole star should be, but wasn't.

And far on the distant horizon I could see the faint insignificant red glow of the volcano that had caused all this havoc.

So that was a tsunami! I tried to get Mekon to see what Koos was doing, but he was too tired and fell asleep against his mother. I Withdrew.

Chapter 7

As Mekon slept I thought over what I had seen. "Dramatic" would be an understatement. Koos however, had missed everything and that had driven him crazy with rage and frustration. His over-reaction seemed excessive for someone who so far had appeared a fairly placid individual. Maybe he did have an Observer in his head who was spurring him on. But I didn't know Koos, maybe he had these mood fluctuations anyway. I would just have to hang in and keep watching.

*

Dawn broke the next morning to a completely different seascape. The sky to the east was stained with an enormous slowly billowing column of smoke - red, pink and purple in the rising sun. Remembering the size of the moon last night I estimated it to be as wide as the moon and stretching upwards to four moon diameters. That column must be at least 30km high! Wind shear had pulled the top aside into a enormous yellow anvil-shaped thunderhead, slowly approaching us. Faint rumblings could still be heard and once during the night Mekon had been woken by a slight earth tremor. The top of our hill was covered with a thin coating of gritty yellow powder and there was a faint choking smell of sulphur in the breeze that blew in from the sea. Small cooking fires were burning on the hill-top and Mekon was fed gruel followed by sea-water wet bread and bananas.

There was a subdued air of "disaster survived" hanging over the villagers. The men had returned from the beach with fish in their nets, to say their huts had all been swept out to sea and one old man had been drowned. There was a wail at this - he was related to everyone.

Koos and his servant had reappeared. Obviously wishing to miss nothing next time (was there going to be a next time?) they had moved the chest to the very edge of the plateau and the telescope was set up on its tripod. Koos was sitting on the chest eating some food one of the nearby family groups had provided. Glancing frequently out to sea, Koos ate quickly with an impatient preoccupied air.

The sun rose rapidly, as it does in the tropics, and the usual low bank of cloud over Gili Meno (the next island to us) dissipated, leaving the single distant enormous cloud pillar the only object in the sky. It was still slowly writhing, but was now a brilliant white.

Mekon's father was sitting in Council with the other Elders of the village, his mother was tending the fire and Mekon was given a fish net and told to go down to the beach and catch what he could for the midday meal. He looked for Aku but Aku's mother told him he was on the other side of the hill collecting firewood.

With a last glance at the volcano, Mekon started to descend the path to the beach but he had taken no more than a dozen steps when he heard behind him a cry of despair and anguish from many throats. Heart thumping, he dropped the net, hastily turned, and ran back up the path.

His eyes immediately flew to the volcano and it was obvious an extraordinary event was occurring. The cloud pillar above it was visibly increasing, expanding outwards at its base as though it was being pushed up from beneath. Its size was doubling every minute. At the edge of the plateau Koos was standing, his body tense, watch in hand.

My God! That eruption was much bigger than the last! This must be the Big One I had read about. Estimated as eight times bigger than Krakatoa, which was the equivalent to 200 Megatons of TNT! That enormous cloud was caused by a 1 600 Megaton explosion, and 150 cubic kilometres of dust and ashes had just been blasted up into the stratosphere! It was going to affect the world's climate so much that 1816, the next year, would be known in Europe and America as the "Year with no Summer". Hundreds of thousands were going to die of cold and hunger.

500 seconds to the sonic shock wave - what could I do? I started my internal clock.

`Mekon!' I shouted. `Run across to your family, tell them to lie down, jam their fingers in their ears but keep their mouths open!' The same advice young soldiers receive when hostile bombers are seen approaching.

21, 22, 23 - Mekon dashed across the hill-top, avoiding as best he could other panic-stricken villagers who were running in all directions across his path, and

gabbled out what I had told him. His family looked up at him dumbly so he urgently mimed it at the same time.

126, 127, 128 - I looked at his family. What about the children? Melak and the younger child had their fingers in their ears, but his mother had her fingers in the baby's ears - her own were quite unprotected. I had another quick look at Melak, with her wide frightened eyes. She was really very pretty, and looked about 18.

`Put the baby's head between your knees and press on its ears,' I said. `And tell your mother to protect her own ears.' He moved across and pulled his mother's hands away from the baby's head, lay down and put the baby between his legs, pressing his knees against its head.

245, 246, 247 - The baby struggled and began to cry. But his father understood at once what was required and pushed Mekon aside, using his own knees to block the baby's ears.

400, 401, 402 - No one was standing up on the hill-top anymore; they were all lying down. Mekon had his fingers pressed in his ears and I could hear nothing except the rapid pumping of his heart.

`It's not for a moment,' I told Mekon. `If you keep your fingers in tight, you'll be okay. It can't be worse than the last one.' Sometimes you have to lie. `Look out to sea, and you'll see it coming.' I wasn't sure of that, but I didn't want to miss anything.

444, 445, 446 - Koos was still at the edge of the plateau, looking out, his watch hung on the nail, telescope ready on the tripod and his fingers in his ears. I couldn't see the servant.

452, 453, 454 - Now! The hard shape of Gili Meno shimmered as the hemispherical diffracting shell of the approaching shock wave reached and passed it. The shock edge itself could be seen as a sharp line racing across the water towards us. In 6 seconds it would be on us! Behind it the water was dappled and disturbed.

`Get down!' I shouted and he ducked, screwing his eyes closed at the same time. An instant later the shock wave hit.

Pow! The crack of its arrival was louder than a near-miss from a 155mm shell - much louder and much more impulsive than last night's shock, and the ground leapt under Mekon's slight body. There was a red flash across his retina and the prodigious crack of doom resonated in his chest cavity. Fortunately the shock wave passed us this time in about 5 seconds. But it was long enough to stun Mekon unconscious. The shattering storm of sound continued over his unconscious body - all I could do was to lock his arm muscles so his fingers stayed in his ears.

After a few minutes, he stirred and dazedly opened his eyes. He had a splitting headache but as he cautiously removed his fingers from his ears I was relieved he could still hear with both ears the dying remnants of the explosion as they echoed into the distance behind us. Feeling something wet, he put his hand up to his face and found his nose was bleeding. The thunder had passed and he looked dizzily around. I reminded myself he had just heard the loudest sound that had ever occurred on the planet's surface since the asteroid strike that killed off the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. And we were 150km from it!

The first thing he saw was his family. They were all unconscious except for the baby and the young child who were crying wildly. I supposed they had escaped in the way a small object thrown into a torrent will survive while a bigger one will be dashed to pieces. His mother, father and the two elder children were looking sightlessly up at the sky and blood was seeping from their nostrils. A good sign - at least their hearts were beating.

Head still ringing, Mekon picked up the baby and cradling it, looked out to the edge of the plateau. Koos was kneeling forwards and blood was dripping from his

nose. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. Standing up slowly and shakily, he looked out to sea. The baby's crying died to a whimper and it clutched Mekon.

Koos was crouched down over his sea chest, looking intently out to sea. His notebook was open in front of him, he had his pencil in one hand and his watch in the other. The tenseness in his body showed he was waiting for the tsunami. It would be bigger than the last which had appeared a mere 15 minutes after the sound shock last time. I was still amazed at its speed. A tsunami must have a completely different type of propagation to normal water waves. It must be a compression wave in the water itself, like sound is in air. The energy would get converted into a surface wave when the water shelved onto the coastline.

Another 5 minutes to go.

Mekon's father and mother were stirring and sitting up, as were figures all over the hill-top. The father was groaning and rubbing his ears. The mother looked at Mekon dazedly and automatically reached out for the baby.

'Are you all right?' croaked Mekon. The father nodded weakly but the mother just nuzzled the baby.

'This wave will be bigger than the last,' I said, to Mekon. He said nothing; a flicker in the distance had caught his attention.

White foam was spurting high up in the air from the headland of Gili Meno, about 2km away! It hung in the air, twice as high as the island, sparkling brightly in the sun. But before it could fall it was our turn! A ruled line appeared on the surface of the sea, from horizon to horizon, apparently pivoting around Gili Meno, and raced incredibly quickly towards us. Could that be it? It looked harmless enough. There was a twinkle off to the left. Another fine line flicking across the sea towards us! Another tsunami! I could see so much more clearly than last night. The two waves were going to arrive here at about the same time - in about 4 seconds! But as they approached they both began to slow down and as they slowed down they rose up from the surface of the sea like 20m high moving walls. Thrusting forwards, with vertical white streaks mottling their sides, they crashed together at a right angle about 200m away. The meeting point, the apex, was wildly turbulent as though an underwater pump was fountaining white foam 100m into the air. The two waves purposefully surged in on our island like the closing blades of scissors, the foaming apex heading straight for us. And as they approached they climbed farther and even farther out of the water, two dark 50m high menacing ridges of water stretching from horizon to horizon, reaching up to engulf our tiny island. Again a deep rattling sound from the bottom of the hill as the water was sucked off the beach, the tide appearing to go out, farther and farther until the steeply shelving 100m wide rocky shelf of the beach was completely and almost indecently exposed. The water that had covered it had been drained away, to be sucked into the base of the two advancing ramparts. They were more than 60m high and then the beach went dark as they screened it from the rising sun. The apex was a foaming maelstrom, gouts of water being thrown into the air twice as high as the waves themselves! I could hear it hissing above the roar of the undertow and the thunder of the two enormous trembling and unstable mountains of water tottering towards us.

They rose and rose, paused for an instant and struck, one instantly after the other!

I swear the very island moved as the thousands and thousands of tons of water tipped over and thundered onto it. Mekon staggered and almost fell. The water rushed hungrily inland, immediately submerging the trees at the top of the beach, swiftly racing higher and higher up the side of the hill towards us. There seemed

nothing could stop the water from completely covering the island as it hissed and bubbled through the trees, rising and rising, closer and closer. Frozen with fear, Mekon watched the water level rise higher and higher. It was going to overwhelm us! But gradually it slowed down and reluctantly stopped, gurgling around the tree tops, a scant 10m below his feet. He looked down at the enormous stretch of flat foam-flecked water surrounding our island, now reduced to a dome sticking 50m out of the wide sea. Slowly, slowly gravity regained its hold and sluggishly the water level began to sink, to return to where it had come from, retreating faster and faster down the steep slope of the hill. But as it retreated it seemed in defeat to be seeking its revenge, determined to destroy everything that had hindered its final victory, vindictively uprooting trees and tumbling down boulders. With a monstrous rushing and roaring it clawed at the side of the hill, exposing the raw rock, ripping and tearing off the growth of centuries. At last with a malevolent bellow it sank back to the beach in a cloud of dirty brown foam, scattering it with tree trunks, rocks, and leafy branches. The brown earth-laden water was sucked out again and a smaller wave swept in, smashing the debris back onto the beach.

Stunned Mekon looked down. The sea was a maelstrom of yeasty yellow foam, conflicting currents and spinning vortices.

The sun was obscured and wind was howling over the hill, lashing it with cold rain and bringing the smell of mangled and broken vegetation. The rain had become mixed with falling ash and was plopping down like grey liquid mud. The sky was a dirty yellow and the temperature was falling. The villagers were cowering on the hill-top in any hollow or behind any tree they could find. It was a scene like the end of the world.

Terrified Mekon ran back through the mud to his family.

Koos was still at the edge of the plateau, sometimes leaning into his chest and apparently writing but occasionally straightening up and running in short slippy urgent steps to the other side of the plateau where he would look down, holding his watch up to his face.

He had stopped writing - it was impossible because of the pouring rain. He was crouching over the sea-chest, the lid was partially open and he had his head inside it. I thought for a moment he was sheltering from the wind and rain, but I realised he was reading and memorising his notes. If he really was an Observer, he would be doing just that! The only way he could carry them back to the future would be in his head.

I must see what he had written!

'Mekon,' I said. 'Mr Koos has something very important in his box and your Spirit must see it. Can you go over and look in the box for me?' I tried to make him feel interested and curious, but it wasn't easy. He didn't want to leave his family, and I could also sense a feeling of resentment building up against me. But he reluctantly rose to his feet and struggled across the hill-top in the whistling cold wind towards the solitary figure of Koos, head still in his sea-chest. Mekon sat innocently on the edge of the plateau, looking down at the wildly tossing sea. It had stopped raining mud but the hill-top was covered with it to a depth of 5 cm or so. He shivered in the unaccustomed cold.

I just had to wait until Koos made another of his periodic sorties to the far edge of the plateau. Ah, there he went! He closed the lid, cast a suspicious glance at Mekon, and started to jog across to the far side of the plateau. Mekon moved to get up.

`No, wait,' I said. And I was right! Out of the corner of Mekon's eyes I saw Koos had got about half way to the other edge, had stopped and was looking back. Satisfied, he turned and disappeared from view.

`Now!' I said. Mekon dashed forwards and with both hands lifted up the heavy lid of the chest and put his head inside.

It was much as I had expected. The chest was neatly divided up into compartments, leather or velvet lined, badly stained by the rain. There was a compartment for the telescope, another for its objective, one for an ink-pot, another for what looked like a powder horn. There were also some small drawers, but in the middle was what I sought. A sheaf of papers, reasonably dry and held down by clips! The top one was a map of the local islands.

Keeping the chest open with one hand, Mekon turned them over. They were all the same. Each one was a map showing the island we were on, Gili Trawagnan, the next island, Gili Meno, and the nearby coastline of Lombok. But on the maps was drawn a system of fine lines and it only took me a moment to recognise these as the paths taken by the tsunamis. Koos had drawn parallel lines coming in from the east, diffracting around the headland of Gili Meno and swinging in to strike our island. Other maps showed waves striking Lombok and being reflected. I could see the super tsunami that had hit us was due to the reinforcement of another tsunami arriving at an inclined angle from the north. He obviously didn't know where this had come from as he had put a question mark against it. The later diagrams were covered with diamond-shapes showing how the later incoming waves had been reflected, diffracted and intermixed. And now I could see why he had needed a watch. There were tiny figures meticulously written between the lines, showing the intervals between the wave-crests in seconds.

I experienced a sinking disappointment. I didn't know what I had expected to find, but it looked very much as though Koos were just a rather eccentric ... what was the name? geologist? oceanographer? I was just about to tell Mekon to drop the lid and return to his family when with a jerk of terror he felt a hand on his shoulder! He was pulled back violently and thrown to the ground, falling on his back. The chest lid fell closed with a hollow thud and Mekon looked up to see Koos leaning over him!

It was not the amiable portly Koos who liked to receive language lessons from Mekon's pretty 14-year old sister. This was a Koos transfigured! His body was rigid with fury. and his face was contorted with suspicion and hate.

`What you doing?! What you doing?!' he shouted, leaning forwards over Mekon and staring intently into his eyes.

`Who are you?!' he continued. And more quietly:

`Ik geloof dat jij een spion bent.' Dutch, I guessed. Near enough to German - "I think you are a spy". Koos did have an Observer in him!

Mekon stared up at him terrified. Koos glanced quickly up over Mekon's head and I knew he wanted to see if there was anyone near enough to witness what he was about to do. Assured no one was watching, he looked down again and stretched out his big hands towards Mekon. A little boy's neck would break easily and would be put down as an accident.

Mekon might be a little boy but he was an agile little boy and he knew mortal danger when he saw it. He rolled rapidly to one side and panic-stricken tried to scramble to his feet but slipped and fell in the greasy grey mud. Koos made a move to follow him but also slipped in the mud. Giving up the idea of catching Mekon, he swiftly turned and opening the chest groped inside and pulled out a pistol!

Jesus! Surely an old thing like that wouldn't work after being rained on? But I saw it wasn't a flint-lock; it had percussion ignition! It probably bloody-well would

work! Mekon had finally scrambled to his feet and turned to run for his life. But Koos was standing in front of the sea-chest, pistol stretched out. I must get out of Mekon's body! The strangest things happened to Observers if their Hosts died on them. The wide muzzle was lining up on Mekon. At 2 meters he could hardly miss.

"In Xanadu ..." I began, but I saw I had no time! A click as Koos pulled back the hammer. There was only one thing to do: "Evade a blade; run at a gun" was a close-combat axiom.

`Run at him!' I said urgently and Mekon turned and threw himself blindly at Koos, hitting him just above his knees. Koos, surprised by the light but unexpected blow, took a step back. The sea-chest caught him behind the knees and being heavy and standing on mud-free rock, didn't move. Arms waving, Koos's corpulent body toppled back over it and he fell heavily on his side at the edge of the plateau. He tried to get up but slipped in the mud. With arms wildly swinging to regain his balance he almost recovered, but his feet shot from beneath him and with a hoarse shout he disappeared over the lip!

Mekon took a horrified look at the edge of the plateau, empty but for the sea-chest, turned and ran as fast as he could in the slippery mud to his family and buried his face sobbing in his mother's skirt. And I didn't blame him.

I didn't see much. His parents comforted him, but they had no idea what had happened. They had enough troubles of their own. And though they didn't know it, their troubles were only beginning.

About 90 000 people had just been drowned on the Indonesian islands, soon all the islands within 200km of Tambora were going to be covered to a depth of 50cm with pumice ash, which would make agriculture impossible for the next three years and cause the death of further thousands through hunger and fighting for food.

As I listened to Mekon's sobs gradually subsiding, I tried to calm him, but he wanted nothing more to do with me.

`Leave me, get out of me!' he kept saying over and over. It was obvious he associated me with all the catastrophes. I kept trying, I desperately wanted to give some advice to his family, to tell them to get away as far as possible from their island, but he just kept shaking his head and telling me to go away.

There was nothing else to do. Koos was almost certainly the Host Asiablock had Inserted into - but for what reason was beyond my comprehension. They would have to work that out back at Chrondisp. I listened to Mekon's sobs and tried to project sympathy and friendliness, but he would have none of it.

`Get out of me,' he said again.

And so with a heavy heart I recited my Return Code:

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 8

I was lying on my back, looking at a blinking light. Usually I would have unhooked the drip-feed, removed my helmet and climbed off the bed myself. But this time I was too depressed. Everyone experiences a bit of post-coital sadness on Returning from a Mission; it's to do with the enormous sweep of history forcibly thrust at you as you go back in time. We're told it's similar to the feeling of deep humility space explorers experience as they first look down at the Earth.

But this time it was somehow worse. I suppose we all, when we are young and are faced with having to pass exams and make our way in a competitive world, dream about an ideal society. Preferably in the South Seas. Golden sand, a calm blue lagoon, perpetual sun, palm trees, the distant sound of xylophones and flutes in the evening. A Garden of Eden peopled by a happy, healthy, beautiful people. Slim, friendly, innocently promiscuous brown-breasted girls. No hunger, no wars, just a gentle life filled with music, painting, weaving, making love, the simple daily round. At one with nature and the slow turn of the seasons.

Mekon lived in the nearest thing I had seen to this dream. And because of the volcano Tambora it was going to perish without trace in the next one or two years. Had perished, almost 200 years ago, I reminded myself sadly. The only traces left were the mouldering memoirs of cranky Dutch colonialists or the garbled accounts of illiterate seafarers. And those of Mekon's community that had survived were going to have their utopian life-style destroyed by contact with the white races. Alcohol, disease, and worst of all the missionaries who were going to corrupt their innocent happiness by teaching them about Sin, and make even the children cover their bodies completely.

My Mission to Gili Trawagan was "classified" and there was no way anyone would finance another Mission just to study them. Only the stress of the East/West conflict had allowed me to go there in the first place.

In the distance I heard the rattle of a trolley. It got closer and closer and eventually stopped at the foot of my bed. It was the Bedside Reception and Debriefing team - the rotund figure of Dan and the lean cadaverous figure of Joe, both dressed in white smocks. I watched gloomily as Dan hyperactively parked his trolley, Joe over-efficiently pulled out the drip needle, wiped my arm with alcohol and stretched a Band-Aid over it. Dan lifted off my helmet and put it by the bedside. They looked down at me in faint surprise.

Back to the bloody competitive 21st Century.

'Okay? Good trip? A small island in Indonesia, eighteen-hundred something wasn't it?' said Dan in his grating voice. I sat up, unconsciously expecting I would have to make an effort after the long sleep, but as usual being surprised by a sense of perfect health. Because of the unconscious electro-exercises our bodies were made to perform while we were "away".

'Yeah, I'm all right,' I replied resentfully. 'Everything was fine,' I continued hastily, knowing what questions they were going to ask. 'Mission accomplished - I guess. Narcosis level okay, Time Marker indicators clear. Target Host the best that could be found in the time.' I scowled around the ward at the rows of beds filled with sleeping figures, wondering where they were - screwing up other people's lives somewhere, no doubt.

'A little snack?' said Joe. Why not. I shrugged my shoulders indifferently. He unnecessarily noisily snapped his trolley open and splashily poured out a cup of warm milky tea. I slid my feet to the floor and took a sip. Wordlessly Dan handed me a plate of warm buttered toast. I bit into it and tasted the bitter tang of the orange marmalade.

*'Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach,
In the morning of the world,
When earth was nigher heaven than now";'*

said Dan, unexpectedly.

I stopped chewing and looked at him blankly.

`What are you on about?' I asked.

`That's where you were,' said Dan.

`Browning,' supplied Joe.

`It's by Browning. Browning the poet,' explained Dan.

`He probably knows more about Browning the gun,' said Joe and they both snickered. The clowns. I felt my blood sugar level rising.

As I continued chewing I reflected it may have been a rather slow-moving existence on that island. I tilted the toast dextrously to prevent a piece of thick marmalade peel sliding off. In fact it would have been a pretty boring. Sure, the girls were very pretty and willing but what could you talk about afterwards? Flower arranging? And the climate. Constant 30 degrees and 80% humidity doesn't make for a busy and creative life-style. Come to think of it, the music with its 5-note scale was pretty dreary too and would probably have driven me up the wall in no time.

I sat up straight, flexed my muscles and reached out for some more toast. God, I was hungry! What I really wanted was a fast game of squash with someone - Jim, for example. I could always nail him to the wall after I returned from a Mission. But first I would have to be debriefed.

Under their amused eyes I helped myself to another cup of tea and three slices of toast, and still chewing followed them past the rows of beds filled with sleeping Observers, all wearing their helmets with their names stencilled across the front. "Francette, Georgi, Fred, Igor ... and all with their left hands moving in synchronism.

They left me in "Debriefing Room 1" where I sat finishing the toast and marmalade.

*

A few minutes later I heard footsteps in the corridor and Jim entered, dressed as usual in a bright Hawaiian shirt. For a moment I thought of greeting him in my normal merry way, with one hand up to my eyes to reduce the dazzle, but he was followed by a rather serious-looking man in a three-piece suit.

Mid-thirties, balding, quite a bit overweight and rather short at 1m 60. For an instant he reminded me of someone, but I couldn't place it. Jim introduced him as Dr Kaplan, and because of the title I knew I was being warned. Jim had once introduced me to another tubby little bloke called Greg. He was on the vibes in a combo playing for the canteen dance one Saturday evening. All three of us got on fine and it was only a month later that I saw him on a holo show, being introduced as Professor Gregory Shaw, Nobel Prize winner for his work on negative time entropy (or something).

So I gravely shook hands with Dr Kaplan.

`Dr Kaplan is a geologist and has written the definitive work on tectonic-plate overlap-dynamics,' said Jim. I looked suitably impressed.

`Mr Digby is the Observer who has just returned from witnessing a volcano in Indonesia in May 1815,' continued Jim. `That information is secret, of course.'

`Tambora,' commented Dr Kaplan, looking at me with covetous pale-blue eyes. `The largest volcanic outbreak that occurred on the Earth in the last six million years. It's a great pity Chrondisp were not able to send someone more knowledgeable.' "Like me" hung unsaid in the air.

There were further footsteps and Dr Duluth arrived, talking into his phone. He paused at the door a moment.

`I'm there now,' he said, and snapped it shut.

He looked at us, and seeing we had all been introduced turned to me.

`Success I hear,' he said in his neutral voice.

`As well as could be expected,' I began. `I found I had the choice of a 10-year old boy as Host, or aborting the Mission and returning.'

`A boy!' said Jim.

`Yes, but it didn't turn out so badly.'

`You found you could Empathise with him, then?' asked Dr Duluth.

`Yes,' I said, looking at him suspiciously, but his face was straight. `Well, to start with, I thought I'd wasted my time,' I continued, `but after a while a member of the Dutch Colonial Administration showed up, who was interested in the volcano.'

They looked at me interrogatively.

`He'd been looking at it from the top of a hill on the island,' I explained. `I don't think it was official, he just came over in the evenings, probably after work.'

`And was the Asiablock Observer Inserted into him?' asked Jim.

`I'm coming to that and you can judge for yourself,' I answered, annoyed. I dislike people interrupting my story. `Can I have a map?' I asked.

Jim fiddled with a projector in the corner and wordlessly handed me the control box. The lights dimmed and the islands of Indonesia floated in the air before us. I expanded the display and zeroed in on Gili Trawangan.

`I was here and the volcano was on an island 150km to the east.'

`Sumbawa,' supplied Dr Kaplan.

`That's it. I was in my Host, a boy called Mekon, as I saw an eruption in the middle of the night. And it was fantastic - a big golden fireball!' I waved my arms. `It lit up the whole bloody sea! It rose and changed to red and grew bigger than the moon, illuminating ...' Calm down. I can give them all that later. I paused. `Anyway,' I continued in a lower voice, `a few minutes later there was a tremendous bang, like a clap of thunder, but longer, and a few minutes after that the tsunami arrived. Of course, it was night-time so I couldn't see it so well but it was enormous!' I stood up. `It must have been 30m high, a damn great mountain of water glittering in the moonlight ...!' Steady on. I took a deep breath, lowered my voice again and sat down. `Well, Koos, the Colonial Administrator bloke, he missed it by about ten minutes and when he finally got to the lookout point he was out of his skull with rage.'

There was a polite pause.

`I would have been annoyed too,' said Dr Duluth.

`Listen,' I said, `the point is that Koos was really quite a friendly sort of bloke. Okay, a fatso, an oddball to be interested in volcanoes and so on but here he was running up and down like a blue-arsed fly. Over-reacting, you know what I mean?' In the darkness Jim coughed.

`Well, I thought it odd anyway, but just wait until the next bit.' I took a large bite of toast and they all waited impatiently while I chewed it down. I tried a sip of the tea but it was cold.

`OK. Well, the first eruption was over and Mekon went to bed. The next morning he got up and saw the volcano - and it had changed. It was a bloody great pillar of smoke stretching up into the sky and kind of waving around slowly. He was sent down to the beach to catch some fish and on the way down he heard all the other natives on the hill give a great shout, so he hung his net on a tree and ran back and ...' I was going into too much detail. I paused. `He got back on top of the hill and he found the volcano had just gone off again. There was this enormous jet of smoke, followed by a tremendous bang, much louder than the first and much shorter. It knocked him out. But the worst part was to come.' I put the cup of cold tea down. `It would have been nice if someone had told me about volcanoes at sea, by the way,' I added complainingly, `then I would have known better what to expect.'

`You didn't prepare?!' said Dr Kaplan in an incredulous voice. `You had full library facilities, didn't you?'

`Sure,' I said, `but all I could find was a lot of crap on "subduction zones" and "igneous complexes". I didn't have the time ...'

`Mr Digby's target was decided on at the last moment,' interrupted Dr Duluth, placatingly.

`Right,' I said. Where was I? `Anyway,' I continued, `there was a sort of line that ran across the sea towards us. I thought I'd seen something like it the night before, but I couldn't be sure. It was a small step in the water, I'd say no more than 1m high, but it was bloody fast.'

`500km/h,' said Dr Kaplan.

`Sounds right,' I said, `But as it got nearer the island, it slowed down, and as it slowed down it got bigger. It just sort of rose out of the water.'

I stopped a moment picking a piece of toast out of my teeth and looking into the distance. I slowly stood up.

`And Jesus, I've never seen anything like it! There were two of them and they arrived together. It was the biggest bloody wave I've ever seen in my life. It must have been 100m high, and as it curled over and hit the beach it was like the Hammer of God! It swirled up the side of the hill and near as dammit reached the top. Another 10m and it would have covered the island and drowned my Host! The whole island shook as it hit and we were drenched with spray even though we were 200m up!' I took a breath.

`And what about the Dutchman?' asked Dr Duluth.

`The Dutchman? Yes.' I said. `Koos had been sitting waiting on the edge of the plateau since dawn, determined to miss nothing this time, I guess. But he was kinda odd. He had his telescope set up and you'd think he'd be looking at the volcano, but he wasn't.'

`And what was he looking at?' asked Dr Duluth patiently.

`Well, he was just looking between his watch and the sea. To the left and the right, back to his watch, and scribbling like crazy. Like he was timing something.'

`But what was there to time?' asked Dr Kaplan.

`Well, all I could see were lines running across the sea - lines coming in from all directions and making big diamond-shaped patterns - you know, like if you throw two stones into a pond at the same time.'

They all exchanged glances and Dr Kaplan shrugged.

`And the waves on the beach?' he asked.

`They were fantastic! After the first wave hit, they came in at all heights. And just after that ...'

`Fascinating,' said Dr Duluth, and I could see he had had enough dramatic description.

`Well, Koos got it all down this time. And now comes the interesting bit.' I lowered my voice and leant forwards over the table. `He kept going over to the other side of the hill to time the waves there and so I waited until he went there again and got Mekon to nip over to look at his notes. He'd been recording everything down in this note-book which he kept in a big sea-chest, as it was raining, you see,' I added in explanation. `But while Mekon was looking at his notes, Koos came back and surprised him and was so angry he tried to kill him.'

`Tried to kill a young boy?' said Jim in surprise.

`Damn right,' I said. `He pulled a pistol out and was going to shoot him.' I held out an imaginary pistol.

`Christ! And did he?'

`No, he bloody well didn't,' I said shortly. `I wouldn't be here if he had. I know all about how Observers go bonkers if their Host dies on them. So I got my Host to run at him and he fell over the cliff. I would have liked to have another shufti at those papers, but Mekon just wanted to get back ...' Dr Duluth held up his hand.

`The Dutchman fell over the cliff?' he asked blankly. I suppose it was a rather abrupt exit for a principal character.

`Yes.' They didn't seem to understand what I was getting at. `Listen, the point is that Koos had had a complete change of character. He was no longer the gentle fatso who handed out candy to the native kids, he'd become a real nasty. In fact ...' I remembered. `He said I was a spy, in Dutch.'

`You speak Dutch?' asked Dr Kaplan sharply. I waved my hand impatiently.

`It's near enough to German,' I said.

`Mr Digby lives in Germany,' said Jim.

`So you think his mood was being controlled?' asked Dr Duluth. I shrugged but said nothing then sat down. They now had the same evidence as I had.

There was a pause, with Jim and Dr Duluth talking quietly together. I thought back to that dramatic encounter on the cliff-top and realised why Dr Kaplan had looked so familiar. Dressed in white duck trousers and a white coat he could have passed for Koos. I scanned back over my description of him. H'm. It explained why Kaplan had been so tetchy with me.

I heard Dr Duluth's voice:

`And what was in the notes you saw?'

I used the control box to change the display to show the same map I had seen in Koos's sketches.

`He'd got this map already drawn on about twenty sheets of paper. And on them ... Jim, can I draw on the map with this thing?'

Jim reached over and showed me the "Write" and "Erase" buttons. I made a few experimental squiggles and erased them.

`My Host didn't have a lot of time to study them, but they were covered with lines like this.' Waving the control box in the air I drew the lines I could remember, the big one diffracting around Gili Meno, the unknown one coming in from the north and the two crossing just before they hit.

`All the maps were much the same and they had numbers written between the lines.' I tried to write a number but the control was too coarse. I erased it.

`Is there anything for you there?' asked Dr Duluth.

`Well, yes and no,' answered Kaplan. `We know tsunami waves are reflected and refracted like you have shown, but I've never seen such complex patterns. But that's to be expected because of their size, of course. Do you remember any of the figures?' he asked me.

`They were in seconds, mostly around 20 to 30,' was all I could offer.

`It's what one would expect from islands so close together.' He paused reflectively. `We have sea-bed profiles and satellite photographs of the islands and if you wanted we could do computer simulations of the wave fronts,' he said to Dr Duluth, `but at that intensity there would be a lot of non-linearity which would make our results unreliable. Krakatoa blew up in 1883 and we have a lot more information on that. But we think Tambora was eight times as violent. But perhaps with these figures...' He looked into the distance.

There was some more discussion between Kaplan and the other two about whether it was worth trying, which computer was free, and would my numbers help, but eventually the conversation ground to a halt. Jim took the control box from me and the lights came on. He turned to Dr Duluth.

`So Dig got to the Asiabloc Observer and found he was measuring tsunami waves. But we don't know why he was doing it,' he summarised.

There was a faint annoyed look on Dr Duluth's face.

`We must get more data,' he said. `Have any of the other Observers reported in yet?' Jim pulled out his phone and started punching in numbers. I turned to Dr Kaplan.

`If there's any more info I can give you, please feel free to ask,' I said with a friendly smile, trying to make amends.

And so I spent the rest of the day and most of the evening with Dr Kaplan, slowly describing everything I had seen. My first impression of him was right. He really was a pompous schmuck and could have done with some language lessons himself. He was pissed-off he hadn't gone himself, but that was a common enough complaint amongst the various experts who the Institute employed. Still, Chrondisp would have paid him well for his advice.

Chapter 9

Later that evening, as I had promised myself, I had an hour of squash with Jim. I won, but to my surprise only just. Sure, I was full of beans but somehow I didn't have the aggressive edge. Even Jim, who had been resigned to an ignominious defeat, was surprised. I was still thinking of the calm gentle lifestyle of Gili Trawangan, I guess.

After we had showered and were having a beer in the canteen, Jim brought me up to date about the investigations into the unidentified Insertions.

`Other Observers have returned and we can't get any sense out of them. We sent a girl out to Batavia, that was name of the capital city of Indonesia then, just after your Insertion - she found her Asiablock Observer all right and he was a Colonial Administrator too. But his job was just damage assessment after Tambora.'

`The Dutch were pretty thorough,' I said. `Couldn't Asiablock have got all that data from old records?'

`Apparently not,' he replied. `It seems they were all destroyed in the flooding that followed the next big volcano that came down the pike - Krakatoa.'

`Indonesia seems a dangerous place to live in,' I commented. 'And our other Observers?'

`Weird,' he said. `Asiablock sent an Observer to Britain in 1550 and so we followed him in. We located him - but this time his Host's job was to make a survey of farming production.'

`Farming production? And that's all he was doing? Collecting farming statistics?' I asked incredulously.

`That's what our Observer said.'

`Where in England?' I asked. He shrugged.

`I dunno. Look, if you're interested we could go back to my room, I could fish it all out on my terminal.'

So we finished our beers and took a lift up to the top level. It was the first time I had seen the Chrondisp staff accommodation. Jim had a luxurious 4-room apartment with a magnificent view of the desert. I stood admiring the long deep-blue shadows cast by the razor edged dunes as the sun went down. There was quite a strong wind, buffeting the dome and blowing the sand up in dark clouds.

`Yeah, it's great,' he said absently, sitting down and tapping at a keyboard. His screen lit up and after a moment a map of the British Isles appeared.

`Sheffield. That's where they had their Observer,' he said. `Sheffield in 1550 was the agricultural administrative centre of the north of England.'

`I wouldn't have thought there were many farms there,' I said, thinking of the hiking holidays I had made over the desolate Yorkshire moors.

`Yeah, sure, but at that time the whole area was covered with trees; they were mostly cut down in the 16th century. There's more on it here.' He put the cursor on the hypertext word DEFORESTATION and pressed "Return". The screen cleared and we read:

"The new technology produced new problems, partly as a result of the increased use of iron in the making of cast-iron guns. Because the blast-furnace was charged with ore and fuel in intimate contact, attempts to use coal invariably failed because the impurities it contained were absorbed by the iron. It was thus necessary to charge the blast furnace with charcoal (derived from wood) as the fuel, and by the end of the 16th century the iron industry was consuming timber at a prodigious rate. Combined with the demands of ship-building (the largest ships of the time each required several thousand trees in their construction), the iron industry was rapidly deforesting Europe. The "Timber Famine" was most severely evident in the British Isles, where the making of both guns and ships was booming."

He went back to the map and toggled a key. It was quite dramatic to see the difference. In 1550 the north of England was mostly covered with trees; in 1650 it was mostly denuded.

`But why's all that so interesting to Asiablock?' I persisted. `Some more feudal abuses of the workers?'

`We thought that too, but it so happens they had a Guild system going, so it wasn't as bad as usual.'

I looked at the map in bafflement.

`Can you call up the other places and times where Asiablock have Inserted?'

Without answering he tapped on his keyboard again. The map became an Earth globe and spikes stuck radially out of it, like the display I had seen just before my last Mission.

`Let's have a look at that one,' I said, pointing at random to one line that stuck out of Russia, near a big lake, about 250km to the east of the Caspian sea. An Asiablock Observer had been sent there in November 1989. The map expanded, and I could now see it was called the "Aral Sea". We looked at it silently.

`Did we also put an Observer in there to follow him up?' I asked. He shook his head.

`Well, can you get some more information on it?' I asked. Obliging he tapped and the screen filled with text:

"The Aral Sea is a large inland body of water located on the border between the Republic of Kazakh to the north and the Republic of Uzbek to the south. The Ustyurt Plateau is to the west and the Kyzyl Kum desert to the south-west. The Aral Sea has no outlet. It is fed by two rivers, the Syr Darya on the east and the Amu Darya to the south. These rivers have been tapped extensively for irrigation, and their flow had been so drastically cut that the Aral Sea's area declined by about 40% between 1960 and 1990. Increasing salinity and pollution have destroyed the fishing industry; the former port of Muynak is now 48km inland. Schemes proposed to halt the sea's shrinkage, which poses a severe environmental threat to the surrounding area, include reductions in water usage and the building of a canal to divert water

from the Irtysh river into the Aral Sea. The Aral Sea was known as the Khwarazan Sea to the Arabs as early as AD 903. Native Kazakhs were living in the area when the Russians first sighted the sea in the 17th century."

We read it without comment.

'Well, shouldn't we send in an Observer to try to find what the Asiablock Observer was looking for?' I asked.

'Do we need to?' replied Jim. 'On past form, he was after lost farming or environmental statistics.' He started to make a print-out.

'Perhaps, but how can you be so sure they were lost?' For answer, he tapped again and we read:

"In November 1989, the Russian Empire began to disintegrate and there was a very confused situation, the Republics of Uzbek and Kazakh inter alia declaring independence. The civic records of both Republics were destroyed in the fighting around the city of Muynak."

'I guessed,' he said. 'As before, the Observer got in just before the data disappeared for ever.'

Damn, I should have seen that for myself.

We flipped around to investigate the sites of other Asiablock Insertions and found they almost all followed the same pattern: an environmental disaster had occurred but the records, showing what things were like just before the disaster, had disappeared for some reason. The Asiablock Observer had been put in to recover these records.

'What the hell's going on?!' I exploded. 'Why are Asiablock so bloody interested in natural disasters and farm statistics?! There's a pattern here but I'm bugged if I can see it.'

'We'll be bugged if we don't see it,' said Jim, tearing off the print-out.

We seemed to have driven the subject into the ground without finding anything useful. We needed to look in another direction.

'Is there any other form of unusual activity over at Asiablock,' I asked. 'I mean not only at Chondiski,' (that's the Asiablock Inserter in Manchuria), 'but generally?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, building up the infra-structure, factory, school or road construction, big training programmes, R&D projects, weapon development - that sort of thing. Where are they spending their big yen?'

'Jeez, Dig, I don't know; that stuff's all secret isn't it?'

'Asiablock would probably like it to be, but don't we have a department somewhere that checks on these things? You know, people who read Asiablock newspapers, watch their holo programs, see who's standing next to who on their parades... What we used to call Military Intelligence.'

'I haven't a clue, Dig, I'll speak to the Doc if you like.'

And there it lay. Chondisp had nothing planned for me in the immediate future and as I was over for two weeks I spent my time making more tests with the beautiful brown-eyed and very British Sara in the psychology department, trying to find what makes a successful Empathiser. Without success, either way.

A day later I got a call from Dr Duluth. Would it be convenient for me to attend a meeting in the Management Wing that afternoon?

"Could I possibly fit in a visit to Mahogany Row?" I asked myself in the mirror, knotting a tie. I decided I could. Politeness from the boss; I liked it. One of the advantages of being freelance. I cancelled my appointment with Sara.

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My programmed card took me to one of the conference rooms in the thickly carpeted Management Wing and I had to pass two beefy MP's at the door to enter. Once in, I found I was the last to arrive. There were a lot of well-dressed people chatting around a long table, each place set with the usual yellow legal note-pads and pencils. Fruit-juice bottles and glasses were lined up down the middle of the table and Dr Duluth was intently talking into his phone at the head. A very well-dressed Jim saw me and motioned to a seat opposite him. There were two empty seats on my left.

I sat down and looked along the table, greeting Al, Pete and nodding at Dr Kaplan. One of the MP's looked in and Jim gestured to him. He exited and the door closed behind him. Dr Duluth looked up from his phone.

'Jim, will you do the introductions?' he said and returned, head down, to his phone.

Jim stood up - I had hardly recognised him, so elegant was he in a dark three-piece suit.

'I am Jim Prince and I head up Computing.' He extended his hand to a blond unexceptional-faced man in a neutral grey suit who was sitting on his left. 'John Smith is a civil servant over from UNO.' A British ex-public school spook, if ever I'd seen one. We looked at John Smith disbelievingly and he looked indifferently back.

Jim's hand moved to the figure on my right. 'Professor Kaplan from Seattle University is our expert on Geology.'

Farther down the table, Turkish-looking Peter Zarda was introduced "In charge of Training" followed by short stocky blond Hans Voss and Al Miller, both in "Research". His hand moved towards me.

'And Mr Digby, from Inserter.'

Jim was about to sit down when he smiled and called over a young girl who had been standing by the door. She walked across and stroking her skirt under her bottom, gracefully sat down in the empty seat at his right hand.

'And Janette, our secretary for this meeting.' She nodded demurely at us and put a recorder on the table, opened her bag, pulled out a phone and laid it by the side of the recorder.

I had already seen Janette out of the corner of my eye but now zoomed in on her. Wearing a formal charcoal-black skirt and white blouse she was neat, slim-waisted, and about 22. Dark hair cut naturally, the ends just curling in around an attractive oval face with wide spaced greenish-brown eyes. Full lips slightly parted to show small white teeth. No rings on her slender white fingers. I caught her gaze for a moment, but she looked away.

There was a silence and turning round, I saw all faces were directed towards the head of the table.

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'First I would like to thank you all for coming here at such short notice,' began Dr Duluth in his quiet accentless voice. 'As you know, I am in Target Selection, and therefore have some interest in the Targets selected by our opposite numbers in Asiablock. It has been suggested I chair a meeting, or rather an informal gathering,

bringing together those who also have an interest in Asiablock activities outside my own rather narrow speciality. It is hoped the synthesis will be beneficial to all parties. I hardly need say that everything said at this meeting is strictly secret and so I must ask you for your Word.' He paused and looked round. We all nodded and in turn said 'You have my Word.'

'Very well,' he said and paused, looking down at a file in front of him.

'Many natural and man-provoked disasters have occurred on Earth,' began Dr Duluth. 'A lot of them, especially the more recent ones, are fully documented. But many in the past are not. And some of these early disasters were really catastrophic, mainly because we either didn't know how to control them at that time or because there was no legislation in place to prevent them.' His voice was steady but the tensed fingers holding a pencil showed me Dr Duluth was not as icy-calm as usual.

'Now we have found Asiablock are very interested in spectacular disasters where little data is available,' he continued.

'Why is the data not available?' asked Jim. A rehearsed question, I'd have said. Dr Duluth turned to him.

'The data can be unavailable for various reasons. Perhaps the disaster occurred where there was no one to observe it. Or data was collected but some later disaster destroyed it. Or the disaster destroyed its own data.' He looked around the table.

'Some examples? Very well. Iron making in England removed most of the forest cover in the 15th century. We have no detailed records of what things were like before that time, simply because it was so long ago and detailed records were not collected anyway. Another? More recently the area around the Aral Sea was ruined by overuse of the water table from 1960 on. Data describing the catastrophe were lost in the fighting for independence at the break-up of the Russian Empire in 1989.' Jim hadn't wasted the facts we had found in his room.

'What you are saying is we can see how things are after the disaster occurred, but we can't say how bad the disaster was until we know how things were before the disaster,' I said.

'Yes, thank you,' said Dr Duluth, after a short pause. They all looked at me as though I was stating the glaringly obvious, but I like to get these things straight. And if I'm invited to a meeting, I feel I should make a contribution.

I glanced across at Janette, hoping she's got down my bon mot, but she was just looking at her recorder. Jim was doodling on his pad.

'Now we here,' continued Dr Duluth, 'perhaps naturally, are more interested in the activities of the Asiablock Inserter. And that is of course how we discovered Asiablock's strange interest in past disasters. But having discovered this interest we are at a complete loss as to how to account for it.'

'Except to know it's not just the disinterested collection of academic knowledge,' said Jim, looking up from his doodling.

'That's for sure,' came Pete's voice grimly, from down the table.

'Exactly,' said Dr Duluth. 'And I am indebted to one of our Observers for the suggestion that if we want to find the reason for this interest, we must look elsewhere.'

Jim glanced up at me. Praise enough.

'And there are some unusual things going on over there,' he continued.

'Perhaps John would describe his findings?'

Our eyes swung round to the spook.

'Yes, there are indeed some unusual events occurring over there,' began the civil servant. He had a deep bass voice and surprisingly an American accent. The

lights dimmed and a blank white square hung in the air in front of us. John adjusted a control box and an organisation diagram appeared.

'To start with, Asiablock formed a new branch of government about three years ago,' he said. A green arrow appeared, pointing to a box outlined in red in the centre of the chart. Like all the others, it had Chinese ideograms in it. 'It is called the "Institute for Geological Statistics" (as near as we can translate). We have discovered the name of the top man is Shan Tien, who we know as a particularly hated and feared member of the CERE.' The chart disappeared and we looked at a small squat ugly figure wearing spectacles and a beret. 'You see him here at the Happy Remembrance parade on the First of May, last year, and here again at this opening of a factory.'

'"The Committee for Ethical Re-education",' quoted Al. 'Their Gestapo doesn't have any obvious connection with either geology or statistics,' he continued. John nodded gravely.

'No,' said John. 'Notice also that standing by his side each time is a young man, Dr Lin Chung. He is a 32 year old physicist at Tokyo University whose field is "Turbulence". Lin's father was killed in the Pakistan Affair.' We looked at the slim stooping figure of a young man wearing jeans and a designer sweater - a sure sign of tolerance by the Asiablock Administration. A click and the organisational chart reappeared. John continued:

'We have also found a lot of funding is being channelled into this new Institute. Its headquarters are in the capital of China, Beijing, next to one of Asiablock's main computer centres, which we find is simultaneously extending its facilities.' The arrow moved to indicate another box, outlined this time in green.

'And here is the Asiablock Inserter in Manchuria,' he continued. 'There is a lot of data passing between the new Institute and their Inserter.' The control box clicked and a black line joined the two.

'The new Institute's connected with computers, so okay for the statistics,' I said as he paused, 'but what about the geology bit?'

John took a deep breath and looked towards Dr Duluth. Who was this guy who kept interrupting? But Dr Duluth merely nodded equably.

John turned back to his chart, moving the arrow to yet another box outlined in black and standing on its own. 'We know there is an "Institute of Resources and Geography", but this new Department seems to have no connections with it.' 'Odd,' I said.

'But what is odder ...' He paused, annoyed. He didn't want to make this a chatty presentation. The arrow jerked with irritation and he restarted. 'We have however detected a lot of traffic between this new Department and what we in Westblock would call "Public Works" - the branch of Government that builds roads, dams, irrigates and reforests deserts etc.' He pointed with his arrow to a large box, outlined in orange and drew a thick line between it and the new mysterious red-outlined box in the middle of the chart.

There was a silence as we all contemplated the diagram. A tight coupling of the mysterious new Institute for Geological Statistics with Computing, Chrondiski and Public Works.

'How did you find out all this, by the way?' I asked curiously, the first to break the silence. 'I thought they used fibre optics everywhere, or at least for all important communications.'

He looked annoyed, but obviously couldn't resist showing off his expertise.

'They do,' he said, 'which means there is no stray radiation for us to pick up. But once in a while we hear an incautious call on a cell-phone, or someone gets

drunk at a reception. We are beginning to hear the word "Tsonah". He looked round, slightly embarrassed. 'It's the name of a god in Chinese mythology who was supposed to have killed his enemies by being able to use "natural forces" or "essential energy".'

Oh God, I thought, we are back in the magic world of code words. I remembered reading how the British in WWII had found references in decoded messages to "Freya", which they suspected of being a secret German radar system. Knowing about the Wagnerian "Swords and Sorcery" atmosphere of the Nazi regime, someone looked up this character and found Freya was a "Nordic goddess who possessed an exquisite necklace. Heimdal, the Watchman of the Gods, guarded this necklace for her. And Heimdal could see one hundred miles in every direction, by day and by night!" So Freya was a radar system!

Had Asiablock made a similar foolish mistake?

I returned to the present to hear John saying:

'...and satellite photographs show some curious structures the Public Works Department are building in one of the countries of the Federation. Presumably at the behest of this new Department.'

There was a tap on the door.

'Could you just hold it there a moment, John,' said Dr Duluth and the lights came on. He nodded to Jim who got up and opened the door. Two soldiers in British Army uniform entered and were introduced.

'Colonel Michels is in charge of the Military who guard the Institute,' said Jim, gesturing at the older. They took the two empty seats, the younger one next to me, on my left and opposite Janette.

The Colonel was a fit-looking grey-haired man of about 50 wearing the flashes of the Rifle Regiment.

'And his aide Captain Carstairs,' continued Jim. Handsome, slim and tall with blue eyes, non-regulation length swept-back blond hair. Very elegant. About 28, with fine long hands. Wearing Grenadier Guard flashes and a bored expression. Neither of them were showing any campaign medals. Not surprising for the Colonel, he was too old. But how had Captain Carstairs missed the "Pakistan Affair" of six years ago? I remembered the Grenadiers had been at Gedol.

Various nationalities in turn provided the garrison troops for Chondisp and it was apparently Britain's turn at the moment. I looked at them with interest. The Army in Britain is organised into tight family-like regiments and tends to keep away from the rest of the population. Some said they were paternalistic but I thought they gave their young recruits a sense of purpose, a clearly marked class-structure they could climb if they wanted, and lots of sport.

You always knew if the garrison was British. They had built a parade ground at the north end of the Chondisp compound and in the cold dawn air you could often hear bugle calls, whistles and the distant shouts of drill-sergeants.

I didn't know either of these two soldiers but perhaps some of the others. I must find time to go over to their mess.

Everyone else around the table was introduced again and lastly Jim's hand pointed to me.

'And Captain Digby, retired, and now with us in "Inserter".'

I looked across at Jim with annoyance. He knew what I thought of people who hung onto an old army rank in civilian life. Pretentious. Especially "Captain"; the lowest rank you could do this with. Did he re-introduce me this way just because of the presence of the military?

The two soldiers' heads pivoted round and looked at my civilian clothes with a mixture of surprise and slight contempt. I nodded politely.

'John here was just telling us about some interesting constructions Asiablock are building,' said Jim, for the benefit of the new arrivals.

The lights dimmed again and a detailed map of some mountain range hung in the air before us.

'See here,' said John. 'This photo was taken a year ago. It's a mountain range in North West China. Now look at this.' A satellite photo was overlaid on the map. 'For some reason known only to themselves, the Asians are building up this side of the gorge. Here is earth-moving equipment and here are the workers' huts. And here,' (with a "click" we moved in at maximum magnification) 'you can see the construction. Reinforced concrete, thousands of tons of it, are being poured into shuttering to build a vertical hollow cylinder 20m in diameter and 200m high.'

'Perhaps they're going to build one on the other side of the gorge too?' I suggested. 'To act as a support for the other end of a suspension bridge?'

'Unlikely,' he said. 'There are all sorts of logistic and engineering reasons why the two supports would be built together, if that were the case. That tower is at 5020m which would make it the highest bridge in the world. And anyway, there is absolutely no reason to build a bridge over the gorge. There are no main roads or railways within 500km; the whole region is a rocky desert.' Okay, so it wasn't for a bridge.

I looked down on the remote snow-capped mountains. Why was Asiablock building a hollow concrete cylinder on the top of a mountain, miles from anywhere?

There was a click and the view changed. Another mountain range.

'And here is another of the mysterious cylinders, this time at 4370m' said John. 'It must have been built some time ago as the workers' huts have been dismantled.'

Everyone started talking at once.

'Have you found any more?' Jim's voice was the loudest.

'No, but we're searching. But look at this one, see how it's sited and how the side has been painted to make it blend into the mountainside. We only caught it by accident as our satellite happened to be overhead during the one hour in the day the tower casts a shadow across the valley.

Christ, I thought. Not only are they building weird cylinders, but they're trying to hide them too! I heard Al saying the same thing.

They were questioning Dr Kaplan, but he could only shrug his shoulders. The Colonel had never seen a military construction like it either.

Al and Hans were asking if they had detected any radiation from it, and John was saying only infra-red heat radiation - the same as would be expected if it were built of concrete.

Kaplan had an afterthought and asked for its co-ordinates in latitude and longitude, but John said he didn't have them at the moment. This spurred the Colonel to ask if there was any structure at the top of the tower which could be used as a mounting base for a heavy weapon or an antenna. John couldn't answer that either, but thanked them both for their questions, and said he would inquire further.

I felt a shiver up my spine. I didn't like this one little bit.

The lights came on and I leaned across the table to speak to Jim. 'They've gotta be connected with this Unidentified Insertions problem somehow,' I said quietly. I turned to the spook. 'Have you no other way of getting more info on these towers?'

'Yes, sure, but not immediately. We have to follow the satellite scans. If we change the orbit they will know we have seen something.' I hadn't meant that.

`No, I mean can you find what's in them?' I said. Finding more of these enormous camouflaged structures might give a clue as to what they were for, but a more direct way would be to go and look at one - up close.

`Not immediately,' he repeated.

Head down, Jim was energetically drawing small squares on his pad. Under cover of the general conversation, I leaned across the table.

`Jim!' I said intensely. `For fuck's sake! This is bad. The Yellow People must be lashing out a fair wad of GNP on these things and we know sod-all about them. We gotta find out what they're up to. You know what we'd have done in Pakistan.' Jim looked at me strangely.

`Well, I, but ...'

`An air-drop. That's what we'd've done, wouldn't we? Air-sleds. In and out like a dose of salts. Have a quick shufti and bring back a coupla prisoners.' I chopped the edge of my hand down on the table.

There was a snapping sound as Jim's pencil-tip broke on the pad. He had his hands clenched and his eyes were locked with mine. Ex-US Marine Corps, Jim had the Right Stuff, he knew what I was talking about. But his eyes filmed over and he sat back.

`Perhaps, but who could ...?' he asked.

`We've got plenty of military here!' I said eagerly, holding my hand out. I half turned to meet the gaze of Captain Carstairs. But then I remembered. Garrison troops. No combat experience; worse than useless. I dropped my hand and turned quickly back to Jim, but not before I saw a flush spread over Carstairs's handsome face. Shit, I hadn't wanted to insult him, but there's no substitute for experience.

`Look, I still know some blokes in my old Unit.

These guys here could kit us out and fly us in. Lemme see, now ...' I reached out for Janette's phone.

Smiling regretfully at my enthusiasm, Jim held up his hand.

`I know how you feel, Dig,' he said, `but I'm not sure Colonel Michels would want ...' he looked across at the Colonel interrogatively.

`No, of course not,' snapped the Colonel. `If any patrol goes out from here it will be from my Command and only on my say so.'

`Look, Jim,' I said, leaning forwards urgently, `if we've detected these silo things, the YP are not stupid and they will probably know we have. They know all about shadows and where our satellites are. We may not have much time.'

Janette was staring slightly cross-eyed at me. She snapped her gaze aside and transferred it to the two soldiers.

Carstairs was agitated. He had turned to face the Colonel and over the general noise around the table, I could hear him talking quickly, tapping the parachute wings on his chest. The Colonel was making indecisive gestures and Janette's beautiful dark eyes were going from face to face, closely following the dialogue between the two soldiers.

There was a rapping sound from the head of the table as Dr Duluth firmly called the meeting to order.

`It seems to be the feeling of the meeting that we need hard data on these towers urgently,' he said.' There was a growl of approval from Pete and vigorous nods from Al and Hans.

`Janette, will you please minute that, and see if you can book a VR call for me with General Schalter of UN Strikeforce. We are going to need some paratroopers to collect that information.'

I glanced across at Janette, but she was looking directly into Captain Carstairs's eyes.

'Yes sir,' she said, speaking for the first time. She had some faint throaty foreign accent. 'A call to UN for some men to collect ze informations.' Was it my imagination, or was there some slight emphasis on the "men"? And did she droop with disappointment as she looked down at her recorder? Stupid cow, surely she didn't think the pretty Carstairs was up to it?

There was some muttering from next to me and the cultured voice of Captain Carstairs made itself heard.

'Before you make that call, sir, I think my Colonel would like to speak to you.'

'Yes, Colonel Michels?' asked Dr Duluth in a slightly surprised tone. There was some rather embarrassed coughing.

'Well, if I've followed all this spy business I gather you need some chaps to make a quick patrol in enemy territory.' Janette was looking up at him, her glistening brown eyes filled with reborn hope.

'That is perfectly correct, Colonel.'

'Very well, I have to advise you that if you go through General Schalter's staff, it may be some time before you get either the specialised troops or the authorisation.' Dr Duluth shrugged resignedly, but there were sounds of protest from Pete and Al. The Colonel continued:

'There may be another solution. We have several NCO's who have their parachute wings up, and I'm sure a call for volunteers will supply enough for a patrol.'

'And the leader of this patrol?' asked Dr Duluth.

Janette's beautiful eyes switched to Carstairs's face. Her lips were parted, there was a faint pulse in her throat and her slender fingers were ready on the keys of her recorder.

'The Captain here is very keen, and he has done the Brize Norton paraglider course. He seems to think he can handle it.' Janette's oval face was glowing with admiration.

I looked at the Colonel with a new respect. He was a decent old buffer really. After all, he'd served his country all his life and it wasn't his fault he had been the wrong age at the time anything interesting was happening. And he was taking a hell of a risk in authorising an unofficial patrol, whoever was in charge. If anything went wrong, he'd get the chop. Court-martialled, lose his pension and have to live the rest of his life on some miserable National Health hand-out.

And Carstairs? Too pretty and born too high up the social ladder. Hardly character forming. And why was he here anyway and not with his fancy Guards Regiment? Fiddling with the Mess funds? Having it off with the CO's wife? Hell, I didn't know, life is rarely stereotyped like that. Give him credit though, come the crunch and he'd volunteered. And of course, as a Regular he had priority over me - a Reserve officer.

But success is independent of good motives. I turned away disgusted. To me it looked like a disaster in the making. However Duluth seemed satisfied.

We rose from the table and the meeting broke up. The two soldiers left talking excitedly and I looked after them enviously. But now Carstairs was out of the way, so I moved purposefully to lurk near the door, hoping to ambush the delicious Janette. At the moment she was leaning over Dr Duluth who was signing a letter for her. I felt a hand on my arm. It was Jim.

'She's a real cutie, isn't she? But she's married to one of the engineers in Resonator.' I stared at Jim. 'And she's one of the stars of the Chrondisp Amateur

Dramatic Society,' he added, grinning. I looked across at her, noticing with surprise she now had a wedding ring on! Something clicked into place.

'That was one of Duluth's crafty tricks, wasn't it?' I said angrily. He said nothing. Another click and I thought of the role I had been manoeuvred into, pressuring Carstairs.

'You bastard,' I said quietly. 'That patrol is going to get shredded as soon as they enter Confederation airspace. The more you associate with Duluth, the more devious you become.' His grin disappeared and his face stiffened.

'We need a patrol right away, don't we?' he said coldly. 'You said so yourself. Where else could he get one at such short notice? And I'm going to do what I can to straighten him out before the drop, if that's what's bugging you. We want the patrol to succeed.'

'You bastard,' I repeated.

Chapter 11

For the next day or two I was left alone. I couldn't find Jim or any of the garrison officers who used to share our bar, so I assumed the reconnaissance patrol was being trained ready for its drop, or however they were going to do it. I must admit I was rather envious. I had served 10 months with the SAS Regiment during the Pakistan Affair and had been sent behind the enemy lines five times to collect information or do sabotage.

But in spite of my pessimistic reservations, the patrol was nothing to do with me. If it went in and out quickly they should be able to at least look at one of those mysterious towers before the defence was alerted. I would no doubt hear all about it afterwards.

I knew I was slated for a Mission "soon" but it was being delayed. A freak sand-storm was raging in the desert outside and had silted up the reactor cooling tower and so all Insertions were being re-scheduled. I didn't mind waiting. For once I was able to browse through the fabulous Chrodisp virtual reality library without any definite object. I spent my free time in its holo cabins, drifting around the pyramids, walking over the Acropolis and looking down at Ancient Athens, or sitting on the surface of the moon and watching the Earth rise. I suppose in a few years all this will be available to the general public, as soon as they have bought some inexpensive add-ons to their PCs.

In the bar during the evening I was also able to chat with various off-duty engineers, programmers and even a few who were neither one nor the other. Because of their obvious unfamiliarity with the routine of Chrodisp they were probably Experts, over here for training as Observers.

To my surprise, there was a lot of bad-temper and discontent, especially amongst these new trainee Observers. Apparently some new department had been formed at Chrodisp since my last visit. It was called "The Department of Psychological Insight", and with the authority of the Under Director all the new Observers were having to undergo lengthy and humiliating psychological testing. It was expected that ultimately all Chrodisp personnel would have to pass through the sieve of this new department. Not like in my time when Observers were just selected for their knowledge of some speciality, given a quick course and sent off on a Mission.

I was told the new department was so irritating that at least two expert trainee Observers had packed their bags and were about to leave in angry resentment. In spite of the high consultant salaries offered them by the Chrodisp Institute.

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On the morning of the second day I was surprised to receive a plastic card from Duluth's secretary inviting me to attend a lecture organised by this new department at 10am. I immediately called back to refuse to take any bloody psychological tests but the secretary told me the Doctor only wanted me to attend the introductory talk; he thought I would find it interesting. I looked at my schedule - at 8:30 I had arranged to play a game of squash with Jim. I shouldn't need to cancel it.

While we were changing I asked him did he have any news about the patrol but all he would say was that he was trying to give Carstairs a few tips and it was scheduled for the near future.

After our game we showered and started to dress. As I buckled on my wrist-watch, I noticed I only had five minutes to get to the lecture.

'Do you know where Lecture Room 15 is?' I asked Jim.

'Yeah, sure,' he answered. 'What are you going there for?'

'It's this new "Psychological Insight" department.' I replied. 'As part of their program they give an introductory lecture and the Doc wants me to attend it.' His face darkened.

'You too!' he said in disgust. 'And what's the lecture on, anyway?' I fumbled in my kit-bag and handed him the piece of plastic I had received from Duluth's office.

'"Irrationality - The Enemy Within",' he read out. 'Given by Dr Julian Dork of "Psychological Insight".' He looked at me as he handed it back. 'Dr Dork's a woman, you know.'

I stared at him.

'So? I've got nothing against women.'

'I know, you told me once. Some of your best friends are women.' He glanced up at the wall-clock. 'Look, it's almost time, you'll have to hurry. I'm going that way too. I wish I'd known you were going,' he added, almost to himself, 'I would have liked to have sat in.'

We finished dressing quickly - I thrust my racket and damp kit into my shoulder bag and we left to take the train. After a lift and a short walk along a carpeted corridor, we saw a small crowd of people waiting quietly outside a door labelled "Lecture Room 15". Standing apart and looking down the corridor in the opposite direction was a stocky middle-aged woman with close-cropped hair, torn jeans and cowboy boots. She was carrying a clip-board and radiating impatient authority.

'Uh - oh ..., Dr Dork herself,' said Jim in an undertone beside me.

The stocky woman, hearing our approaching footsteps swung round.

'Dr Prince. Have you seen a Mr Digby?' she asked in a nasal New York accent. A nervous silence fell on the rest of the group.

'Well, er yes, Ma'am,' said Jim. 'This is Mr Digby.' I nodded politely.

'You're very late,' she said severely, consulting a gun-metal wrist-watch, and ostentatiously made a mark on her clip-board. She had intense blue eyes, magnified behind thick lenses mounted in airline-pilot type frames.

'Do you realise none of us can enter the lecture room until all are present?' she continued.

'Well Ma'am, I'm real sorry; we sorta got hung up on the way,' Jim muttered, shuffling his feet. I looked at ex-Marine Lieutenant James Prince PhD in wonder. I'm always surprised how some Americans let their women-folk walk all over them.

Satisfied, the twin barrels of her eyes swung round to register on me. I hadn't grovelled yet.

`I didn't think you needed to wait for me. And as we had a game to finish...,' I said with an apologetic smile. I saw her face change. My English accent, I supposed. I knew from experience some Americans find it arrogant and condescending.

`Well, now you are here, you can put your card in,' she said acidly. I looked at Jim.

`Your card,' he explained nervously. `The one you showed me. You must all put them in to open the door.'

`Did you give it me back?'

`Yes. For Chrissake, Dig.'

I thought back. It must be in my bag.

`Lemme see,' I said, kneeling down and unzipping it, pulling out damp clothes and parking them on the carpet. `I thought it was just an invitation: I didn't think I would need it,' I said complainingly.

But in the end, under Dr Dork's wrathful eye and impatient comments I found it in a zippered pocket, stood up and pushed it into the slot by the door. Mine was indeed the last one as immediately the door clicked and swung loose. Trying to make amends, I politely opened it wide and stood aside to let Dr Dork enter.

`And you can cut that out, I'm not an invalid,' she snapped.

I bet, I thought, watching her as she strode with swinging hips towards a desk on the dais, the steel tips in the heels of her boots tapping on the hard floor. I resisted the temptation to dash forwards and pull the chair out for her. In a subdued silence the rest of the class filed in and sat down.

I looked round. About twenty of us, all ages and all nationalities. Three or four I had seen before. A dark handsome Italian mathematician and ... ah, yes, a pretty blond French girl, Francette, who I had met in the bar last night. I humped my squash bag over and found a seat next to her.

`Ca va?' I said to her, leaning over to give her the usual three French cheek-to-cheek "bise".

`Oui, merci,' she murmured, looking apprehensively over my shoulder.

`The course has already been delayed by three minutes ...' began that nasal voice.

I turned round, waved my hand placatingly and resumed my seat. The lecture began.

Dr Dork started by explaining how the technology of time travel had put tremendous power into the hands of a few people and it was very important these hands be guided by rational and logical brains. For this reason she and her team from the University of New York had been called in to put all Chrodisp employees through a series of modern psychological tests, many of which she had devised herself, to measure their mental stability and reasoning aptitude. She explained most people reacted negatively against these tests, believing themselves to be both stable and rational. To bring those about to be tested to a more amenable frame of mind, she usually introduced the test sessions with a short talk showing how irrational our thought processes often were. This was it.

The lecture started and the good news was that Dr Dork was a competent lecturer and the subject material was interesting.

Of course, it's always easier to teach a subject than to do research on it and if you are not careful you can unconsciously present the solutions to puzzles as though you had actually solved them yourself.

And that was the bad news. Dr Dork unfortunately was not careful. In fact, she was condescending and abrasive, especially to me, it seemed. I think she was rather too accustomed to fawning graduate students in her home University. Combine this

with my unaccustomed subordinate student role, and a personality conflict was a foregone conclusion.

And Dr Dork was a psychologist, of course. I didn't know much about psychologists except they gave people tests, studied and classified them. And women psychologists in particular studied and classified men into various demeaning categories such as "Anal Retentive", "Narcissistic Personality Disorders". Next to policemen, I don't like psychologists. My ex-wife, right for once, had perceptively said pretty girls didn't need to learn male psychology: they discovered it automatically as they grew up. I remembered bitterly she sure had known how to manipulate me.

I was rather grimly pondering on all this and wondering if it would be less stressful to leave the class and simply study the course material alone. I became aware she was addressing me.

'And what is the chance of it also being red underneath? Captain Digby?' Somehow she had found out I was ex-military and ponderously addressed me each time by my old rank.

I pulled myself together. Dr Dork had just shown us three cards. One was white on both sides, one was red on both sides: the other was red on one side and white on the other. She had one of the cards red face up on the wall display. The two others were hidden. She impatiently repeated the question.

'Here you see a red faced card, what is the chance the hidden face is red too?'

It couldn't be the white/white card. That must be the trick, so forget it. The hidden face could only be red or white.

'One out of two - fifty percent,' I said confidently. By the gleam in her eye I knew straightaway I was wrong. She looked around the class.

'Two out of three,' said Giovanni the mathematician.

'Fifty-fifty,' said two or three others and the rest remained silent. But I think Dr Dork was only interested in my reply.

'Correct,' she said, nodding at Giovanni with a slightly disappointed air. She slowly and in a grating New York accent explained the solution to the rest of us.

'The white/white card is obviously irrelevant. I put it to one side. The remaining two cards can be laid down in three ways to show a red.' She picked up the white/red card. 'Red up, white down.' She picked up the red/red card. 'This red face up,' she flipped the card over, 'or this red face up. I repeat. The two cards can be laid down in three ways to show a red, but only two of the ways has a red underneath. So the answer is "two chances out of three or a probability of 0.66".

Dammit. She was right. I must concentrate more.

'Do you see that now, Captain Digby?' I nodded weakly.

'I wonder what is behind your red face, Captain Digby?'. A well-rehearsed joke. The rest of the class sat in an embarrassed silence and rightly so; only one of them had given the correct answer. I wondered how quickly Dr Dork had got it the first time she had heard it.

Now in a high good humour Dr Dork continued the course, telling us about the "Availability" of data. How "First Impressions" were so important and how later evidence is interpreted in the light of these beliefs. How a book costing \$5.99 appears much cheaper than one at \$6.00. Someone in the class raised a laugh as he said the US Treasury should bring out a 99 cent coin, but Dr Dork barely thinned her lips. Only the teacher was supposed to make the jokes in this class.

And the "Recency Effect", which shows how heavily we are influenced by what we have heard or seen most recently. At this, one or two people in the class looked

across at me sympathetically but Dr Dork didn't seem to see any connection with the bad first impression I had made with her.

And the "Halo" effect whereby one salient (or "available") feature influences the interpretation of all the others. Like good-looking men and women are rated high in intelligence. This last related with a certain note of contempt.

I took notes dutifully, hating the role of school-boy I had been forced into.

Finally at the end of the morning there was a soft tone from the wall clock. Dr Dork stood up and we closed our note-books, me at least with relief. She looked around at us.

'And so in conclusion I hope I have shown you that the human brain is capable of many impulsive illogical errors. In spite of our superior knowledge of technology, the fundamental intelligence of the human brain has hardly improved over that of the caveman.' Expressionlessly her eyes slid over to me.

There was a titter from the class.

Right. We had had a well-presented and informative lecture, but I couldn't let that pass. It would be interesting to see how she reacted to a joke a maths master had made at my school, a long time ago. I pushed back my chair and stood up.

'On behalf of the rest of the class, I would like to thank Dr Dork for an interesting lecture.' She looked up at me in surprise. 'Not only interesting but practical and instructive,' I continued. 'Information we can really use.' She was now simpering. I held out my hand theatrically at her and looked down at the open-mouthed class.

'All the more surprising for us Europeans to receive such a lecture from an American.' The smile vanished.

'An American?' she snapped. 'I'm a scientist. What's my nationality got to do with it?'

'Well, Ma'am,' I looked at the class as though embarrassed, and shrugged my shoulders - I would have to tell her. 'Well, Ma'am, there was a risk. You probably don't know it, but over here it's common knowledge that 50% of Americans are under average intelligence.'

Horrified silence descended on the class, except for a guffaw from Giovanni.

'And I suppose 50% of the British are over average intelligence?' he said. I looked down in exaggerated modesty.

But Dr Dork was not laughing. At this apparently blank insult, she had gone white.

'How dare you, you stupid asshole ... you ignorant prick.. you ...,' she stuttered. Her hands were clawing out at me and her face was contorted with fury. I could see I wasn't going to pass any of her tests. The class was in an uproar, some standing and shouting at me, others laughing, yet others looking bewildered. Several people, including Giovanni, had pushed themselves forward and were trying to restrain Dr Dork from throwing herself at me. I picked up my squash bag, stepped carefully round the seething melee and made for the door.

'It's a joke,' I mouthed to her over the heads of the crowd. It didn't calm her down any.

Behind me I could hear Giovanni's deep voice saying it was a gag. He was explaining that in a normal population 50% was under its average intelligence and the other half was over average intelligence.

'That's what "average" means,' he was explaining. Unnecessarily, I should have thought.

In the bar that evening I noticed a group of trainee Observers, mostly from the class I had been in, drinking and laughing together. A change from the last time I had seen them there! Giovanni was chatting up Francette and as I approached must have noticed me over her shoulder. He said something and everyone turned round and smiled at me. I looked back coldly and ignored the grinning fools. So I had been made to look an idiot by that woman with her three-card trick, but most of them hadn't done any better either.

I was more interested in a small knot of military in civilian clothes who were talking quietly amongst themselves at the other end of the bar. Elderly grey-haired garrison maintenance and supply officers, they were not usually the most lively of drinking companions. But one, 2nd Lt. Halbut, was German and had for some reason hung on from the German garrison which had been here last. As he came from Munich, I had spoken to him a few times. He was in charge of Communications here and to his credit was trying to get a posting to a more active unit. He was preoccupied and drinking alone.

I tried to pump him about the patrol and he very properly feigned ignorance. But as I revealed I knew the size and composition of the patrol and the name of its leader, he muttered that since they had been dropped, there had only been silence. They had not kept their transmission appointment and even their IFF Responder must be masked. Colonel Michels was "verzweifelt" (desperate).

Jesus. I wasn't too happy either. I returned to my room and tried to contact Jim but only got his voice mail. I was half-way through telling him about the patrol as his voice broke in.

`Jim,' I said. `I've just been chatting to some of the military and guess what - that patrol's screwed up, they're not reporting back.'

`Are you sure? It could be just some technical thing. Like ...'

`Carstairs is carrying a Responder beacon. Three interrogating satellites have passed over them so far and haven't had a peep from it.' There was a silence.

`You'd better come up here. Stick your card in the slot.' I did so and heard the rapid beeps of route programming.

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As usual, my card took me down corridors, on to the train, off the train, up a lift... until I found myself walking down the thickly carpeted corridor leading to Dr Duluth's office. His door was open and I could hear a loud voice issuing from it. So I didn't knock; I just entered and sat in a corner. In the excitement no one paid me any attention.

Apart from Duluth, sitting behind his desk, there was Jim, Al, and a well-dressed rather corpulent older man who I recognised as a Chrondisp Director. He was standing up angrily waving his hands and had a deep booming voice with a middle-European accent. Under-Director Kleinfeld.

`She's not stupid and she must have almost instantly realised it was a joke,' said Al, in reply to something Kleinfeld had said.

`But too late to prevent her over-reacting in front of the class,' added Jim, shrugging regretfully.

Kleinfeld who had been looking from face to face swivelled his gaze accusingly towards Dr Duluth.

`You did that, didn't you? I heard you'd had a fight with her; she wanted to see how you'd score on her tests.'

`And she also called him a cold-blooded Limey mandarin,' said Jim disapprovingly.

`Nothing is to be served by ...' began Dr Duluth.

`And so you sicced Digby on to her,' interrupted Kleinfeld, nodding his head sideways at me. At least he had noticed my entry.

`I thought Mr Digby would find her introductory lecture interesting: I had no idea what he was going to say,' said Duluth austere, opening a drawer in his desk and looking down into it.

`Perhaps not in detail, but you knew nevertheless that he ...' He paused, staring grimly at Dr Duluth. `She came here with excellent references, she is well-known in her field and we needed her input.'

`If Dr Dork cannot demonstrate rationality and stability herself, her "input" is not likely to be of much use to us here,' replied Dr Duluth. He pulled some papers out of the drawer and laid them on his desk.

I could see Under-Director Kleinfeld was not pleased. He drew a deep breath.

`You are assuming far too much ...' he began furiously, and stopped, glaring at Dr Duluth who looked back at him neutrally. `I am going to take this up with the Over-Director,' he finished, and turning abruptly left the office. He didn't look at me.

`His wife introduced her,' explained Al, when the door had slammed. `Now her cred's shot and she's leaving the Institute in a huff and taking her staff with her.'

`Yes,' said Jim. `It's always been a problem - who tests the testers?'

`So the Department of Psychological Insight will be closing down,' said Al. He didn't sound over-depressed.

Perhaps that explained why the trainees were smiling. It was my first intimation of internal politics in the Institute. Chondisp was growing and I supposed inner strife was one of the penalties of success.

Dr Duluth chopped his hand down dismissively.

`We have more important things to talk about,' he said.

Good. They'd been rabbiting on about that bloody trick-cyclist for so long I was wondering if they were ever going to get down to the reason for my presence here.

`I have just been talking to Colonel Michels and he confirms what you told Jim,' continued Dr Duluth, looking at me. `We have lost contact with Carstairs,' he said to the others.

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I took a deep breath, fighting hard not to say "I told you so". But everyone heard it, especially Jim who looked away uneasily. Al looked nervous but Dr Duluth just looked at me impersonally.

`You persuaded the poor bastard to go out there, with only a sergeant,' I began. `A guy who'd never heard a shot fired in anger ...'

`If you remember, I wanted the patrol to be furnished by UN Strikeforce,' interrupted Dr Duluth. I thought back to that meeting. He was right, of course. It was Colonel Michels who had volunteered the services of Captain Carstairs. At least that's what the minutes would say.

`And there should have been little danger,' he continued. `That part of China is virtually unpopulated, and we know there is only scanty radar cover,'

`Maybe,' said Jim, `but what are we going to do now?'

`How much can they tell if they're captured?' asked Al who was leaning against the wall. `If they don't know much, it might be more logical to abandon them. They would get returned in some prisoner exchange later,' he added.

`Carstairs came into the meeting late and only knows about the towers,' answered Jim, sitting on the corner of Duluth's desk.

Not too much, I thought.

`So forget them and send in another patrol to look at another of these towers,' said Al callously. Jeez! Were they trying to provoke me?

`You have to get them out,' I said impatiently. `Abandoning troops is bad for morale and you'll never get volunteers again. They may have injured themselves on landing and if the place is as unpopulated as you say, they could die for lack of medical care. I'd go in myself if Michels wasn't so set against me.' There was a sudden silence and Jim and Dr Duluth exchanged glances.

Christ! What was I saying?! They **had** provoked me!

And yet. I was getting bored here - all Missions were on indefinite hold because of the sandstorm. With the back-up of Chondisp military, a rescue operation should be simple enough. It was just untidy to leave them there. The heart jumps and the head follows, as my grandmother used to say. And I would have them over a barrel money-wise.

`Ah!' said Al.

`He might be more receptive now,' said Jim.

*

Colonel Michels was indeed unhappy. For the first time in his career he had made an unauthorised move, and it had blown up in his face.

Duluth had made the appointment. The Colonel had dismissed his aides and was expecting me, sitting at his cleared desk, looking ahead grey-faced. He started as the orderly room sergeant showed me in.

`So you are volunteering to find out what happened to our patrol,' he said.

`Yes, sir,' I said. I was hoping to do more than that.

`Carstairs's a good man,' he was saying. `His father was in Bosnia with mine. But he's not had much combat experience. And if those torturing swine get hold of him with their devilish mind probes...' His hands twisted. Yes, mind probing, if not done very carefully could seriously damage the brain. The YP interrogators would be even less careful with the sergeant.

`You will have free access to our stores and armoury, of course,' he said, `and as for members of your patrol, I have here a list of those who volunteered the first time.' He passed over a piece of paper. I took it, thinking they might not be too keen to volunteer a second time. But on that score my mind was already made up.

`Before I accept this assignment,' I began, `I will want to see the personal dossiers of those on the patrol.' It took a moment for him to react.

`There is no way I can open the dossier of a serving officer to you,' he snapped. (He meant opening the dossier of a gentleman in the Guards to a mere Reserve officer in a Line Regiment, especially one who had served with those notorious thugs, the Special Air Service).

`I'm sorry, sir. But I need to know who I am trying to rescue and how they will react.' "Need to know", was the key phrase. And the "will react" reminded him they may well be undergoing interrogation at this very moment.

He looked at me angrily. This interview wasn't going the way he wanted. But he must have remembered what would happen if the patrol were captured. A mumbling Carstairs on Beijing holo confessing to crimes against the peace-loving Federation of Yellow People, with background shots of cute little black-haired Chinese children.

I handed him my card and he reluctantly typed in an authorisation to visit Records.

`Communications and Clothing are expecting you,' he said. `The Sergeant Major himself will take you to the Armoury.' He handed me my card back.

`Carstairs is a good man,' he repeated, looking at me directly.

'I'll remember that, sir,' I said and left.

*

At Records I quickly scanned through the dossiers of the volunteers he had given me. The only man who had had any experience at all was Staff Sergeant Silk and he was the other member of the patrol that had disappeared. It confirmed my decision. It wasn't going to be popular in certain quarters but it was the only way that stood a chance.

I carefully examined the dossiers of the two who had gone on the patrol. Captain Carstairs first.

Age 32. Son of General Sir George Carstairs (Ret), KCB, VC, ... etc. Two elder sisters. Education Harrow, Cambridge, commissioned into the Grenadier Guards after passing out at Sandhurst. An average cadet, good at languages. Hobbies skiing and riding. An affair with a brother officer's wife resulted in a reprimand and a posting to the Guards' Depot at Catterick, just outside London, while his Regiment was sent to Pakistan. Another affair, this time with the wife of a cabinet minister. Another reprimand, and a posting to Chondisp Garrison, most likely after some intervention from Michels. They probably thought there would be less opportunities for him to dip his wick in the middle of the Sahara desert. And if he did, who cared, 2 500km away from London? A "womaniser", my grandfather would have called him.

I blanked the screen and looked into the distance, comparing it to my career. Born in the Lancashire Fusilier's regimental hospital in Wuppertal, Germany, my mother had been killed in a terrorist attack when I was a child and I had been brought up by an uncle and my grandmother in Liverpool. My father had been a soldier too, Regimental Sergeant Major in the Lanc's, and had wanted me to follow him into his Regiment. No way. As soon as I left school I had signed up in the King's Own. To his great disgust. I was a sergeant at the time the Pakistan Affair started and having had the luck to help save the life of a stupid General whose transport had broken down, was commissioned in the field. Before the Affair ended I was Captain. At the conclusion of hostilities I was offered a permanent commission which would have meant going to staff college to learn to be an officer and gentleman. But like so many soldiers, I could not go back to the peace-time army after I had known action. Regretfully I retired to the Reserve and found a job in civilian life.

I opened the next dossier.

Sergeant Silk was a 37-year old run-of-the-mill competent Regular soldier, seconded to the Rifle Regiment on a two year tour at Chondisp, resting after police duties in various trouble spots in Africa. He had probably volunteered to go on the patrol out of boredom.

I went round to Clothing and picked up two camouflaged battle smocks, two pairs of boots and had them packed in two standard rucksacks. Now for the tricky part.

I excused myself from the sergeant in charge of Clothing and opening my phone, called Dr Duluth directly. He could see who was calling and answered immediately. I said I wanted to see him. There was a pause and I could imagine him calculating priorities.

'I can see you in 15 minutes for 10 minutes,' he said, programming my card, which I already had in the slot. No-nonsense Duluth. If I wanted to see him, he assumed it was urgent.

Humping my two kit-bags, I found him in a small ante-room, off the Main Conference Room.

He received me with cool courtesy, showing none of the impatience he undoubtedly felt at being pulled out of an important meeting.

'You had a satisfactory interview with Colonel Michels? You have chosen your team?' he asked politely.

'Yes, on both counts,' I said. I took a deep breath. 'The YP may have captured or killed our patrol. In which case they are alerted and will be waiting for a rescue attempt, or at least another attempt to investigate their silos. I am not a magician. I need a partner who has done this sort of thing before. Someone I can trust. Someone I know.' From the slight expression of alarm and annoyance which fleetingly crossed his face, I saw he knew who I meant.

'There is no way you can take Jim,' he said. But significantly he didn't pick up his phone and ask Jim; he knew Jim would jump at the chance.

'Do you realise what Jim, or even yourself, could reveal if you were captured and interrogated?' he continued. 'Your knowledge in Asiablock hands could jeopardise the whole operation of the Institute for months to come.'

'Ah,' I said cunningly, 'but think what good spies we'll make. We'll really know what to look for, and we'll be sensitive to all sorts of clues that at the moment we don't even know exist.'

That was the plain truth and he knew it. Dr Duluth was facing the dilemma of all spymasters: if you really want to know how far the enemy are along in the development of some technology, you have to send one of your own experts. An expert who knows the extent of your knowledge. And who if captured could reveal it.

Dr Duluth was looking into the distance and I was regarding him with exasperation, the exasperation of seeing someone doing what I can't. I had to remind myself he was only a member of the Chrondisp Target Selection Committee, but had managed to close down a department which he disapproved of, even though it was the brain-child of the Under Director.

Then he had manipulated the conservative garrison commander to send an illegal secret patrol into Asiablock territory. And now he was arranging to have yet another secret military patrol sent out! I could see his mind working. It had been worth having a go with Carstairs - a pity it hadn't succeeded. So he must send in another patrol. But this time he was choosing its members, members who were not even part of the military hierarchy. And the military hierarchy, as personified by Col. Michels, had agreed to support them, hoping the second patrol would rescue the first and incidentally his pension. Incredible.

I had told Duluth the sort of person I wanted was Jim and it was not his way to argue. He would know I could find or be found another suitable partner - given time. But time we didn't have. He opened his phone, punched in a number and said where he was. He continued silently looking into the distance.

There was a knock on the door and Jim entered. I dropped the second kit bag at his feet.

'We're taking a trip to the other side of the Bamboo Curtain,' I said. His mouth dropped open. He looked across at Dr Duluth for confirmation, but as the Doctor was still looking into the distance and apparently in agreement, he transferred his gaze back to me.

'When?' he asked.

'As soon as possible.'

'Who's going?'

'Just you and me.'

`You should try to find the purpose of the towers and rescue the patrol already sent,' said Dr Duluth, speaking for the first time in ten minutes, and accepting the inevitable.

`In that order?' asked Jim.

`Yes,' said Dr Duluth. There was some talk between them as to who should take over his work in "Computing" in his temporary absence. Jim picked up his kit-bag, humped it over his shoulder and jerked his head at me:

`Well, the sooner we start ...,' he began, making for the door but I hesitated.

`I just want a word with the Doctor,' I said. He looked at me surprised.

`Yeah, sure, well go ahead ...oh, I see. I'll wait in the corridor.' He left.

Dr Duluth looked at me with a slightly resigned air. He may have known what I was going to say.

`One small point,' I said, pulling out a piece of paper and unfolding it - my contract with the Institute. `My job specification here describes me as an "Observer".' I peered at the paper with exaggerated attention, turning it over to check the back in case I had missed anything there. `I can find nothing in it about making illegal armed excursions into Asiablock territory. I think we should talk about a renegotiation of contract, widening the meaning of "Observer" to include the term "Mercenary".

`You want more money,' he said perceptively.

`I was once told "mercenary" comes from the Latin for "wages".

`"Mercenarius", he said. `Very well. I can go up to Scale 7 for the duration of your mission; I can obtain no more.' I believed him - this patrol was illegal in Chrodisp, never mind to the UN.

I rejoined Jim in the corridor.

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As we could get a lot of the info we wanted from Jim's terminal, we made his room our base. He opened the rucksack I'd given him, pulled out the camouflaged battle-smock, boots and a small but important tinkling envelope containing the rank bars of a Lieutenant in the US Army. I emptied the same out of my rucksack, with a similar envelope, containing however the three pips of a Captain in the British Army.

The atmosphere imperceptibly changed. At Chrodisp I was an independent consultant, and Jim often directed my activities. But on this patrol it was going to be the other way round. It's best to get these things settled right away.

`We'll be going in uniform?' he asked.

`Sure we are. We're a reconnaissance patrol, not spies.'

`Yeah,' he said, holding his envelope and rather bitterly watching me punching the pips into the shoulder flaps of my smock. `Well, thanks for asking for me, anyway.'

`I wouldn't have wanted anyone else,' I said.

I found I still had my Chrodisp Contract folded up in my pocket. I pulled it out and under Jim's eyes carefully replaced it in its plastic folder. He recollected I had remained behind to talk to Dr Duluth.

`You asked for more money?' he asked incredulously.

`Sure, Lootenant. I'm not on expenses like you. You can live it up over there - hotels, car-hire, girls. Anything I spend comes out of my own pocket.'

`Jeez,' he said, `In my time I've met some mercenary guys ...'

`Comes from "mercenarius" and means "wages",' I explained, putting the plastic folder back in my pocket. `But I don't suppose you had a classical education.'

I got a pencil out of my pocket and sat down. `I've never had to go in to rescue anyone before,' I said meditatively, breaking in on his disbelief. I pulled forwards a piece of paper and looked up at him.

`Perhaps if we start by you telling me what you know about this patrol? You were going to "straighten him out" if I remember rightly.' A shadow crossed Jim's face and he sat down too.

`You know,' he began, `if it weren't for Englishmen like Carstairs, America could still be a British colony.'

`That bad?' I said.

`I gave him a list of things I thought he would find useful, but he just didn't want to know.' Jim stood up in a regal posture and was about to make a grotesque caricature of the Lord of the Manor sending some inopportune visitor round to the Servant's Entrance, when he realised we didn't have time to play games. He sat down again.

`He's just hiding an inner insecurity,' I said.

`He does it very well.'

`So let's think what we've got to find out.'

`Well, off the top of my head,' said Jim, `exactly what their orders were, exactly where and how they went in, what they took with them.' I wrote it down.

`Local situation, nearest YP garrison, weather, maps,' I said to myself, still writing.

`What we take, how we go in,' continued Jim. Enough to go on with. I folded up the piece of paper. "How we get out," I thought, but didn't write it down.

Chapter 13

First stop was to Col. Michels to introduce Jim in his new role as one of the rescuers and to get authorisation to interview the team who had sent off the first patrol. We were introduced to Lt. Jones and Sgt. Bowman who had worked with Captain Carstairs.

Jones was about 45, pepper-and-salt short cropped hair and must have been chosen for the briefing because he had once worked testing paragliders. He was conscientious, but still a Lieutenant at 45 said everything. He was counting the days to the end of his service.

Sgt. Bowman was better. About 19, fresh-faced and rather over-confident. He wanted to become an officer, and probably would.

`We loaded them up and had a trial jump with the Type 7 chute. There were no problems,' said Jones.

We looked at the list of equipment they had taken and I could see nothing to fault. One Global Positioning Satellite navigator, one satellite hand-phone, one video camera that could be connected to the phone, food tablets for a week, 10 liters of water, two dew-collectors, two sleeping sacks, two sets of thermal underwear, two Mk 6 rifles, two knives, two flash-lights, night/day binoculars, one Type 4 IFF responder.

Jim grunted.

`Your list?' I asked. He nodded.

The Colonel told us Carstairs's orders were that the tower was to be photographed from the paragliders as they approached. They were to land as near as they could, take more photos and explore the surroundings, looking for any support facilities, electronic installations, maintenance accommodation etc. Everything to be photographed. Radio silence unless they thought they would be captured in which case they should try to send back all the pictures.

`And what was the approach plan?' I asked Lt. Jones.

`I went with them by shuttle to Madrid and we took the SST flight to Delhi. After that a jet to Kathmandu. Here we hired a small plane to take us to the frontier at ...,' he gestured to the sergeant who tapped on a keyboard and we looked at the screen, `.. here.' He touched the screen-map. `There I met a pilot who took them over, and dropped them within 10km of the tower. They paraglided in.'

`Where did you find a pilot and how the hell did you persuade him to do that?!' asked Jim.

`A man at our Consulate introduced me to a smuggler,' said Jones, `and we gave him money. They know all about the radars. But I think the military on the other side are pretty tolerant.'

But maybe not around the towers, I thought. `And how would they get back?' I asked.

`The pilot said he would show them a valley where he could pick them up and would lend them a beacon transmitter.'

The smuggler had returned and reported he had off-loaded the two paragliders as planned. As proof, he played back the recorded voice of Carstairs saying they could see the tower and were jumping now. The smuggler had been told to stand-by for the pick-up. He was still waiting.

It sounded logical and I recognised the hand of Dr Duluth.

`And since then, nothing?'

`Nothing,' confirmed Lt. Jones. `Carstairs was carrying a Type 4 "Identification Friend or Foe" responder but even that has not been detected.' He showed us one. It was a metal box, about 10cm square and 1cm thick. `You can lay it on the ground or fasten it to the top of a rucksack with these attachments. There's an antenna on each face,'

`Won't enemy satellites also get a signal from it?' I asked.

`Only if they send the right code at the right frequency,' he said. I picked it up and examined the recessed switch and the faint spiral antenna just visible under the plastic. Neat. It was new since my time.

`We won't be taking one,' I said.

`We could set ours to a different code, no?' asked Jim.

`No,' I confirmed. There was nothing to be served by letting our side know we had landed, and the transmission could be detected.

Now to get some weapons.

We were met by Sergeant Major Matheson outside Communications. He briskly marched towards us, leapt up in the air to land with a crash of heels in a Guards-type jump-halt, followed by an impressive wide-armed steel-spring salute. Jim beside me, visibly flinched. About 45, the Sergeant Major had a brutal bruiser's face, eyes almost hidden under the vertical black visor of his peaked hat, a hoarse voice and an incipient beer-belly, tightly restrained by his webbing belt. A row of campaign and long-service ribbons decorated his barrel-like chest. I looked at him approvingly.

I returned his salute.

`To the Armoury, S'arnt Major,' I said.

`Sir!' he rapped and span round as though on a vertical spindle in a stamping knees-up about-turn. Arms swinging he set off across the drill square; I fell into brisk step beside him and heard Jim following.

At the Armoury entrance the Sergeant Major stamped to a halt, reached out an arm like a steel piston and grasping the knob tore the door open, almost pulling it off its hinges. He leapt inside and bellowed:

`Attention! Officer's inspection. Stand by your benches.' Seven pairs of heels crashed together like rifle-bolts. The Sergeant Major came to rigid attention just inside the door and saluted.

We entered to see a sergeant, a corporal and five close-cropped troopers in fatigues, standing stiffly to attention, eyes front, at surgically clean work-benches.

`Carry on S'arnt Major,' I said saluting casually, and there was immediately the stamp of feet. The Sergeant Major was in an instant towering rage.

`Sergeant Wetherby!' he bellowed in a voice that made the windows rattle. `Call this an armoury? This isn't the armoury. I've made a mistake - I've come to the wrong place. I'll tell you what this place is. This place is a shit house. A filthy shit-house where they shit and throw all the paper on the floor.' His eagle eye had spotted a 2 square millimetre piece of paper by the door. `In all my twenty-five years of service I've never seen a more slovenly hovel. I've seen cleaner floors in a wog's kraal.' His eyes fell on the five troopers standing immobile, like five statues, eyes front. `And who are those unshaven long-haired layabouts slouching in the corner over there?'

As he raved on, I left Jim standing nervously by the door and strolled between the geometrical rows and rows of spotless lightly-oiled Mk.6 rifles, slings tightened, silencers retracted and bolts open. Racks and racks of Browning lasers and Heckler and Koch grenade launchers. Much as I had expected. Infantry and riot-control weapons, a few heavy machine guns and a few anti-tank rocket launchers. The anti-aircraft missile defence of Chondisp was in the hands of a specialised UN Air-Defence Service who had their own separate repair workshops. I appreciatively breathed in the smell of gun-oil and floor polish. I had been a sergeant once; it was good to be back.

More shouting and stamping. I knew the ceremony was nearing its close.

`And now get those misbegotten excuses for soldiers out of my sight!'

A different voice.

`Squad! Shun!' Crash! `Right turn!' Crash! `Corporal, take these men to the cook-house. Quick ... wait for it ... march!'

The corporal and five soldiers marched out, arms swinging to the horizontal, eyes front, and the door smashed to behind them. I walked over and took off my beret.

The Sergeant Major unclipped his belt and removed his peaked hat, followed by Sgt. Wetherby. Formalities over, the tension relaxed and Sergeant Wetherby stood at ease. Now to business.

`Fucking gasper, sir?' said Sergeant Wetherby politely, holding out a packet of cigarettes. Short, broad-shouldered, balding and about 28, he had grey direct eyes and a firm mouth. On his chest was a long service medal and the Pakistan Cross; on his sleeve the crossed-rifles badge of a marksman.

`No thanks, Sergeant,' I said. `I'm trying to give up the buggers.' Jim came forward from his position from the door and made a stunned gesture of negation.

`Wish I could,' said the Sgt. Major, taking one. A butane lighter miraculously appeared in his other hand and flared as he snapped a nicotine yellowed thumb-nail over its wheel. He lit his and the Sergeant's cigarette and looking down they both pulled on them with hollow-cheeked concentration. No one looked at the "No Smoking" sign.

`We're going out on a short patrol.' I said. Sgt. Wetherby turned to a glass case behind him containing a selection of automatic pistols and pulled it open.

`And we don't want fucking hand-guns,' I said angrily. Both NCO's looked down their noses disapprovingly. Officers always carried pistols. `I said a patrol, not a fucking parade.'

`Very well, sir,' said Sergeant Wetherby primly and closed the case. He looked at me a moment, came to some decision, walked across to the armoury door and after opening it and looking outside closed and carefully locked it. He disappeared into his office and reappeared a few moments later reverently holding what looked like two brand-new standard Mk.6 rifles.

`It's the new 6D,' he whispered, behind his hand. `We got ten of the fuckers last week. I'm keeping them under the counter, just for me special customers, like, or every mother-fuckin' cock-sucker would want one.'

`"Mother-fucking cock-sucker?"' I muttered, shocked in spite of myself. I had only been out of active service for six years and already ... Well, call me a purist, but I dislike this constant leak of Americanisms creeping into what is after all the language of Shakespeare. But the sergeant didn't notice my frown.

He worked the action of one with a silky snick. `Listen to that,' he said, cocking his head. `Smooth as a baby's arse.' He grasped the pistol grip. `The propellant gauge's under yer fuckin' thumb now. And look at this, fuckin' fire mode changeable without taking yer fuckin' finger from the fuckin' trigger. Beautiful piece of work,' he said fondly. His big calloused hands slid lovingly over the rifle like another man's would slide over a woman's thigh. `I zeroed the bastards in meself, but I suppose you'll want to do it yourself.'

`Fucking right', I said. Everyone shot slightly differently.

`So shall I wrap up two?' he said. `Is the American gentleman having one as well?' I nodded. We were in a gent's outfitter now as Sgt. Wetherby smoothly pulled two plastic gun-covers from under the bench, slid the rifles in and zipped them up. He rubbed his hands.

`What sort of ammo would you like, sir? We have a nice line in explosives, or I could do you a mixture of tracer and hollow-points?'

`Just the standard buggers,' I said. `We may have to use the fucking silencers.' Reaching into a steel cabinet, he pulled out a box of propellant sticks and another, heavier, containing pre-packaged blocks of fifty 5.56mm full metal jacket bullets. Deftly he slipped them into pockets in the gun-covers and snapped them shut. We could have been going on a safari.

`Now if the gentlemen would place their cards in here ...' We did and the rifles were ours.

I handed one gun-case to Jim.

`Right then,' I said and put my beret on. Immediately the two NCOs clipped on their webbing belts, donned their peaked hats and heads back, stiffened to attention. Sgt. Wetherby marched ahead to unlock and pull open the armoury door, we stepped out and he and Sgt. Major Matheson simultaneously leapt up in the air and gave us two tremendous crashing steel-spring salutes. I already had my rifle under my left arm, freeing my right hand for a salute in return.

Unfortunately Jim still had his rifle in his right hand and surprised by the need to salute, hastily transferred it to his left but it caught on the door. The two NCOs patiently waited at the salute until he had sorted it out and returned their salute.

`Good luck on your patrol, sir,' said the Sergeant Major. His face was inscrutable, but his eyes were turned up, showing only the whites.

`Thank you, S'arnt Major,' I said. They stepped back and the door crashed to.

`You can goddamn well collect anything more we need yourself,' said Jim angrily, his face red.

We returned to Jim's room.

Chapter 14

'Paragliders!' said Jim. 'Radar would have seen the metal of their weapons long before they landed.'

He was right. Sophisticated radar would have seen their tooth-fillings, let alone their weapons.

'We need a two-man stealth sled,' I said.

'And I know where we can get one,' said Jim, opening his phone. After a few minutes of: 'Yeah, Jim. You remember me? At that bar in Atlantic City. Whatever happened to that girl ... yeah, the red-head. No?! Jeez! Me? Okay, the same thing, electronics, you know. And you? You gotta be Master Sergeant at least. Hey, that's fabulous! Well, look Art, I gotta favour to ask. I promised this broad I would take her to St Quentin Island to ... yeah, sure it's restricted, but I figured if I could get hold of a two-man air sled, you know, those fancy black ones, it'd give her a blast ... that's right, a "stealth" sled ... we could ... Now don't be like that Art. I know they're still secret but there's some way to burn 'em up isn't there? That's it - "self-destruct". So there you are. All we ...uh, uh,... Well, if you can't, you can't. I just thought that with you being a ... Yeah, sure we'd burn it. On my mother's grave. And I'll file off the ID numbers. You'll do that for us? Well, that's great Art! I knew I could rely on you. And Art, I owe you one for this.' He closed his phone.

'St Quentin?'

'It's a deserted island in the South Pacific,' he said. 'Used for weapon testing. He says hang on to the girl; she sounds a treasure.'

'And the sled?'

'It'll be at LA airport tomorrow,' he said.

I thought over the kit we were going to take. The same as Carstairs, apart from the beacon. And that would be it. After all, we were collecting information, not fighting a war. And ideally we should collect the information without anyone knowing we had collected it.

'You'll want to take some of your own things?' I asked. He nodded.

'A satcom. Proximity detectors. Three four remote detonators. Some plastic. Scanner. Recorder. Metal detector. You never know.'

'How heavy, you think?' He pondered.

'Coupla kilos.' I nodded.

We thought and thought, trying to find some original way of covering the fifty-five kilometers from the frontier to the landing zone. And getting out afterwards. If we had to use local hired help we could never feel really secure.

'What's the glide angle of the sled?' asked Jim, opening his PC.

'About six degrees, loaded as we will be,' I replied immediately. He tapped on his PC.

'We could glide in from the frontier if we were released at ten thousand meters,' he said. 'We'd need oxygen of course, but we should be able to get that here somewhere.'

'Could a smuggler's aircraft go that high?' I asked doubtfully. 'Smugglers normally sneak in at low altitude, I would have thought.'

'Probably not,' he agreed, 'but we should be able to find something. And we'd better take a coupla our own pilots too,' he added.

'What about getting out?' I asked. 'Can we use the same method the first patrol was going to use?'

`I don't see why not.'

We divided the various tasks to be done and split up.

Chapter 15

As you may imagine, the next few hours were pretty hectic, what with having the sleds transferred from LA to Jaipur in India (acting on the principle that I wanted to be as different as possible from the first patrol), ripping out three passenger emergency oxygen masks from one of our shuttle aircraft, and generally chasing up the various items on our list.

But in the end, to cut a long story short, Jim, myself and two Italian pilots named Antonio and Georgio found ourselves at Simikot airport, on the Nepal/Chinese frontier with a lot of excess baggage and, still in Customs, a crate containing the 3m long airsled. And all this no more than 24 hours after Duluth had given us the green light!

`A very creditable performance by all personnel concerned', I found myself rather pompously saying.

By showing an end-user certificate stating the "sport articles" were not going to stay in Nepal but going to be re-exported to Marbal in the Oman, Jim got the crate transferred in bond to a closed hangar containing our CP21 executive jet. I calmed my conscience with the fact that the sled was indeed going to be exported.

Antonio and Jim had hacksawed out eight of the seats from the luxury jet and stacked them on the floor at the back of the hangar. We broke open the crate and loaded in the brand-new sled. With a hard black surface and the odd tapered "stealth" shape it could easily be lifted by one person and at 3m long, 80cm wide and 1m high, it just fitted through the hatch. We unpacked our luggage, strapped everything inside the sled and lashed it down.

I was worried about the launching of the sled. Normally they were carried and released at speed from under the belly of the launching aircraft. But ours would have to go out of the passenger hatch; there was no other way. The difficulty was that the slip-stream thrusting sideways on the sled when it emerged might cause it to jam against the side of the hatch. But someone back at Chondisp had worked out that if the CP21 was at its stalling speed at ten thousand meters, one person sitting down with his back against the far side of the aircraft should be able to thrust it out with his feet. We decided Georgio was to be the "shover" while Antonio kept the CP21 straight and level at just above stalling speed. The big problem would be that when we got free, the air would be blowing sideways on the sled at 150km/h, the stalling speed of the CP21, which could cause it to tumble. I decided that I, with my sport surfing experience over the Alps, would be the pilot.

I wanted to arrive at the tower from the east at 5am, the classical time and direction for a dawn attack; the time when the human spirit is at its lowest. And the sun when it rose at 5:34 would be behind us.

It was cold in the hangar. I sat down on one of the sawn-out seats and looked around. The nose of the sled was just visible through the entrance hatch of the small sleek CP21; it was already loaded up. Three oxygen bottles and masks lay on the floor nearby.

Jim and Georgio had carefully gone over the inside of the cabin to remove or tie down any movable metallic objects.

`The YP will have their little beady radar slant-eyes on us and we don't want them to see anything leaving the aircraft when we do,' Jim had explained. Good thinking. We would slowly decompress before we opened the cabin door, of course, if

only to save our ears, but nevertheless any metallic articles lying around could fall out and give an unusual radar echo.

At that moment we would be at ten thousand meters - like on the top of Mount Everest and it would be -20 degrees. Georgio would give us a shove and we would exit, hopefully without losing too much height. I would have to turn into the slip stream as soon as possible and head east.

Jim had programmed the GPS-based navigator for the correct flight profile. All I had to do was keep the analogue height bar between two moving markers and follow a direction arrow.

The sled was constructed of layers of resistive carbon fibres to absorb radar pulses and its outer surface had no sharp corners or flat surfaces to scintillate in a radar beam. But the sled would heat up if it descended too steeply and Asiablock had little beady infra-red slant eyes too. So I would have an "external temperature" gauge mounted in front of me and I would have to keep it in the "green". I just hoped there wouldn't be any conflict between what my two instruments wanted me to do.

Jim set up some surveillance devices to watch the surroundings to the hangar and switched on his scanner to check if there were any unexplained radio transmissions. It was now 22:14. I couldn't think of anything else to do so I set my alarm watch for 4am, and we wrapped up in our sleeping bags on the carpeted floor of the stripped out jet. Antonio and Georgio sat up front. We slept.

I woke with a start, feeling a prickling in my wrist as my watch gave me small electric shocks. I shook the others to life and handed out hot coffee. Jim cautiously slid the hangar door slightly open and we looked out into the cold black starry night. 4:04am. I scanned around with the binoculars set to "night", but there was nothing obviously out of place. Jim collected his surveillance devices, helped me pull the hangar doors wide open and we all pushed the aircraft out onto the tarmac. We returned shivering back into the warmth of its cabin.

Antonio and Georgio were in the cockpit, their faces illuminated from below by the various screens. The aircraft shifted slightly as Jim moved around inside with a flashlight, last minute checking.

'All right?' I asked, quietly. His flashlight beam moved around once more, illuminating the sawn-off seat supports and the equipment inside the sled.

'I guess so,' he replied. So I closed the hatch with a thump and pulled the locking lever down. I made my way through the cabin to the cockpit and stood behind the two pilots. I touched Antonio's shoulder.

'When you're ready,' I said. He spoke a few words into his lip microphone and waited. Receiving confirmation, he thumbed a button and with a cough the starboard engine began to turn. Its note rose up the scale and after a moment the port kicked in. I looked down at the pilots but they were completely preoccupied watching the screens, hands on controls. Georgio reached forwards and slid the side window closed. The noise level dropped and they both settled themselves in their seats, sliding them forwards and tightening harnesses. Time 04:22.

The note of the engines rose to a howl, the brakes came off and we began to slowly edge away from the hangar. We turned gradually, the note dropped a trifle and we started to trundle bumpily along the perimeter track. Looking at one of the screens I could clearly see it and its bright reflectors.

We wheeled into position at the end of the runway and stopped with a squeal of brakes, rocking slightly. Antonio's eyes and fingers were flicking over the controls and his lips were moving. The engines were making a constant howl. He raised his hand to me and I went back into the cabin, sat down next to Jim and strapped in.

We took off quickly, ascending rapidly into the night. I looked out of a side window but could only see the faint lights of the airport far below. I undid my seat belt and went to stand behind the two pilots again.

We circled round and round, gaining height until we broke into brilliant dazzling sunlight at ten thousand meters.

'Keep it at that and slow down; we're climbing in,' I said to Antonio. Georgio unstrapped and we both went back into the bright sunlit cabin. I gestured to Jim.

Georgio helping, we crawled head first into the sled and fastened ourselves down on our stomachs with the harnesses. I heard the note of the jets slowly sliding down the scale and the aircraft started to bounce around as its speed dropped and we approached stall. Jim was lying just above me in a webbed hammock and his head was directly behind mine, so we could easily communicate. In front of me was my GPS navigator, the external temperature gauge and a small window, looking forwards and down. In flight I had to cover it with a carbon shutter. A quick glance at my watch - 04:35.

And just in front of my nose was the single flight control for the sled - the joystick. Reaching forwards I waggled it to check the controls were free.

Lastly I pulled the airline passenger oxygen mask towards me, pressed it over my nose, stretched the elastic behind my head and turned the valve, hearing it hiss. I heard Jim doing the same.

I tapped my foot three times against the side of the sled as a signal to Georgio, wearing the third oxygen mask, to slowly decompress the aircraft. A minute later my ears began to pop and the noise of the engines vanished. I swallowed, the engine noise reappeared, but fainter. Again my ears popped. I felt the air getting thinner and my head seemed to be expanding. I took a deep breath from my mask and swallowed. My head seemed stuffed with cotton wool and I could hardly hear the engines.

Ultimately the pressure seemed to have stabilised, but I still felt dizzy.

'You okay, Dig?' said a muffled voice above and behind me. I gave a thumbs up sign.

I saw Georgio's feet in my vision port and there was a thump and immediately the howl of the jets leapt in to the cabin, followed by buffeting freezing cold air. Georgio had opened the passenger hatch. The sled rocked on the cabin floor and my feet and legs felt the cold.

The sled jerked forwards with a grating sound and now I could see over the sill of the hatch. We were in sunlight but beneath me all was darkness. Another jerk forwards and my head was outside the aircraft. Jesus, I could feel the pressure of the slipstream pushing the nose of the sled to the right! Those fools at Chondisp had miscalculated - we would never exit! The noise of the engines disappeared and we seemed to hang weightless; Antonio had banked. There was a thump from behind, a hollow scraping sound and we were free!

A brutal lateral jerk threw me against the side of the sled followed by a spooky helpless feeling of weightlessness as I hung in my harness. I kept the stick forwards and hard over to the left - I must not let the slipstream push us away. The stick was fighting back and I needed two hands to hold it over. I had one knee against the side of the sled to brace myself as I concentrated all my being on holding the small stick over. The air flow rose to a roaring bubbling scream and I heard a muffled "Ker-rist!" from above me. Would the control wires break? I could hardly hold the small stick over and the big clumsy mask on my face rode up and stopped me seeing forwards. But eventually the howl of the wind diminished and the stick stopped trembling. I slowly let it centre itself. But by the progressively decreasing pressure on my

stomach I knew we were rising and suddenly the stall alarm squawked. Hastily I thrust the stick forwards, speed gradually built up again and stability returned.

There was nothing in the viewing port but the line of the horizon at 40 degrees. Carefully I brought it horizontal and eased back on the stick. A quick glance at the GPS navigator. We must head more east. A slow bank to the right centred the arrow. Stable and on the right course. I flipped the screen over the viewing port and had a quick glance at my watch. There was just enough light coming in from the rear to see it. Time 04:37. Only one minute since launch?! Incredible! I took a deep breath.

Now we had to start moving, as quickly as possible. We had only lost 200m, which was better than I had expected.

And then, like a light going out, we were in complete darkness. The sun had sunk below the horizon again. Another glance at the illuminated display of the navigator. It was still pointing ahead but the bar that showed our height was above the two slowly dropping lines which were our programmed glide path. Too high. Stick forward, nose down and the hissing wind noise rose in volume. Keeping a careful eye on the temperature gauge I saw it slowly rising. Steeper and faster, the wind noise a buffeting roar, the control stick vibrating like a live thing. Jim was speaking urgently in my ear but I ignored him. The analogue bar that gave our height was still slightly above the slowly dropping markers. Nose temperature just in the green, air noise a constant roar. Incrementally the altimeter bar caught up with the markers. I eased back on the stick, took a deep breath and relaxed. We seemed to have made it!

`Another twenty minutes,' said a comforting voice in my ear.

`You OK?' I replied, pulling the oxygen mask to one side for an instant.

`You missed the tail-plane by two millimeters,' said Jim.

Yuk. I shivered, and concentrated on making sure the programmed glide path didn't push the nose temperature into the red. I swallowed again and my ears clicked. Seven thousand two hundred meters. The air pressure was returning. I pulled the oxygen mask off, inched open the vision port shutter and peeked out. As we skimmed over the dark landscape I could see faint groups of lights and I was for an instant reminded of how similar this was to looking for a Host when I had left the Inserter! Unconsciously I had been looking for a "swirl"!

`Prepare to turn,' said Jim's voice. The analogue bar on the navigator was sliding down rapidly and when it hit the baseline there was a soft beep. We should now be about five hundred meters directly over the tower.

Stick over to the left and I felt my weight increase as we banked and turned. Round, round and straightened up. The navigator was pointing to the left - I had overshot. Stick a bit to the right, a tad to the left to straighten up and we were headed west, directly for the tower, about five kilometers away. In this valley we should be masked from ground-based radar so I flipped the viewing port shutter fully back. Above me the snow-covered mountain peaks were golden yellow, the valleys still pools of darkness. We were swooping down parallel to a long valley when I saw the tower!

`That's it!' said Jim's voice in my ear at the same time. A thin straight finger, standing up at the end of a mountain spur, still in the shade but silhouetted against white puffy clouds. This next part was going to be hairy.

The sled was similar to the sport air-surfer I used over the Alps in Bavaria, but with two men a lot slower and much heavier on the controls. We wanted to arrive as close to the tower as possible, and from stereo satellite photos we had picked out a small level area on the southern side of the spur. But it was still in the shade and I couldn't see a damn thing. I decided to approach as slowly as possible at the approximate height and pull up when I saw the plateau. The tower was rapidly

approaching and I veered a bit to the left, too far, back to the right, now correct. That should be the right heading. Gently back on the stick, the nose came up and airspeed dropped. Where was that bloody plateau? The tower filled my vision, its tip now glowing in the sun. Jesus, I couldn't see a thing. I was going to overshoot into the valley! But at that moment, like two identical transparencies sliding over each other, the pattern I had been holding in my head coincided with the rocks below us. We were a little low. Back on the stick. The nose came up and the stall alarm squawked and went off. And again. Nose down a trifle - now too high; I could only see the sky. Again a squawk and, thank God, a hollow scraping sound. We had touched! Immediately I pushed the stick forwards and the scraping noise increased, the whole sled vibrating. And with a teeth-shaking bump we were down and sliding forwards, bumping over rocks. I could do nothing - I just had my hands over my head. The slithering and bumping seemed to go on forever but finally with a heavy jolt we spun round sideways and stopped. In the intense silence I heard Jim letting out his breath. I raised my head and through the vision slot had a spectacular view down into a valley. We had just made it!

'Not one of your best landings, Captain,' said a voice in my ear.

Chapter 16

Jim had to get out first and I could feel him wriggling above me.

'Er, we're kinda evenly balanced,' said his voice from outside and deliberately casual. 'Back out slowly.'

I pushed myself backwards cautiously. Just before my feet touched the ground the sled tipped forwards and would have slid over the edge of the precipice down into the valley if Jim hadn't grabbed it by his harness straps. I froze there a moment, just sitting on the ground, one hand on the sled, waiting for things to stop moving. It was a cold clear morning with a slight breeze and we were on a flat levelled rocky plateau about twenty meters wide and a hundred meters long. The sun illuminated the top half of the tower but down here we were still in darkness.

With a hollow grating sound we quickly pulled the sled's lightened weight back onto the plateau. Jim reached inside and pulled out our rifles.

I grabbed one and cocking it, rolled over to one side waving the muzzle over the nearby tower. Jim, on the other side of the sled was doing the same. Nothing moved. Silence except for the sighing of the wind in my ears.

'Cover me!' I said, standing up shakily. I almost fell down again but after a moment the ground stopped moving and I made cautiously for the base of the tower.

Jim stayed crouching by the side of the sled, watching me until I had almost disappeared round the curve of the tower then followed me. I jogged around its base but nothing. The ground fell away steeply on three sides - the third side stretched back to join the mass of the mountains, about five kilometers to the east. We returned to the edge of the spur, pulled out our binoculars and carefully scanned in all directions.

'Nix,' said Jim eventually. We seemed to be safe for the moment. I made for the tower and unzipped my pants. Wordlessly Jim imitated me.

'The kit,' I said, zipping up. We went back to the sled and put on our rucksacks, turned round and looked at the tower for the first time. The sun had risen and it was an enormous glaring white pillar in front of us, mottled on one side with green camouflage paint.

We knew from satellite photos that it was about two hundred meters high and twenty meters diameter but these figures never mean anything until you see them.

The tower was bloody enormous! It was thick massive and high, soaring above us, tapering away into the distance, seemingly thrusting itself into the clouds. Constructed of rough unfinished concrete, the shuttering marks were still visible.

We walked around it again, this time more slowly. I remembered I had passed a small opening. Yes, here it was, about two meters wide and three meters high, on the side facing east.

'Cover me,' I said again and crouching, ran quickly through the opening and stood to one side, back against the wall. Gloom, a faint smell of raw wood and human manure. My foot struck a piece of wood and there was an echo.

I was inside the tower and it was empty. The morning sunlight entering the doorway made an uneven bright path across the rocky floor ending in a yellow oblong on the wall opposite. Far above me was a tiny blue disk. The muzzle of Jim's rifle appeared around the edge.

'It's empty,' I said, my voice echoing. 'Come in.'

The sunlight reflected upwards from the floor showed the rough unfinished concrete of the cylindrical wall stretching upwards. I pulled out my binoculars and looked up at the bright circle far above me. On highest magnification I circled round it but could see nothing. No fixtures for antennas or weapons.

And on the ground before us was just litter. A heap of wooden shuttering planks, some with dried concrete still sticking to them, some old newspapers covered with fine Chinese script, a few empty plastic drink containers, and one corner that looked as though it had been used as a toilet. I folded up the newspapers and put them in my pocket - they could at least tell us where the workforce had come from. Jim opened his rucksack and pulled out a camera.

I walked back to the opening and the blinding glare of sunlight, leaving Jim inside filming. He would film the outside too, but there was nothing here. It was exactly what it appeared to be on the satellite photos; an enormous empty concrete cylinder, two hundred meters high, twenty meters diameter, walls three meters thick and sited on a windy commanding crag.

I sat with my back to the cold tower, looking around at the magnificent view. It was summer here but the temperature was only just above freezing. The ground fell away on all sides at about twenty degrees. Convex slope, rough limestone rocks, scree and some stunted bushes. Why the bloody hell had the YP built it? At 4 370m it was a wonderful site for a radar or rocket launching site. But a passive tower?

Looking back along the spur towards the nearest mountain, I could see where the workforce had been temporarily quartered. I got up and walked over and saw the remains of toilets, hollows where garbage had been burnt, rough concrete foundations for machinery - for wood cutting judging by the sawdust still stuck in rock cracks. Wood for scaffolding and shuttering. The sordid remains of a temporary building site. There were no tracks leading along the rocky spur towards the mountains so everything had been lifted in at enormous expense by helicopter. It must have been quite an engineering feat to bring up all the concrete and scaffolding, not to mention the labour force.

Jim had moved off and descending the slope was photographing the tower from all sides.

'Cheese!' he shouted, his voice faint in the thin air but I ignored him. We had completed the first phase of our mission. We must now try to find the lost patrol. But first we should get rid of the still secret sled.

'So where's Carstairs?' said Jim, approaching and packing away his camera. I shrugged. I had only begun to think of that problem.

'We've got to destroy the sled,' I answered.

`We can do that in the tower,' he said. His voice went up at the end, as though surprised; he'd just thought of it.

I nodded my appreciation.

`Yes, good idea. Let's get it in now.'

It was very light and it passed easily through the opening. We laid it on top of the shuttering.

`And how are we going to destroy it?' I asked.

`Easy-peasy. There's a layer of some oxygen containing stuff built in. You just break off an edge to expose it, apply a light and get away. The sled whooshes away to nothing in about ten secs.' It sounded dramatic, but I knew the radar absorbing plastic it was made of was still on the secret list.

`So the sled could really have burnt up if we'd come down too steeply,' I said, shiveringly remembering the nose temperature gauge.

`I was trying to tell you that just after we exited.'

Bloody hell! I looked at him incensed.

`Well, tell me before next time.' And maybe I'll come on foot. I'm glad I hadn't heard him; we'd been riding on a bomb.

`You want I should fire it up?' he said, pulling out a butane lighter. I had a strange feeling of reluctance, and the expression "burning one's boats" jumped into my mind. But we couldn't use the sled any more. If we tried to push it off the edge of the plateau it would just go straight down. And burning it in the tower would produce a hot plume which the YP might detect from orbit if they had anything overhead. Maybe we could break bits off to use as fuel if it got colder. I mentioned all this to Jim, trying to rationalise my unwillingness to get rid of an energy resource.

`I guess so,' he said, shrugging. `But the pieces would burn pretty quickly though.'

I compromised by having him put one of his remote controlled detonators in it, so we could pop it off just before we left.

Before we left with the first patrol, that is. Having rescued them. Where the hell could they be?

So we sat on the ground on opposite sides of the tower and used our binoculars to carefully quarter the view in front of us, looking for fallen parachutes, movement, anything. But there was only a small village far, far down in the distance. Jim pulled a rod antenna out of his scanning receiver and switched on, listening for any transmissions. There were some faint long-wave transmissions in Chinese, the usual amount of short-wave chatter, but nothing on the military frequencies.

After a quarter of an hour we moved round by ninety degrees and repeated our searching.

Nix.

I looked at my watch - 07:47. We had been here over two hours. There really wasn't much else we could do. We were in the ideal spot to find the lost patrol - we had a wonderful view covering about ten kilometers in most directions.

Jim had a directional satcom transmitter that could be pointed up at one of our special satellites and would enable me to contact Chrodisp. But that satellite was on the other side of the world now and wouldn't be in view for another five hours. Perhaps the lost patrol would also try to communicate with base using the same satellite and we could be patched to talk to them directly and find where they were. We had to wait.

But in the meantime the weather was getting worse. The wind was strengthening and clouds were rolling up from the east. The sun was becoming obscured and the temperature was dropping. In fact it was getting bloody cold and

windy. We were completely exposed to the elements here. I looked towards the sharp drop into the valley.

'We've got to get out of this wind,' I said. 'Let's see if we can climb down a few meters over the edge.' It stank in the tower. Jim nodded.

It was markedly better out of the wind. We opened our sleeping sacks and sat in them. Jim had the radio scanner quietly hissing beside him.

I decided it would be safe for us to sleep, one at a time. We tossed and he won, disappearing into his sleeping sack and buttoning over the hood.

I sat shivering and looking around at the desolate mountain spur. The wind was buffeting the sparse rough grass and I had a brief odd feeling of unease. A storm was building up and wet grey clouds were rushing past, hissing over the rocky edge of the plateau then tearing and twisting rapidly a few meters over my head. Slowly the panorama below me lost its sharp edges and slid into featureless grey. Sudden stabs of unease, as in missing heart-beats. What was the matter with me? The ground below was completely hidden and soon even nearby rocks were lost in the turbulent mist. Another stab of unease and I felt a movement in my chest cavity. Ultra-low frequency sound! It must be the wind rushing over the distant open mouth of the tower and causing its column of air to resonate like a monster organ pipe.

I walked around a bit to keep my circulation going; the temperature was down to -5 degrees. I put my head over the edge of the plateau but I could barely see the loom of the tower. And now over the roar of the storm there was a deep sonorous breathy booming sound, heard through the feet as much as the ears. As the wind force increased it must be overblowing the tower organ pipe to audible harmonics!

I moved back to sit in my sleeping bag again but kept nervously looking back up at the ridge, imagining monsters creeping down towards me through the swirling mist. As the storm gradually worked itself up to its hysterical peak the booming contra-bass of the tower was an almost continual drone. A sudden flash of sunlight shining through an incongruous patch of blue sky was followed instantly by a hissing white cloud of horizontally blown hailstones, fortunately just over my head, a few golf-ball sized ones dropping by my side. The sun disappeared but that flash of sunlight signalled the peak of the storm. It was slowly abating as I looked at my watch and saw gratefully my time was up. I woke Jim and he took over.

I was frozen, tired and worn out. As soon as I slid into my sleeping sack and pulled the hood fully over I began to warm up. And with warmth came sleep.

Chapter 17

I woke to feel Jim shaking my arm. His cold pinched face was just above me and he was speaking urgently.

'What?' I asked, pulling the hood back. The wind had dropped, the sun had reappeared and a quick glance at my watch showed it to be 09:32.

'There's some YP nearby!' he said, gesturing to the scanner. 'I heard them gabbling.' In an instant I was out of my sleeping sack and grabbed my rifle. We climbed rapidly up the slope and cautiously peered over the edge, across the plateau.

And then we heard it. The faint rhythmic hiss of an Asiablock "whistler", over to the right somewhere.

'There!' said Jim, binoculars up to eyes and pointing south. And now I could see it too. It was circling nervously about two kilometers away, three hundred meters above us, the sun glinting on its five-meter diameter shimmering rotor. Behind us the

scanner broke into life again. And just as I had got my binoculars up to my eyes on wide-angle, a large object fell from underneath it.

`They've dropped an air-sled!' yelled Jim.

How the hell did they know we were here?! Our sled should have been invisible during the approach. I put my binocular's cross-wires on it, pressed "hold" and zoomed in. They were using the standard YP transparent plastic two-man attack sled, with some angled armour over the nose. It hung motionless in the field of view under the cross-wires, growing slowly in size. Sweating I took my binoculars down and checked my rifle.

The sled was a black dot, getting rapidly larger as it slid round in a wide circle and bored in towards us. The whistler for some reason had dropped down and was hovering over to our right, at about the same height as us.

I was trembling with tension. How had the buggers found us? I felt stupid and guilty at the same time. This looked like the end of the line. We had been caught with our pants down! We were trespassing, spying. The two power blocks were not at war. In an International Court we wouldn't have a foot to stand on. Our own countries would have to disown us. But we would never come before an International Court. Asiablock wanted us alive and that whistler/sled combination was exactly right for capturing us. The whistler would stand off at first, fearing shoulder-launched missiles. The sled would land and the whistler would keep us in view and direct the troopers, supporting them with its heavy long-range machine gun. After that it would close in and pin us down so the two troopers could take us prisoner.

But neither I, nor even more Jim, could be taken alive to face interrogation. We knew too much. If we were lucky, we could hold off the troopers for a while, but in the end it was the deadly choice - die or be made prisoner. I had never been in this position before.

All these thoughts were going through my mind feverishly. I was sweating and shivering. I glanced across at Jim and his face was covered with sweat too. He also knew he must not be taken prisoner, and against these odds the only alternative was to be killed. This was the end of the line. How the fuck had they found us?

The sled was arrowing straight in. It was obviously going to land on the plateau above and the two troopers would scramble down to get us.

But their tactics were wrong. The whistler was not in the right position. Why wasn't it watching us? These thoughts slipped away as the sled approached. It would turn aside in a moment, keeping just out of effective range of our rifles and ... but it was keeping straight on. It would fly right over us!

`We've got it!' said Jim in exultant relief, kneeling behind a rock and raising his rifle. I saw his thumb moving as he switched to high-power, full automatic. He was right. The underside of that sled was not armoured and as it flew over us, our rifles would gut it. I was amazed at our luck - putting off the inevitable for even a minute gave the chance of putting it off for another minute. I raised my rifle and snicked into Automatic.

The sled was now no more than two hundred meters away, nose up for the landing, giving us a perfect shot at the soft underbelly. This was going to be a massacre.

But it was all wrong. I lowered my rifle.

`Jim!' I shouted. `Don't shoot!' Startled, he removed his eye from the sight and looked across at me.

`What? We'll never get a better chance.'

`Don't shoot!' I repeated. `They don't know we're here. They're not after us.'

`Who cares ...' he began and his face froze, I could see the thoughts going through his head. If they were not after us they must be after the other patrol. The YP must have found what we had missed!

We ducked down and the sled hissed barely five meters over our heads and scrunched to a landing on the plateau above us. A pause and we heard high sing-song voices which rapidly vanished into the distance.

We scrambled down to our original position and grabbed our rucksacks, heaved them over our shoulders and climbed up to the edge of the plateau again. I held out my hand to restrain Jim and gradually raised my head over the edge. The YP sled lay slewed over near the tower. There was no sign of its previous occupants. Off to the right and about two hundred meters up, the YP whistler was motionlessly hovering. I realised it was keeping the tower between itself and the position of the lost patrol. So Carstairs and Sgt. Silk must be on the convex north slope of the spur. No wonder we hadn't seen them. They had obviously dropped in from the north and undershot. And landing on a steep slope with a paraglider was very dangerous - they could be injured.

I turned to Jim.

`Carstairs is on the north slope and can't be far down. We can get to them round here.' I pointed to the left. If we kept the ridge between us and the whistler, we should be safe.

We started scrambling around to the left. It wasn't too bad. There was some slippery shale and a rather steep bit but we were able to swing out on a small bush. And all the time we could hear the hissing of the whistler just over the edge above us. It hadn't moved. If it came round this side, we'd just have to freeze and hope our camouflaged smocks would hide us.

I had no idea what we were going to do when we got around the other side, but we just couldn't sit and watch two of our men be captured. Logically I supposed we should have just let them be taken prisoners and serve as a diversion from us. But we don't always think logically.

Now we were around the other side and could see the two YP troopers, about a hundred meters away, alternately moving and covering each other in the approved manner. And there was the mottled green of a paraglider!

`There they are,' said Jim quietly. We heard a shot and both YP melted into the ground. We were slightly above them and could see them both. Through my binoculars the bigger one had a radio up to his mouth. The other one was just waiting.

The sound of the whistler intensified and its flickering shadow appeared above the horizon behind us. There was a sharp tearing roar as it let go with its MG and I could see rock chips flying up around the paraglider.

`Our best chance is to let them be taken prisoner and follow them up onto the plateau,' shouted Jim over the screaming of the whistler. `That whistler's gotta land to pick everyone up,' It sounded good for a moment. But then I realised the whistler would just touch down for an instant and it was most unlikely the gunner and pilot would climb out. Our rifles would have little effect on the whistler's armour.

I made a negative gesture.

Over the shriek of the whistler we could hear the rattle of its heavy MG again. It was behind us, hovering just over the ridge, firing down short bursts as directed by the man with the radio. It was a hopeless situation and we'd just have to watch them be taken prisoner. If we intervened, we would get taken too. That bloody whistler. Why hadn't I thought of bringing ...? They were small enough, no longer than ... I

froze, one arm out, holding my breath. An Idea! It was quick, brutal and would be totally effective.

I gestured to Jim and putting my mouth up to his ear, explained my Idea. He looked up doubtfully at the tower.

`But how're you gonna get them there?'

`Help me cut this log,' I said in answer. It was rotten, covered with green lichen and about 10cm thick. I explained what I intended to do as he sliced it into a piece about 1m long with his pocket laser.

`No they're not,' I said, in reply to his objections, `they're going to shit in their pants. Just have your thingummy ready. I might not be able to give you more than one chance.'

`But what about these two?' shouted Jim, nodding down at the two troopers. Yes, if my plan didn't succeed, the whistler could direct them on to us and that could be a problem.

Jim had his rifle to his shoulder.

`Hold it,' I said, putting my hand on his rifle. They didn't know we were here and killing them wouldn't change anything. The whistler could always call up its base for reinforcements. The core of our problem was the whistler. And if everything worked we would want these two as prisoners.

`I think I could hit the radio,' said Jim. Now that was a good idea!

`Great,' I said. `Fire in the middle of the next MG burst.'

We crouched down and I also sighted on the radio, which the bigger trooper had placed on the ground beside him. There was a another tearing rip of gunfire from the whistler and we must have both fired simultaneously. The radio leaped into the air and disintegrated.

Through the sight I saw the two troopers look round startled. It could have been a stray from the MG. Uncertainly they turned back to firing over the hollow.

And unseen we scrambled round the edge of the plateau to our original position. I placed my rifle on the ground and picked up the log.

`How about you ordering me to make with the log?' he said shouting over the screaming whistler.

`I want a good man on the button,' I shouted back, looking at the small complicated box in his hands. He nodded resigned.

We both peered over the edge of the plateau, ducked down and moved around to place the tower between us and the whistler, now about fifty meters up and firing down over the ridge in short bursts. They were probably wondering why the two troopers were not answering their radio calls.

I climbed quickly over the edge of the plateau and ran forwards, keeping the tower between myself and the whistler's canopy.

Holding the log across my chest, I pressed flat against the rough concrete of the tower. The whistler was making an infernal din on the other side of the tower and its downdraft was whipping up clouds of dust and small stones.

This was it.

I walked around the base of the tower and stepped away from it, standing legs astride in full view, the downdraft flattening my smock against my body. I put the log to my shoulder, confidently sighting along it as though it were a shoulder-launcher. I reached over with a white fluttering handkerchief in my left hand to clean the lens.

I was unnoticed until the fluttering handkerchief caught the pilot's side vision. His face turned towards me and he received the shock of his life. His worst nightmare realised! The whistler rocked crazily on its axis, the pitch going up and down as the rotor clawed at the air in near stall. For a moment I thought it would crash into the

tower and the rest of my plan would not be needed. The MG ripped off wildly in all directions on full automatic but I held my aim steady, imagining the panic in the canopy as the pilot screamed at the gunner, telling him there was a guy with a rocket launcher fifty meters below! They both knew a rocket could instantly convert a whistler into a fire-ball, incinerating anyone in it. And at fifty meters he could hardly miss.

I saw shapes moving jerkily inside the canopy. The gunner would be frantically trying to register on me, but his gun couldn't traverse far enough. The pilot would be sweating with fear, just wanting to get away, to hide behind the tower, to land ... anything to escape from the igniting fuel he already felt searing his flesh. In the confined space of the canopy they would both be shrieking at each other, falling around and getting in each other's way.

I removed the log from my shoulder and examined it nervously, as though I had a misfire.

The whistler stabilised and started to back off, the nose swinging towards me for the gunner. Panic stricken, I glanced up at it as the MG muzzle swung round. Just in time I dodged back behind the shelter of the tower. A storm of heavy bullets howled off the concrete, raising clouds of dust and thudding into the ground where I had so calmly stood a few seconds before.

But I was not there. I had jogged around the tower to the other side and again presented my "weapon", the fault apparently cleared.

Again confusion. However the MG was already pointing at the tower, and so was able to traverse around to me quickly. A short burst and I dodged back out of sight. But this time the pilot must have had binoculars on me and realised I was pointing a tree branch at him! He would just about burst a blood-vessel with fury.

Now logically they should have pinned me down and called up one of the troopers to pick me off, unprotected as I was. But I was depending on the fact they both had had a terrible shock. Soaked with sweat, cut and bruised from hitting sharp edges, sitting in soiled underpants and blind with rage, they would want to exterminate me personally. And in any case the goddamn radio wasn't working.

The whistler began to inch around the tower, the gun firing in short bursts. But I was able to quite easily keep ahead of them until they decided it would be easier to get me from above. I heard the rotor scream increase in pitch and the whistler rose and rose until it was hovering just above the tower. A short burst thumped into the ground beside me, but at the last moment I had jumped sideways and vanished through the opening, into the tower!

'Got the tricky bastard!' I imagined someone above saying and as I expected, a flap opened and three small black objects dropped out. They would get me inside the tower with hand-grenades. The steel splinters, concentrated by the walls of the tower would shred me. And if I tried to get out of the opening the MG would be waiting for me.

But just for the moment the whistler was directly over the tower and the gun could not register. I dashed out of the tower again and flattening myself against its outside wall, raised my hand to Jim, his face visible above the edge of the plateau.

There was a muffled thump from inside the tower, as Jim detonated the sled incendiary destruct charge. Followed a few seconds later by the crashes of the exploding grenades.

I looked upwards urgently. The whistler's nose with the long depressed barrel of its MG was inching into view, ready to chop me up if I ran out of the bottom of the tower. Perhaps because of their eagerness they were a little uncoordinated this time. Unfortunately for them they would not have another chance; there would not be

another time. The balloon of hot air from the burning sled was rising rapidly inside the tower; I could see dust raised outside the opening as cold air rushed in to replace it.

The whistler is a simple but sturdy development of the helicopter. Instead of rotating blades it has a hollow rotating rod which simulates a blade by having air blown over it from many small holes. Not having to change the angle of a scything blade as it rotated, it did not need the complex cyclic gear of the helicopter. The "blown wing" was robust and cheap. In still or moderately rising air it works fine. But in rapidly rising air, air moving faster than the air blown over the wing, lift can be seriously reduced. And the concentrated blast of hot air funnelled up the tower towards it was very fast.

Seen from below, the nose of the whistler, two hundred meters above me, slid back out of sight. There was a sort of crackling noise from the top of the tower and the high pitched whistling, which I had been hearing for so long that it had disappeared into the background, instantly ceased, leaving a ringing silence. And in the silence I could hear a terrible hollow scraping and squealing sound coming from inside the tower, getting closer and closer until there was a dreadful nearby thump felt through my feet. The whistler had fallen down into the tower!

I ducked and ran straight for the edge of the plateau. That whistler was loaded with munitions and fuel and I didn't know how strong the tower was. I leapt over the edge of the plateau and turned round to watch.

'It just goddamn well disappeared,' said Jim wide-eyed, looking at his remote detonator box as though it were a bomb. We stared upwards. Where once there had hovered a deadly whistler was only a small plume of black smoke blown away flat by the breeze. But from the body of the tower we could hear a deep roaring sound gradually building up, with occasional crashes and the unmistakable crackling of burning small-arms ammunition. There was no more smoke from the tower now. It had been replaced by a shimmering heat haze. Awed, we climbed onto the plateau and moved around the base of the tower until we were opposite the opening. Cautiously we peeked in, but all we could see inside was a brilliant white glare and feel intense heat beaming out. Aluminium burns like magnesium if the temperature is high enough.

Apart from the sullen roar of the whistler being cremated, the plateau was quiet. Jim held my rifle out to me and I found I was still carrying the log. I looked at it - it would make a great souvenir and in Victorian times would have found a place on my study wall, to be taken down in my dotage and used to bore visitors.

I listened to the roar of the furnace within and no, I had no regrets. Those two were enemy; it was their duty to capture or kill us and it was our duty to escape and kill them.

There was a brittle burst of automatic fire from over the side of the hill and I remembered the whistler was out of the way but there were still two élite Asiablock infantrymen on the loose. I threw the log un sentimentally into the opening of the tower. Let it be consumed with its victims.

I grabbed my rifle from Jim and we ran to the edge of the plateau and cautiously looked over. About a hundred meters below us was the crumpled body of the YP corporal; I couldn't see the other.

Apart from the sighing breeze it was very quiet on the sunlit mountain top now so we shouted down, telling them we were from Chrodisp and were there to rescue them. We knew their names and what with my British and Jim's American accent, we stopped them shooting. In the end I stood up.

'Where's the other Wipe?' I shouted. There was a pause and a figure in a Westblock battle-smock stood up and waved. A sergeant.

`We've got him.' He turned and motioned. A figure in YP uniform rose, hands behind his head.

`Where's Captain Carstairs?' I shouted.

`He's here too. He's wounded.'

`We're coming down.'

Sergeant Silk was waiting for us and saluted as we entered a small hollow. The prisoner was sitting in one corner and in the other was Captain Carstairs. He looked up at us sullenly and had an inflatable splint around one leg. There didn't seem much to say. He had had his chance and blown it. I broke the uncomfortable silence by bringing him up to date on the military situation.

`We're done here,' I said. `We've gotta get back.' I turned to Jim. `How quick before you can make contact?'

He squinted at his watch.

`It's now 10:07. At extreme slant range I can perhaps make contact with a satellite in an hour and a half, more likely two hours.'

I looked at Carstairs.

`Is there anything I can do?' I asked.

`No, thank you,' he said. `The sergeant put this on and gave me a jab.' It was embarrassing. We came from completely different worlds and I had absolutely nothing to say to him.

The sergeant was quietly talking to Jim and I heard him explaining how a gust of wind had blown them down onto the rocks. He had been winded but survived. He had been up to the tower and had seen there was nothing in it, but both the camera and the radio had been broken in the arrival. They had spent a night on the mountainside, hoping a rescue attempt would be made, when the YP patrol arrived.

`A whistler appeared over the edge there and started shooting at us, sir,' he said pointing. `I guessed they had sent in a sled, but I couldn't see it. And then I saw two Wipe coming down towards us.'

`Did they ask you to surrender, or anything?' asked Jim.

`No, sir. But the whistler's MG had pinned us down and they would have just walked up to us and we'd have had to put our hands up.' He fingered his rifle.

`But the bloody whistler must have hit the tower as it disappeared and the MG fire stopped. I didn't know what was going to happen until one of them just got up from behind a rock and ran right at us - blazing away on full auto.'

`So you shot him,' I said.

`No choice, sir. He was crazy.' I had met this before in Pakistan. Their soldiers were so highly integrated that when they were separated from their unit they often became suicidally aggressive.

`And the other?' I glanced towards the other YP, and jerked around, grabbing for my rifle. He had moved and was crouching by Captain Carstairs! Holding it by the pistol grip I came up to the aim but realised he was not attacking Carstairs, but just quietly talking to him.

`He just stuck his hands up and walked in, sir,' said the sergeant's voice behind me, completing his report.

I put my rifle down and looked round. Two hours to go before we could try to contact base and a further hour before we could reasonably expect transport out. The YP must have somehow detected Carstairs and sent out a patrol to arrest them. How long would the YP military take to react when this patrol didn't report back? And how long would it take them to detect the heat plume from their tower and connect the two? I turned to Jim.

`Will Asiablock have noticed this?' I pointed my thumb at the tower. He opened his rucksack and sitting down opened his PC, screening its display from the bright sunlight with a hand.

`An Asiablock observation satellite went over half an hour ago. The next one is not due for two hours. I think the last one missed it,' he said in conclusion.

So we had two hours plus Asiablock reaction time before they came to see what had caused the tremendous heat plume from one of their secret towers. As they said in my adopted home of Munich, it was going to be a bit "knapp". But perhaps we could delay things a little.

`Sgt. Silk. I want you to stay here. Lt. Prince and myself will be going up to the tower for half an hour or so.' Jim looked up at me in surprise.

`I want to remove all traces of the YP patrol. It may confuse their follow-up team.'

`You've made a good start,' he said, dryly as we left the hollow and walked towards the dead YP Corporal. He was lying on his face. I stooped by him and turned him over. He had been shot through the head. I completely emptied his pockets and giving everything to Jim, grabbed one of the body's arms.

`Help me carry this up to the plateau.'

`A dead YP? What do want it up there for?'

`I'll show you. Come on, let's go.'

We slung our rifles over our shoulders and hoisted up the body of the dead corporal. We dragged him, not without a lot of bewildered cursing from Jim, onto the plateau.

`Shove him in the sled,' I said. Jim was beyond questioning.

I grasped the back of the sled and turned it round until it pointed at the tower.

`Into the tower,' I said.

`Jesus, Jim,' he protested, `you can't just ...'

`We're clearing up. Remember?'

He shrugged, and got his hands on the opposite side of the sled. We were about ten meters from the opening in the tower and carefully lined up the nose of the sled.

We pushed it forwards a little. In spite of the weight of the body it slid easily over the rocky surface.

`We'll rush it in,' I said as we started to push. Running along one on each side, we got it up to speed, scraping hollowly on the rocky surface, ducking as we neared the opening to avoid the heat still streaming out. One final push and it shot inside. We dived one to each side.

I picked up the corporal's beret which had fallen out of the sled and threw it also into the flames. I rubbed my hands, looking round with satisfaction. `Now, what have we forgotten?'

It must have sounded a bit sinister as Jim had gradually moved his rifle until the muzzle was pointing in my direction.

`Dig,' he said looking at me strangely. `We're taking the other soldier back with us.' I stared at him.

`Of course we are, Lutenant. And it's a court-martial offence to menace a superior officer.' The rifle muzzle moved slightly aside but he still stared back at me defiantly. Jesus, what sort of reputation did I have?

`Who killed the corporal?' I asked patiently.

`The sergeant, I guess.'

`And he killed him because the corporal was about to kill him and Carstairs, right?' Jim nodded.

`And who pressed the button that caused all this?' I nodded my head towards the tower.

`Sure, I did. But I had to because ...'

`Because if you hadn't, that bloody whistler would have killed us all.'

`Yeah, but it's so ... wholesale. A whole fucking patrol gone up the chimney.'

`If we leave no traces, it'll stymie their investigation team; perhaps long enough for us to get away. So why don't you go down there and get their rifles, the remains of their radio, our paragliders and anything else you can find? Get Sergeant Silk to help you.'

`And burn them too, Captain?'

`You got it.'

Chapter 18

I looked at my watch. Another hour, earliest. I took a last walk around the tower and went down the slope to the hollow. I sat in the corner trying to think of what to do as Jim and Sgt. Silk cleaned up all traces of the YP patrol.

Carstairs and the only YP patrol survivor were still talking in the corner and I looked in surprise at the ill-assorted couple. The poorly clad shaved-head Asiablock soldier, about 18 years old, talking to the handsome rather long-haired Grenadier Guards officer, wounded but lying back gracefully.

But how could they be talking?! I turned my head out of the rustling wind and as I saw Carstairs lips move I heard the lilting sing-song of Cantonese.

I started to remark "I didn't know you spoke Cantonese", but checked. That would be a dumb thing to say. He was speaking fluently, and the young soldier was looking up at him gratefully.

`Give him a cigarette,' said Carstairs to the sergeant, switching to Home Counties English.

`Yessir,' said the sergeant, dropping a paraglider harness he was folding up and pulling a packet out of his top pocket. He stretched it out to the private, who looked at it with wide frightened eyes. Carstairs spoke softly to him and he gingerly lifted out a cigarette.

`Light it for him,' snapped Carstairs. `And give him the packet.' Silently the sergeant obeyed.

Jim was about to speak, but I held my hand out, watching. Carstairs's face had lost its usual arrogant look as he chatted to the young soldier. And the private looked up at him, well, adoringly. Since his mother, Carstairs was probably the first person who had addressed a kind word to him in his life.

And Carstairs was interrogating him. The soldier couldn't answer all the questions Carstairs was gently asking and it was obvious by the way he shrugged that he was distressed that he couldn't. I looked at Carstairs in a new light. He was completely at ease with the young private, who came from a world even more distant than mine. I began to see why Carstairs had had so much success with women.

After a while Carstairs leant back and the young soldier returned to his position, his eyes never leaving Carstairs.

`He doesn't know much,' said Carstairs to me abruptly. `He is with the 15th Mobile Infantry Division at Do'gyaling which is based in Zhongba.' Unconsciously he pronounced the names correctly. `He has heard the word "Tsonah" but all he knows is that it's a secret project and is going to win the war. I may be able to get more out of him later. Do you have any food?'

`Only tablets,' I said, handing a packet over to the private. He stubbed out his cigarette and tearing it open wolfed them down greedily.

Jim in the meantime had taken another box from his rucksack. Using his fingernails he pulled up a thick tube which fanned out into a narrow cone, about thirty centimeters long. Looking at the side of the box, he pointed the cone up towards the west and slowly moved it around.

`Our beacon was broken,' said the sergeant, watching.

Jim made an exclamation and the cone stopped moving.

`There's a handset in my sack,' he said to me, over his shoulder. I found it and pulled it out, unwinding the cable. Jim's eyes were on a small luminous circular display with a blurred spot in the middle. It moved from side to side as he swung the cone around. Without taking his eyes from the display he indicated a socket. `Plug it in here and see if you can get anything. I'll keep it lined up.'

I put the handset up to my ear but all I could hear was the hissing of static. But after a minute the noise cleanly cut off and against a perfectly quiet background was the dialling tone.

In about thirty seconds I was talking to Duluth. I downloaded our camera, asked him to tell the smuggler we were ready, and just had time to repeat what Carstairs had got from the young Asiablock private before the satellite was hidden behind the mountain and the rushing hiss of static returned.

*

It took us most of the day to carry Carstairs down into the valley to the pick-up point and on the way down we heard two whistlers land near the tower behind us. Another circled slowly around but came nowhere near us. In the late evening we heard the buzz of the smuggler's light aircraft, Jim switched on the beacon, it landed and we climbed in.

Our smuggler was buzzed by a pair of Asiablock jets on the way back, just inside the Chinese frontier, but he must have been recognised as they howled away into the distance. We went on to land at the military airport Baipol, not far from Simikot which had been our civil airport departure point.

And for me that was really the end of the adventure.

Chapter 19

Jim had a quick conversation with Chondisp on the way in and it was decided that all of us would fly farther south into Nepal which although undoubtedly filled with Asiatics, had a long tradition of friendship with the West. I knew; my Regiment had had Gurkha troops with us in Pakistan.

We would leave Carstairs and the prisoner there, as Carstairs felt he would be able to better interrogate him alone. The rest of us - Jim, myself, Sgt. Silk and the two pilots Antonio and Georgio would return by SST to Madrid and then on by shuttle to Chondisp.

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Arriving at Chondisp we found the sand-storm had blown itself out but left another five centimeters of sand over the desert and most of the domes. A particularly graceful set of dunes had built up behind the reactor tower and were being systematically removed by bulldozers as we flew in. I could see the reactor cooling tower itself had been cleared, so I supposed Chondisp was fully operational.

Sgt. Silk had to report to Col. Michels immediately and after a quick shower and change (I was still in battle-smock), I found myself in Jim's room, the only other occupant being a rather tense Dr Duluth, dressed as usual in his smooth charcoal-

grey suit, and holding a sheaf of glossy blow-ups of the pictures Jim had taken and transmitted back.

I quickly confirmed the previous conversation we had had about the tower and Dr Duluth was visibly bewildered.

`Just a simple tower?' he asked.

`Just a simple empty tower,' I repeated, tapping one of the photos. `No signs of any electronic installations, nor even fittings for mounting them. It's what it looks like from space. A simple geometrical cylinder, two hundred meters high, twenty diameter and with three meter thick walls. Made of concrete.'

`But it's part of this "Tsonah" project,' said Dr Duluth, almost to himself.

`Yes, that's what Carstairs got out of our prisoner,' conceded Jim.

`Go through it from the beginning,' said Dr Duluth, pressing a switch on his desk.

Jim looked at me, but we were no longer in uniform. I nodded at him to continue.

`Sergeant Silk told us he and Carstairs were dropped at 01:00 within sight of the tower,' he began.

`On day one,' I interrupted, foreseeing difficulties in Jim's narration.

`Correct,' he said. `There was a strong wind blowing and they crashed into the side of the rocky spur on which the tower was built. Their satcom was smashed, Carstairs was knocked out and fractured his leg. The sergeant found a hollow, put a splint on his officer's leg and gave him a Newphine shot. Their beacon was in Carstairs' rucksack which had dropped off somewhere. When daylight appeared the sergeant had a quick search but couldn't find it. Rightly deciding his main job was to examine the tower, he did so, but like us he found nothing special.'

Dr Duluth nodded approvingly at the sergeant's conduct.

`So how did Asiablock find them?' he asked.

Jim shrugged.

`This is only a guess, but I think the beacon landed on its side somewhere and was screened from our east-west orbiting satellite. But Asiablock have a polar orbit satellite which may have detected it. Perhaps the shock switched it on to transmit.' He waved his hand. `Whatever. The satellite is quite slow scanning and made its pass over the tower at 22:20h'. I opened my mouth. `On day two,' he added. `Asiablock could have shifted its orbit so it repeated its scan six hours later, at 04:20, on day three.'

`Just about the time we were starting off,' I added.

`So Asiablock knew there was something worth examining just about the same time you left,' said Dr Duluth.

`Yes,' said Jim. `They sent off a patrol from Zhongba and arrived four hours after us.'

`It was fortunate you arrived first,' said Dr Duluth, prone to understatement as usual.

`Quite so,' said Jim, in the same vein. He related the rest of the story and Dr Duluth looked satisfied.

`So the Asiablock team, when they arrived to investigate the heat plume, found nothing but incinerated fragments which they identified as the remains of their patrol and its whistler. They will assume there was some accident and the whole patrol perished in it,' he summarised.

Jim wanted me to provide some more details, but I preferred to forget the whole thing. I am able to switch off my imagination when I'm in combat but afterwards I don't seem to be able to avoid playing it back, frame by frame. And the thought of

those two men falling out of the sunlight, dropping faster and faster down the dark inside of the tower, knowing full well what was waiting for them at the bottom ... I felt slightly sick.

'You saw it all. I've got to hand my kit back,' I said abruptly and left.

Chapter 20

Al, looking very muscular in bathing trunks, met me in the chlorine-smelling swimming pool and apologetically said he was supposed to debrief me and the sooner we got it over the better. I sighed as he proudly showed me a waterproof recorder no bigger than a wrist-watch. That plus the novelty of being interviewed sitting in a swimming pool must have overcome my unwillingness.

'I've got some good news for you,' he said half an hour later, switching off the recorder. 'You're slated for an Insertion soon and Jim asked if it would be convenient for you to pop round to his apartment this afternoon at two o'clock.'

'Pop round', he said that?

'That's right. It's British, isn't it?' he said. I grinned reluctantly.

'I suppose so. All right, I'll be there.'

We spent the rest of the time watching some pretty secretaries splashing water over each other.

*

Jim was in his gaudy Hawaiian shirt, which for some obscure reason I always associated with authority.

'Hi, Dig. Siddown. We gotta have a chat. Coffee?' I shook my head and took the chair at his desk.

He sat on his bunk and opened his PC. He seemed a bit uncomfortable.

'A quick bit of background. All the recent Asiablock unidentified Insertions, except your last one into Indonesia, seem to be connected in some way with finding out how part of the world was before a catastrophe struck. Yours was the only one that actually viewed a catastrophe striking.'

True enough, I thought.

'Well,' continued Jim, looking down at his PC, 'there is another unidentified Insertion also not connected with finding out how things were before a catastrophe struck. If you see what I mean.' I assumed he was talking about what was going to be my next Mission. He usually briefed me more clearly.

'Also not connected?', I repeated. What I wanted to know was if there were any similarities between this Insertion and my last one. I tried to phrase a question, but failed.

'Where and when was this latest unidentified Insertion?' I asked. Give me the info and I'll work out the resemblances myself.

'In the Mediterranean, off the coast of Morocco on the 21 June 1806. We can't find any trace of any natural catastrophes there, before or after,' he said.

'And you want me to go there and try to see what their Observer is doing?' He looked at me - I would have said apologetically.

'Yes. But I have to tell you this Asiablock Insertion is kinda unique in that it's the very first Asiablock Insertion we couldn't identify. And second - Asiablock seem to have sent two Observers there - the second about an hour after the first.'

I just stared at him. Two Observers on the same Mission!

'They must have a very difficult Mission if they need to send two Observers,' I said. 'Jeez, I don't know if I can handle two Observers.' He waited while I absorbed it.

`I'm sure you can. But the real problem is that two Observers means twice the chance of them spotting you. So you must keep your head down as much as possible.'

He meant I should only passively Observe my Host's Timeline and bend it by Empathising with him only if an emergency arose. Jim was looking at me fixedly.

`Just remember, if Asiablock start suspecting we can follow their Observers around, our big secret would be out,' he finished.

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There wasn't time to do much research except for a quick browse through the Chrondisp library.

1806 was one year after the Battle of Trafalgar :

"...where the 27 ships of the English fleet under Admiral Nelson defeated the combined French and Spanish fleet of 33 ships, capturing 17 of them and putting paid to Napoleon's hopes of invading England. Admiral Nelson's message to his fleet just before the action had been: `England expects every man to do his duty'. Trafalgar ensured England's total mastery of the seas for the next hundred years."

It sounded like this section had been copied from the "Encyclopaedia Britannica".

I continued reading, to find Napoleon still soldiered on on land, but had only another nine years to go before he was defeated by the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo. This brought an end to the Napoleonic Era. There was a musical section I could have clicked on, but didn't - it would probably have been "Rule Britannia".

In 1806 there was no stable government in any of the countries we now call Algeria, Tunisia or Morocco. In fact, the whole north coast of Africa was infested with pirates, or "corsairs", and was called the Barbary Coast. The infant United States had fought against some of these pests in the rather grandiosely named "Tripolitanean War", (1800-1805), but the main result was to have allowed the US Marines to have put "...to the shores of Tripoli..." in their marching song. The pirates were not stamped out until 1830, when France colonised Algeria.

During mid-June 1806, the time of my Insertion, there had been a rather curious skirmish where a British frigate had chased a pirate sloop into a heavily defended port. The pirate ship had eventually been captured, a number of pirates had been hung and the ship sold on 11 July 1906 in Malta as a prize for 2 422 pounds sterling. But there were a lot of conflicting reports from the crew as to how it had actually occurred.

Chapter 21

I reported to the Medical Section as usual, wondering how my Insertion was to be hidden this time - Duluth couldn't camouflage it as a calibration check again. But as soon as I had finished in the medical section, I was loaded onto a stretcher and wheeled down into the echoing ozone-smelling Inserter hall through a narrow service passage I hadn't seen before.

The cage was down and a sleeping man, wearing a helmet plugged into an electro-narcosis unit, was being helped out of the cage and loaded onto a stretcher. He was rather plump and it needed the efforts of both medical orderlies.

Shit. This was bad scheduling. Scantily clad, I would now have to wait in the cold Inserter hall for about twenty minutes or so until the Resonator was re-charged for my shot. I turned to one of the orderlies, asking if they had a blanket.

`Don't worry,' he grinned at me. `The Resonator is still charged. You won't have to wait.'

He didn't enlighten me any further, but this accounted for some of the "unexplained misfires" I had heard about and that Chronosp Research were "actively investigating". The unknown man I had just seen would no doubt be kept under electro-narcosis in the underground ward for Observers on Mission. It would be switched off in two weeks or so, and he would wake up, surprised to find he hadn't been Inserted and had become yet another of the mysterious statistics. Tough. Still, after two weeks of muscle anti-atrophy electro-exercises he would be fitter than he looked now. And under drip-feed he would have lost a lot of weight too.

I was then wheeled over, climbed into the cage and its door clicked into place. With a whine from the hoist motor I rose, was positioned between the two discharge spheres and went through the usual thought calibration routine - handled this time by AI. I supposed slipping in covert Insertions needed a complete cover-up, with an accomplice in the Inserter complex as well. I cleared all this from my mind and prepared for that all-important moment when I had to select my Host.

The clock counted down 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 - and I was off!

Chapter 22

The usual coloured time Markers as I slid back up the Main Timeline, the feminine voice signalling the turn-off to the Branchline followed by the green marker. A dense group of swirls with two off to one side. I killed my forward motion and cautiously approached. They could already be occupied by the two Asiablock Observers! I gently brushed against the first one. A young man, almost a boy, but very alert. The other an older man, also very alert. Both of them unoccupied. I decided on the elder and just as my forward motion ceased I eased into him and ...

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Jesus! I was falling! The wind was whistling in my ears, the empty sky was swinging round, there were ropes and masts blurring past and far, far below me was the crashing sea! I must get out, my Host was going to die!

"In Xanadu ..." There was no time!

`Are you all right, Mr Fletcher?' said a solicitous young voice in my ear. My Host was crouched down in a waist-high box, gasping and desperately hanging onto its edge with clenched hands. He gradually released his breath, relaxed his grip and slowly stood up, to meet the curious eyes of a young Midshipman standing beside him in the box, which I now could see was fixed to the top of the tall mast of a big sailing boat. Involuntarily my Host grasped the edge of the box again.

`Yes, I'm all right, Mr Gray,' said my Host, after a moment. His face was covered with sweat and hot with embarrassment. "What the devil came over me?" he said to himself. He thought of making some excuse to the Midshipman, but rejected it. Never admit confusion, especially to a subordinate. And Midshipman Gray, sixteen years old and on his first commission, was the most inexperienced, the most junior officer in the 250-man crew of the frigate HMS Dorchester.

First Lieutenant Fletcher, second in command of the Dorchester and now in command of himself too, took a deep breath and looked around the wide horizon. It was late afternoon, a clear warm day with a cloudless sky. The small box, the "crow's nest" or "maintop", was mounted near the tip of the main mast and gave a

magnificent all-round view. Fifty meters below, through a mass of supporting ropes and spars, I could see the steeply tilted main deck with small groups of men standing around each gun. Fan-like white waves were thrown out on each side of the thrusting bow and there was a long creamy wake bubbling behind us. The wind whistled through the rigging and the six large square sails, two on each mast, set at an angle to the wind, were trembling, humming and straining. The maintop described slow circles as Dorchester shouldered her way close hauled through the long rollers. In the stern a group of blue-uniformed officers were gathered around the capstan on the raised quarter-deck. But Lt. Fletcher had not climbed to the maintop to admire the view.

Fletcher was twenty-eight years old and had been in the Royal Navy all his life after passing out from the Naval Academy at Dartmouth. His parents owned a farm in Suffolk and it was his ambition to marry a local girl and buy one too. But he needed money and his salary was woefully inadequate for that. And so far he had had no luck with prize money. He looked longingly at the pirate. If they could capture that sloop it should sell for two thousand pounds at least, and with his share at an eighth ...

He raised his telescope and looked out to sea again. The situation was unchanged. The pirate sloop was two kilometers away, heeled over in the brisk wind from the east, spray glittering from under its sharply raked bow.

We were so placed that the pirate was hemmed in between us and the curve of the coast, but there was little hope we would overtake the agile and lightly loaded pirate before she reached her bolt-hole. A last critical glance at the set of the sails and Fletcher snapped his telescope shut. He turned to the Midshipman:

`Very well, Mr Gray, keep a sharp watch out and report if there's any change.'

`Aye, aye, sir.'

I looked at Gray's eager sunburnt face. Through my Host I knew that Gray, unlike the other Midshipmen, sprigs of the nobility who had found a coveted berth on HMS Dorchester through the preference of influential titled fathers, was merely the son of a village school-master. But Fletcher liked him and thought he was the only one who would make a professional officer.

Fletcher climbed over the edge of the maintop, transferred himself to some ladder-like ropes ("Futtock shrouds" sprang instantly into my mind) and climbed nimbly down to the deck, the wind blowing out his coat-tails. Looking around alertly, he walked quickly along the crowded main deck between the rows of guns, the gunners clustered around their weapons, but the gun-ports closed. The uncluttered decks showed we were at action stations.

He mounted the steps to the quarter deck, passing two armed marine sentries who stiffened to attention.

Fletcher touched his hat to a short, bulky figure standing slightly apart and wearing the epaulettes of a Captain.

`Well, Number One?' asked Captain Blake.

`They have the heels of us I fear, and are making for Al Hoceima.'

Captain Blake was a clean-shaven, heavy-faced man of about forty five. He was old to have command of a frigate and was lucky to have been promoted from First Lieutenant seven months ago after the Battle of Trafalgar.

I began to see confirmation of what I had learnt at Chondisp. The North African coast was infested with pirates who preyed on the multi-national Mediterranean shipping, including English merchantmen, who therefore had to travel in convoy with a Royal Navy escort. Looking into my Host's mind I could see that Dorchester had been sent out from Malta to clean up some of the small ports that

succoured these pirates. The ship fleeing in front of us had shown Turkish colours when challenged. But when requested to heave to, she had crammed on full sail and being trapped between Dorchester to windward and the Moroccan coast, was seeking refuge in the small port of Al Hoceima.

From Fletcher's mind I could call up a plan of the harbour of Al Hoceima. The port itself was very old, dating from before Roman times, but it had been taken over and fortified by pirates. They had established their base in a village about five kilometers up the river Moulouya, and were therefore safe from sea bombardment. There were two small unoccupied islets opposite the river mouth, each about three hundred meters from the coast. The entrance to the bay was through a narrow channel between one islet and the coast. On the east or far side of the bay was a battery of unknown size which covered this channel. There was a chain barrier between the two islets, but as the soundings under the chain gave a depth of only two meters, it was difficult to see what it was supposed to keep out.

Captain Blake's intention was to effect a "coup de main" - to enter the harbour directly behind the pirate, using it as a shield to protect Dorchester from the battery. He would sweep the sloop's decks with grape-shot and canister, close and board.

Apart from the Captain and my Host, there were four other officers on the quarter deck. Lt. Boulton, a balding, tough-looking man of twenty three was the gunnery officer. Mr Small, the sailing master was a wizened old man of fifty wearing a frock-coat. To the rear was the officer of the watch, second Lieutenant Ford and another Midshipman. And at the big spoked wheel of the capstan was the coxswain, a squat gorilla-like seaman who had his long arms up on the wheel and one eye on a compass bowl set in front of him.

From the deck we could all see the pirate, and in the distance behind it, the shore. The pirate was sailing as close to the wind as it could and fortunately for it, this led it directly to Al Hoceima. We were on a converging course and had the wind more on our beam. All things equal we should have been able to overhaul the pirate sloop in twenty minutes. But we were a ship of war, loaded with provisions to give us autonomy for six months at least, whereas a pirate just dashed out of its lair to snap up a prize and needed no more than a day or two's provisions. As it was, we were barely keeping level with the pirate, although the distance between us was slowly closing.

There were two strokes of a bell.

'Sunset in less than an hour,' said Mr Small gloomily. Fletcher shrugged his shoulders impatiently and looked up at the masts, wondering if he dared risk putting on more sail.

'Mr Boulton,' said the Captain. 'I'll have the starboard upper-deck guns run out.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' replied Boulton and walking to the quarterdeck rail bellowed a command to the gun captains.

The starboard gun-ports were swung open and fastened back and with a squealing of gun carriages and enormous effort, the 22-ton 18-pounder guns were hoisted by their tackles up the steeply sloping deck. And after a while their extended weight did somewhat reduce the incline of the Dorchester's deck. The starboard gun crews crouched at the open ports, looking out and talking quietly to each other. They also would get a share of the prize money if the pirate were captured.

'Mr Horrocks,' said Fletcher, 'take the log.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' said a voice behind us and a burly swarthy young man in Midshipman's uniform went to the quarterdeck rail and shouted for a seaman who

climbed up the steps carrying a one meter long piece of wood and a carefully coiled length of line, with knots in it every ten meters or so.

Under Fletcher's critical eye the seaman cast the piece of wood over the stern and at the same time the Midshipman inverted a sand-glass. Pulled by the piece of wood the line spun out, the rating counting the number of knots passing through his hands until the sand-glass emptied. Immediately the rating pinched the line and said how many knots had passed.

`Six an'a half, sir,' shouted the rating from the stern rail. But Fletcher wasn't satisfied and made them do it twice more, without any improvement.

`Six and a half knots,' groaned Fletcher to himself. It had been two years since Dorchester had left the dry dock at Gibraltar, and in the warm water of the Mediterranean her hull must be thick with barnacles.

`We must careen her at the first opportunity,' said Captain Blake, echoing Fletcher's thoughts.

`She's still head-reaching on us,' said Small, a sextant up to his eye, measuring angles. Fletcher turned to the Captain.

`I think we might just reach her with the long nine, sir.' The Captain turned to the gunnery lieutenant.

`What do you say Mr Boulton?' he asked.

`Yes, sir,' said Boulton, `It's worth a try.'

`Very well, Mr Boulton.' Eagerly Boulton ran down to the gun deck and snapped out commands to the crew surrounding a long bronze gun just below us. It was the only one of its type - the others that lined the bulwarks were shorter and heavier. A seaman climbed out of the gun-port and returned holding a wooden disk which had been used to seal the muzzle of the gun against spray.

Another seaman pulled out a stepped piece of metal from under the breech and the gun muzzle tipped upwards. Boulton had his hand over the flint-lock to shade it and tugged at the lanyard to check for sparks. He signalled to the gun-crew and they all heaved on a rope going through an eye-ring at the back of the gun to pulleys fixed to the side of the ship. Squealing on the small wheels of its wooden carriage, the gun moved forwards until its muzzle was clear of the gun-port. A hand-spike was put under the carriage and it was pushed round to point forwards. There were several more adjustments until Boulton was satisfied. He primed the flint-lock with fine powder from a horn and crouched behind the gun, squinting along its sights. He ordered another slight shift and lastly, taking the lanyard in his hand, turned and looked up at the Captain on the bridge above.

The Captain took a speaking trumpet and pointed it upwards.

`Mr Gray. We are opening fire. See if you can observe the fall of shot.'

`Aye, aye, sir,' came the faint reply from the masthead. The Captain waved his hand at Boulton.

A few seconds later there was a loud bang, the gun leapt back and a choking cloud of smoke blew towards us. All eyes looked upwards to the main-top. After ten seconds:

`No sign, sir.' Not surprising. A small splash could easily pass unnoticed in the white capped waves.

A crew-member swabbed out the barrel with a damp sponge on a long flexible pole. A boy appeared from below holding a bucket containing a serge tube of powder which was pushed down the muzzle. A thick felt wad was inserted and the two rammed in. A cannon-ball was taken out of a net lining the bulwarks and rolled into the muzzle. This was followed by another felt disk and the gun was hauled back into position ready to fire. It was all done very quickly, obviously the fruit of much practice.

Boulton reprimed the lock. The powder-monkey disappeared below for another charge.

The gun continued firing but it was only after the third shot that an excited voice shouted down:

`In line, but fifty meters short!'

Now he hadn't said "fifty meters", the Translator had slipped that in for me. He had probably said "half a cable's length" or some such outdated unit. Although I hardly needed the services of the Translator when everyone was speaking English, it still came in useful for giving me the equivalent of old units or the meaning of complex nautical terms.

`He'll reach her when the gun heats up,' said Fletcher confidently. As I watched, I decided it was not a bad idea to open fire at extreme range on this tack. Because of the tilt of our deck, the gun was cocked up to a high angle and I further noticed Boulton waited for the moment when the deck was tilted to its highest point before pulling the lanyard.

And the pirate could not fire back. The sloop had five 9-pounders to a side, but close-hauled it was so canted over its gun ports had to be kept closed.

Both ships were straining in the brisk gale; the pull of the jib and mainsails carefully balanced against keel and rudder. If one of our small cannon balls could carry away a spar or cut a vital rope, a sail could break loose and destroy the critical balance of the pirate ship. While a new rope was being spliced the pirate would have its speed marginally reduced, perhaps for long enough for Dorchester to approach within the range of its heavier guns. That would be the end and we wouldn't need to enter Al Hoceima. Knowing their fate if captured, the pirates would never surrender but would try to flee in their boats. Only last week Fletcher had hung seven pirates on the mizzen mast and duly entered the event in the ship's log.

He coldly studied the situation again. The pirate would be at the harbour entrance in about a quarter of an hour. At that time Dorchester would be about four hundred meters, just in range of her main armament, and with the sloop so close the pirate harbour defence battery dare not fire for fear of hitting their own. If this wind held. On the other hand if the wind dropped, as it usually did near the land, this would affect the heavily laden Dorchester more than the pirate. The sloop would disappear up the river to safety. If we could only wing the pirate! That would slow it up long enough for us to arrive just behind it at the entrance to the port.

Another shout from above.

`No splash. I think you hit him.' There was a cheer from the men clustered in the rigging and standing on the bulwarks, looking out to sea.

`Silence!' bellowed Fletcher. `Bosun, keep the men quiet.' The gun-layer needed to hear the voice of the spotter.

All telescopes turned to the pirate, but it sailed on unscathed. The gun banged again.

Fletcher was looking at Captain Blake. This was a critical moment. The pirate was almost in range and a full broadside might well inflict some damage. On the other hand, the recoil from firing a broadside would take the wind out of the Dorchester's sails and close-hauled as we were, at least three minutes would be required before she got underway again.

The Captain raised his speaking trumpet.

`Mr Boulton. See if you can reach her with one of the lower-deck guns.' Boulton waved his hand in acknowledgement and a seaman doubled along the deck and down a companionway.

That seemed a good idea, I thought. The excitement of the chase was infectious! Just one extra gun and we would double our chances of winging the pirate.

`Hardly,' said Fletcher. `The powder charge necessary to reach from here her with a cast-iron 24-pounder would burst the breech.'

Damn. My Host had heard me. I must keep calm. It was of course comforting to know I would be able to Empathise with him if the necessity arose, but I had been told to keep a low profile on this Mission. No danger so far, Fletcher had just thought he was talking to himself.

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Which reminded me. There were two Asiablock Observers around here somewhere. Who had they Inserted into? I pulled my fascinated attention from the chase to give some thought to my main objective.

Who had they Inserted into, and more important, why? Certainly not Midshipman Gray, I had checked him before I had Inserted into Fletcher. It's a pity I hadn't been able to check out all the other "swirls" I had seen, but an Observer has only a very limited time to spend before he must choose his Host and Merge.

If I wanted to see whatever the Asiablock Observers wanted to see, I would choose as a Host someone with the freedom to move around, an officer. And the one with the most freedom was Captain Blake. Failing that, Lts. Boulton, Ford, or one of the three other Midshipmen. One Midshipman was forward at the jib, another by the starboard guns, Horrocks was on the quarter deck with us and Gray was of course in the main-top.

It was not easy to see what everyone was doing. In my passive role as Observer, I could only look at what Fletcher was looking at, and his overpowering interest was in the chase and the state of the ship. He hardly cast a glance inboard except to look up at the sails or to check the compass heading. Perhaps I should cautiously try to influence him.

*

My thoughts were interrupted by two seamen running up from below and collecting two of the 9-pounder cannon-balls from the net by the side of the gun below us. Carrying one each they disappeared below.

"Double wadding!" said Lt. Ford, who so far had been merely watching. A well-built, red-headed man, about twenty-two, he was the officer of the watch. Fletcher was annoyed, he should have thought of that himself. It was some technique of wrapping a small cannon-ball in two of the usual felt wads, to make it fit in the barrel of a larger gun. Being lighter, the 9-pound ball would fly farther, though less accurately, than a 24-pound ball with the standard gunpowder charge. The equivalent of those high-velocity `sabot projectiles' used against armour in my time.

The 9-pounder banged, followed thirty seconds later by a deeper bang farther away. The two guns were firing alternately so as not to upset the wind/sail balance of the close-hauled Dorchester and also to avoid confusing Midshipman Gray at the mast-head who was spotting the fall of shot.

The land was clearly visible now, the wind had not abated and it was clear that in a few minutes the pirate frigate was going to enter the harbour. Captain Blake was looking restless.

`Mr Fletcher, take command and keep her on this course. I'm going aloft.'

'Aye, aye, sir. Take command,' said Fletcher automatically. The Captain descended to the main deck then climbed up the rigging and disappeared from view into the main-top.

The two guns continued to bang alternately until there was a wild shout from the main-top.

'She's hit!' And even from the deck we could see the pirate sloop floundering. A long streak of white sail was flying out to one side. By great chance one of the small 9-pound cannon balls must have severed the jib stay. Deprived of its balancing thrust on the bow, the pirate had turned into wind and its main sails were flapping.

But during the panic someone there had seized an opportunity. Several of the pirate's upper-deck gun-ports opened and a few seconds later its side disappeared in a bank of leaping smoke followed by the booming of their nine pounders. Fletcher jumped up onto a hatchway coaming to see better. There were some splashes about a hundred meters away and freakishly one cannon ball skipped past us, bouncing twice like a flat stone. We were just out of range.

'Nowhere near!' shouted Midshipman Horrocks contemptuously.

'He's firing to get back into the wind,' snapped Ford, 'and keep your eye on the compass.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' said Horrocks, abashed.

'Get back into wind?' I asked Fletcher.

'Of course,' he answered absently. 'The recoil pushes the bows round and temporarily compensates for the lack of a jib. Gives them time to reset the sails.'

The loose flying jib was quickly made fast.

'They've some good seamen over there,' thought Fletcher reluctantly. 'It's a pity we'll have to hang most of them,' he continued. 'But we may be able to recruit some of the better seamen into Dorchester if they can convince the Captain they'd been captured by the pirates and forced to work for them.' HM ships were always chronically short of good seamen.

Unless they were deserters from the Royal Navy of course, in which case they would be taken in chains back to Malta where their gruesome public punishment and deaths would serve as an example to the crews of any ships that happened to be refitting there. Lack of able seamen and desertion, the two greatest problems of the Royal Navy.

But now we were perceptibly closer.

Captain Blake was descending the rigging and a few minutes later his head appeared at the top of the steps and he touched his hat to the quarter-deck.

His heavy face was alive with enthusiasm.

'Now we have a chance, Number One!' he said, cheerfully, rubbing his hands. Turning to the steersman:

'Two points to starboard.'

'Aye, aye, sir. Two points to starboard.'

'And I'll have the top-gallants set.' Fletcher was waiting for this command, the wind had slightly dropped, and immediately his voice was blaring out. The bosun's pipe shrilled and a crowd of seamen ran agilely up the ropes to the very top of the masts, where extra sails were shaken out.

There were more shouted commands and some of the starboard guns were run in. The wind was still on our beam and I could see we were steering a course to intercept the pirate just outside the harbour. The pirate also had all sails set and was fleeing as quickly as she could to her safe harbour, about a kilometre ahead of her. We were less than a kilometre behind when we heard a tearing sound followed by a boom. Six waterspouts rose eighty meters off our port bow.

'A point to starboard,' snapped the Captain and Fletcher looked upwards.

`A battery two kilometers away and dead ahead,' came the thin voice of Gray, still at the mast-head. He would have seen the smoke. Fletcher and the Captain dashed over to look at the compass and take a bearing on the battery.

`Too soon,' said Fletcher, triumphantly. And in a minute I could see what he meant. The harbour battery on the far side of the bay had revealed its position prematurely. It had hoped to cripple us with a lucky salvo. But we were almost directly behind the pirate now and the battery dare not fire again.

`The fools should have waited until we were closer; they could hardly have missed,' I heard Ford quietly explaining to Horrocks behind me.

The pirate was directly ahead of us, about six hundred meters away, forced to stay on this course to enter the channel, and screening us from their battery. Five minutes to go. You could cut the tension on the quarter-deck with a knife.

`Steer small, damn you,' snapped Fletcher.

`Aye, aye, sir. Steer small,' repeated the coxswain phlegmatically.

The sun had almost set and we had about half an hour of daylight left. As I saw it, the pirate's best bet would be to enter the bay and move aside so as to allow the heavy battery on the far side of the bay a clear field of fire. It would also be able to bring its small five-gun broadside to bear.

`It's going to need some damn quick manoeuvres,' thought Fletcher, `and I'm not sure they can do it. And in any case, pirates don't want to fight, they can't have much repair facilities here if they get damaged.'

`And men?' I asked.

`They don't seem to have any shortage of men,' he said bitterly, looking at the crowded decks of the pirate through his telescope. `After Trafalgar this part of the world is full of unemployed French and Spanish sailors. And nothing would delight them more than to be able to pick off an English ship.'

`But is there no battery on the west side of the bay?' For answer a map of the bay appeared in his head. Just sandbanks and mud-flats.

The Captain seemed to have made a decision.

`Mr Fletcher,' he said, formally. `I intend to come up to wind as soon as we are inside the bay and open fire on the pirate.'

`Aye, aye, sir,' said Fletcher automatically. The Captain turned to shout down into the well for the gunnery lieutenant. Boulton sprinted up the stairs and saluted.

`As soon as we have entered the bay we will turn to port and open fire,' said Blake crisply. `Starboard guns loaded with grape first and we will complete the turn, which will give the port guns a chance. I want the upper deck guns loaded with grape too but five of them to be loaded with chain. Port guns to be fired only on my orders. And then we will close and board.'

`Aye, aye, sir!' said Boulton, his face alight with anticipation.

`And Mr Fletcher. Have boarding parties told off.'

It was a classical manoeuvre. The first broadside into the pirate's stern. The thousands of small grape-sized shot would traverse the decks from stern to bow and cause untold casualties, followed by a quick turn to present the port guns. The second broadside should cripple her. If not, the chain shot, (short lengths of chain joined to a metal ring and fired upwards at the rigging) would. A last resort as damage done to the rigging would have to be repaired before the captured prize could be sailed out.

And all the time the battery at the other side of the bay would be masked.

Fletcher looked back over his shoulder. The sun was a red ball, just above the horizon. Another twenty minutes of daylight. The pirate had traversed the passage and was entering the bay.

Captain Blake was standing by the coxswain, looking ahead and quietly giving orders.

'Get your men ready, Mr Ford,' he said. Ford had a speaking trumpet up to his mouth and was looking upward at the seamen, waiting in the rigging.

'Now!' said Blake to the coxswain and immediately the long simian arms were spinning the wheel. The sails shivered and there was a rushing sound behind the stern as the rudder bit. With cries and the blowing of whistles the ship came level and tipped over in the opposite direction as we turned through the wind, barely a hundred meters behind the pirate.

Immediately there was a series of crashes from the starboard guns. They were firing one at a time as they bore, and Boulton was running along the deck from gun to gun, checking the aim. There was a tremendous crash nearby and Fletcher jumped. A seaman had just fired a stubby swivel-mounted gun mounted on the rail behind us. Other carronades were also firing across at the pirate, although the range was really too great for them.

Fletcher's attention was on the pirate. Pieces of wood were flying off her stern, her upper deck had been swept clean as though by a broom and we could hear screams coming over the water.

The pirate was no more than eighty meters away, wallowing clumsily, sails flapping and blood running from her scuppers. There were the yellow flames of a fire at the stern, probably started by a flaming wad from one of Dorchester's guns. Some of the 9-pounders banged at us and there were defiant shouts and the popping of muskets. Boulton blew his whistle and all our guns ceased firing. We wanted to capture the pirate, not destroy it. But the pirate sloop not only sheltered us from the battery but also the wind. Our sails flapped loosely as we drifted up. The boarding parties were crouched ready behind the bulwarks, pistols and cutlasses ready. The bosun's mates each had ropes with grappling irons ready to throw over the pirates gunwale. It was getting dark and we wanted to capture and secure the pirate before nightfall. Fletcher was supervising the boarding parties when suddenly it happened!

Chapter 23

There was a boom over to our right and a tearing sound simultaneous with a crash in the bows! A stunned pause then shouts!

'Battery due south at four hundred meters!' screamed a voice from the mast-head.

Even as we watched there was another red flash and almost instantly a tearing sound and another crash! The captain was bellowing orders, men were pouring up the rigging, the jib was pulled over and we began slowly to turn. The new battery was low down, almost at the water's edge and hidden behind a sand-bank. That explained why it had not been seen from the sea. Sited to only fire at targets inside the bay, it had waited until we had entered the trap. We had made a terrible mistake!

The Captain leapt over to the compass and was taking the bearing of the hidden battery. Fletcher needed no orders. He was screaming through a speaking-trumpet and the sails were being shook out again. We were using the little way we had to complete our turn and retreat.

'Lt Boulton. Fire at that battery as soon as your guns bear.' Almost before the words had left his mouth there were crashes from the upper deck guns, firing as the

quickest way of getting rid of the now useless grape and chain-shot loads. They were quickly reloaded with round shot in an efficient silence. The lower-deck guns fired in a ragged salvo.

In the dark the only sign of the battery was its flashes, and it seemed pretty pointless to me for us to fire at all if we couldn't see the fall of our shot.

After a few rounds the same thought occurred to the Captain.

'Avast firing there, Mr Boulton,' he shouted. 'We're just giving our position away.' Yes, coastal artillery would know how their guns ranged and could aim at our gun-flashes.

A tearing whistle and six waterspouts appeared ten meters behind our stern. We were moving away from the pirate ship now and so exposed to the fire from the other side of the bay as well. This was a disaster! We were under the cross-fire of two batteries.

The battery across the bay seemed to have lighter guns and sailing away from them we presented a narrower target. On the other hand the gun at the mouth of the bay was a big one, we were broadside on to it and so were a much bigger target. We must get out of the bay as quickly as possible.

But there was another danger. Someone had lit a flare over our stern and just at the edge of its blue circle of illumination I could see three large rowing boats, each crammed with heavily armed men. They were keeping directly behind us and so safe from our main guns. As soon as their batteries had immobilised us, they were going to dash forward and board.

'Douse that light!' screamed the Captain furiously. 'The fools are just showing where we are,' he said to Fletcher. There was a hissing sound as the flare was dropped in the sea. But we must make them keep their distance. They could damage our rudder.

'Mr Ford. Try a long shot with the deck carronades,' said the Captain.

'Round shot,' snapped Ford and there was some confused movements in the darkness at the rear of the quarter deck.

'Ready to fire, sir,' announced the seamen, one after the other. Ford stood behind one carronade and gave the order to fire. Fletcher was standing to one side, looking backwards over the stern-rail, a hand up to shield his eyes from the flash. There was a loud crash and a second later he saw a splash about ten meters in front of the three boats.

'Reload the same,' said Ford and dashed across to the other gun. In its flash Fletcher could see the boats were spreading out, rowing as fast as they could, making to run alongside the Dorchester and grapple, long boat-hooks ready, standing up like spears.

'Three boats behind us, sir, preparing to board,' said Fletcher to the Captain. The fire from the two shore batteries had ceased.

'Very well,' said the Captain pointing his speaking trumpet into the well of the ship, 'Prepare to repel boarders!' There was a roar and in the faint glow of our battle lanterns men could be seen standing on the bulwarks holding round shot, ready to drop them in the boats as soon as they approached.

There were two thumps against the Dorchester's sides, muffled cheering from below, the popping of pistols and grappling irons appeared over our bulwarks.

There must have been about a hundred men in the pirate attack. Dorchester had about fifty men aloft in the rigging, a hundred on the deck setting the sails and another hundred manning the guns. The attack was ferocious but didn't last long. Several pirates made it to our lower gun-ports by hauling themselves up grappling lines, but they were met by fierce resistance from the gun-crews using boarding pikes

and their rammers. One boat was sunk with round-shot, another was hit by a deck carronade and the sea around the Dorchester was filled with swimming figures. Aiming by the faint light from the burning pirate ship, the marine marksmen hit several swimmers. And gradually Dorchester was gathering way.

`Starboard your helm. Steer north by west,' said the Captain, his voice nearby and the imperturbable coxswain, after a glance into the faintly illuminated compass spun the wheel. The deck tilted, there was a bump and shouts as we struck a pirate boat, and we were underway at last. But seeing no more pistol flashes, the two batteries must have realised we had beaten off the boarders and they recommenced firing. They seemed to have lost the range but even so one last shot from the hidden gun howled across the deck, killing ten men and severely weakening the mizzen mast support rigging. Officer's voices bellowed and bosuns' whistles shrilled as seamen ran up the rigging to hastily furl the mizzen sail, for fear wind pressure would snap off the mast.

Fletcher looked back. Behind us was complete blackness; the pirates had extinguished the fire on their ship. Our main sails were fully spread to catch the faint breeze and with it behind us we crept out of the harbour entrance, safe as the enfilading gun could no longer bear on us. There were some red flashes from the distant battery on the other side of the bay but in the dark they were firing blind and he couldn't see where their shots fell. He heaved a sigh of relief. We had escaped the trap. But at what price?

We had been defeated! We had had the pirate under our guns, on fire, its crew decimated and we were about to board, when the trap had been sprung and we had been forced to retreat. To underline this there was a thin derisive chorus of jeers from the distant pirate sloop. Two of their pop-gun nine pounders flared and banged at us defiantly. Fletcher thumped his fist on the taffrail with fury and Captain Blake was in any icy rage as he heard the damage reports come in.

`Twenty-two men killed and seventeen wounded, four seriously,' he raved, `and all for nothing.' He was no doubt also thinking of the report he would have to make. The Royal Navy could never be seen to be defeated by a small pirate community. A bigger force would have to be sent to destroy them and maintain English prestige. But Blake wouldn't be part of it. He would be court-martialled and lose his command.

It was also a wrathful and short-tempered crew that sailed west, out of the choppy water of the bay, hearing the jeers of the pirates ringing in their ears. They had done their best; their stupid officers had let them down. After the glorious victory of Trafalgar it was unthinkable that the mighty Royal Navy should be defeated by a band of pirates. When the rest of the Navy heard of this ...

Finally out of sight of land the Dorchester hove to, pumps clanking to pump out the sea water pouring in from the holed hull.

Chapter 24

The crew of the Dorchester was busy, angrily repairing the damage, splicing ropes, patching holed sails and resetting the mizzen mast.

`Come down into my cabin,' snapped the Captain at Fletcher.

A map was open on a table and they peered at it under the light of a lantern. It was of Al Hoceima bay and the captain carefully drew a line showing the bearing of the hidden battery.

`It's here,' he summarised grimly. `It's a 32-pounder, it's mounted at the end of this low rocky promontory and is surrounded by mud-flats. The gun must be mounted

just above the water-line so we can't see or hit it from the sea. And all these mud-flats mean we can't attack overland. It's screened from us until we enter the harbour.'

It was indeed a cleverly sited gun. Of course, being mounted so low down meant it would not have the range of one mounted on a cliff-top; but its targets would never be more than five hundred meters away. The only way to approach it would be to land far down the coast and take it from the rear.

What could we do? As the night wore on, many were the wild schemes proposed as the Captain and his First Lieutenant talked together. The key was the big hidden gun. Our guns could probably reduce the fire of the battery on the far shore, enough for us to run the gauntlet and up the river. But the enfilading cross-fire from the big gun would always wreck us.

There was a tap on the door and Fletcher opened it. It was Midshipman Gray. He had a piece of paper in his hand and looked nervous.

'Yes?' said Fletcher bad-temperedly. It was 4am.

'Excuse me, sir,' said Gray, 'but I have something urgent the Captain should see.' Fletcher looked at him angrily, amazed at his temerity. When he was a Midshipman he would never have dared to have approached a Captain.

'You know very well, Mr Gray, that if you want to speak to the Captain you must first report to Lt Ford, the officer of your watch. Now go back to him and tell him I have put you on three extra watches.' That would teach the young man his position in the ...

The Captain's weary voice appeared from behind the door.

'Who is it, Number One?'

'It's Gray, sir. He wanted to speak to you directly. I sent him away with a flea in his ear. I don't know what the young officers of today ...'

'Call him back. We could do with any ideas at the moment.' Fletcher leant out of the cabin door and shouted up the companionway.

'Belay that, Gray. Come down here.'

'Well, Gray,' said the Captain. 'What do you have for me, that you can't show to your officer first?' The young man looked wide eyed and over-awed at being in the presence of the older and vastly superior officers. But his face set with determination.

'Well, sir, it's this ...' He swallowed nervously. 'You know I was at the maintop during the whole of the action and I noticed something, something which you probably didn't notice on the deck.' The piece of paper fluttered in his hand.

'Both the Captain and I went up to the maintop,' said Fletcher, 'And we saw everything there was to see. And if that's all you've got to say ...' The Captain held up his hand.

'What did you see, Gray?' he asked.

'Well, it was the sea, sir,' he answered. He put the piece of paper on the chart table and I could see it was a neat sketch of the harbour entrance, showing the two islands with the chain between them, the far battery and the gun that had revealed itself at the last moment. But also drawn on the map was a series of arcs of circles and fine lines. With a prickling feeling in my scalp I was instantly back on Gili Trewagnan, my head under a chest lid, looking at an almost identical diagram!

'Yes, so I see,' said the Captain quietly, looking up at Gray, eyes wide. For some reason the tension had risen in the small cabin.

'Well, it's these waves, sir. They all diffract, er, ... sort of bend round these islands and reflect off the coast here. They produce standing waves with maxima here and minima here.' He looked confused. That is, they sort of add together...'

'I know about refraction and diffraction,' said the Captain gently. Fletcher only had a vague idea of what they were talking about, but he remembered the ship had

bumped up and down a lot as they entered the harbour. The Captain was looking down intently at the Midshipman's sketch but then he looked up at Fletcher with a jerk.

`Mr Fletcher, I want to know how quickly we can get underway.'

`Aye, aye, sir.' It was the only answer.

I was consumed with curiosity as Fletcher left, closing the cabin door behind him. I felt I was being shut off from some vital piece of information, the very purpose of my Insertion. Fletcher was also surprised and hurt at being so abruptly dismissed from the conference. Muttering to himself resentfully he went forward to the bows to check on the repairs there. The three big shot-holes had been plugged and a small brazier was being used to melt tar to finish the job.

`They will do for the moment, sir,' said the carpenter, `but in the next storm the plugs will work loose. We should get it properly repaired as soon as possible.' Fletcher nodded and went to inspect the rigging.

He was conferring with the Bosun when the call "All officers" rang through the ship. In dawn's early light he made his way to the quarter deck, preceded by the four watch-keeping officers, the sailing-master and the four Midshipmen. There was little room as they crowded around Captain Blake. Fletcher looked at the group of officers, but he couldn't see Gray.

The Captain waited until the last officer was present then ordered the coxswain to lash the wheel and leave the quarterdeck. So he couldn't overhear and pass anything on to the rest of the crew, I supposed.

`Mr Fletcher. How are the repairs proceeding?'

`The three holes in the bows have been plugged sir. The carpenter says they will be finished and tarred in half an hour.'

`And the rigging?' Fletcher gave some technical information which the Translator struggled with - the four main ropes supporting the third mast ... Captain Blake looked up at the mast and listened attentively until he had finished.

`Good,' he said, turning to face the group of officers. He looked at them a moment in silence and when he had their undivided attention he tapped on a piece of wood on which a map had been pinned. `This is what we're going to do. We're going back.'

There was a combined gasp and: `But sir...' followed by silence. The Captain stared at his officers.

`Our task is still to destroy this pirate nest. They surprised us the first time; the next time we will surprise them.' He picked up a small wooden model of a ship.

Using it and another smaller model of the longboat he detailed his plan.

`Tomorrow, that is today, we will stay hove to, out of sight of land and complete our repairs. And I want to see every able-bodied man at work. At nightfall we will get underway and arrive off Al Hoceima at 3am. We will drop the long-boat which under the command of Lt Ford will take Captain Merideth and a half company of Marines to storm this battery.'

His finger stabbed the battery on the far side of the bay.

`Dorchester will enter the passage immediately afterwards, under full sail. We will procede up the bay, come alongside the pirate sloop and board it. A prize crew under Lt. Fell will sail it out. A hundred men in boats under the command of Lt. Barder, Lt. Jones and Midshipmen Horrocks will land and burn any wood, rope, tar - anything that can be used for ship repair. And take as many prisoners as they can. Dorchester will then collect the boat crews, open fire on the port installations, return to this small island, pick up the long-boat crew and leave.'

It sounded great. The sort of action Dorchester's well-trained crew had done many times before. But Fletcher, in company with the other officers, could hardly restrain his impatience.

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'That is how we would normally attack the port. But what about this gun?' He touched its location at the end of the spit of rock.

For the first time the Captain looked slightly uncertain.

'That will be taken care of,' he said, almost defiantly.

There was silence and a clearing of throats. They had served with Captain Blake for seven months now, and like Fletcher, they must have known Blake was a competent if rather conservative captain. If he said they had nothing to fear from that gun, he was almost certainly right. On the other hand if he wasn't absolutely right the mission would end in disaster again.

'Are you ..., sir, how can you be so ...' began Fletcher and stumbled to a halt. The Captain must have information they were not privy to. Perhaps the big gun's crew were going to desert and seek asylum in Dorchester. Or perhaps the Captain had contacted some spy on land who was going to sabotage the gun. Whatever it was, the iron discipline of the Navy prevented him questioning his Captain's orders further.

'So we don't have to worry about the 32-pounder,' summarised Fletcher, speaking slowly and looking directly at his Captain. I could also see he was making a formal statement in the presence of witnesses, in case of a possible court-martial if anything went wrong.

'And now to your posts, gentlemen,' said the Captain, without answering the unspoken question, 'and remember we move off at 21h tonight. In the meantime I want the men fed and rested.'

Silently the officers left the quarterdeck and the coxswain returned. The Dorchester lay hove to in the grey dawn swooping up and down in the choppy sea. I Withdrew.

Chapter 25

So I had found one of the Asiablock Observers. He was Inserted into Captain Blake. Those drawings of wave patterns had been the clue. It was just too much of a coincidence to see the same unusual sort of drawings I had seen in Indonesia in 1815. "Would see in 1815", I had to remind myself. I was now in the year 1806.

I had located the Asiablock Observer, and I had found what he was looking for. So should I say my piece of poetry and return to the 21st Century? No, not yet. Captain Blake had so far given me the impression of being a normal extrovert Naval officer. He had had a personality change and become secretive, for no good reason my Host could think of. The Asiablock Observer was moving into action. The story was not ended yet. I would hang in for a while.

But I remembered there was another Asiablock Observer lurking around here somewhere. What was he here for? The first Observer seemed to have everything under control. What help could a second Observer provide?

*

When I Returned the day had passed, it was night again and Dorchester was underway for Al Hoceima.

'Barometer's rising, the wind is going to freshen,' said Ford, looking up at the faintly visible rigging.

'I'll have a reef taken in on the main-sails,' replied Fletcher and a moment later the bosun's pipes were shrilling as the watch raced aloft.

The helm was put over and the sails were set.

`Course south,' said Fletcher, standing by the capstan.

`Aye, aye, sir. Course south,' replied the coxswain, spinning the wheel. With the wind from the east the Dorchester heeled over and with a rattle of blocks the sails tightened and we picked up speed. It was a dark cloudy windy night and we were making directly for the coast, to give anyone watching the minimum of time to react.

Fletcher was uneasy. The Captain's certainty that the outflanking gun would not fire seemed somehow to be connected with Midshipman Gray's absence. Gray should have been at that briefing too. But Gray had been excused normal watch-keeping and told off for "special duties" during the day.

`Mr Ford,' said Fletcher. `Where is Gray?'

`The Captain sent him to the maintop, sir,' replied Ford. Fletcher was irritated. To ask more would show he was not in the Captain's confidence. He looked upwards. Perhaps he should swallow his pride, quickly climb up and ask Gray what his orders were.

Someone appeared at his side in the darkness. It was the Captain, his small bulky figure outlined in the faint glow from the binnacle. The opportunity had passed.

Fletcher turned to the waiting group of officers and started rapping out orders for the preparation and equipping of the long boat, telling off and arming its crew. Chatting excitedly amongst themselves they went off to their various duties.

He then went down into the well of the ship to watch and supervise the Dorchester being made ready for the attack. After that he mounted the quarterdeck and stood by the Captain. They both had their telescopes out and were looking towards the almost invisible shore.

`Course east,' said the Captain.

`Aye, aye, sir. Course east.'

There was a slapping of seamen's feet on the deck and the squealing of pulleys as the sails were pulled in. The dimly visible coastline began to slide to the right. As near as I could see we were about a kilometre from the passage into the bay and would be there in about five minutes. There was a flurry of orders, the Dorchester came into the wind and the longboat was quickly lowered over the lee side. Its crew swarmed down into it, the Dorchester's sails were reset, filled and we resumed our course. To our right I could see the small sail of the longboat as it danced over the water, crammed with armed seamen and marines, close-hauled and heading for a part of the coast to the east of the battery.

The chart of the coast was set up on a table and illuminated with the faint light from a screened lantern. Mr Small the sailing master was poring over it, with occasional references to the compass.

In complete silence the Dorchester was close hauled as we rushed through the roaring windy night. It was very risky, sailing so fast so close to the rocky coast.

`Mast-head, what do you see?' said the Captain, through his upward directed speaking trumpet.

`We're in the middle of the passage, sir. Lights at two points to starboard,' came the reply, hollow sounding through another speaking trumpet. That would be the lights of the port where the pirates, if they had any sense, would be repairing their ship.

`By the deep, ten,' came a distant hail. Midshipman Horrocks was by the seaman in the bows.

`Surf fifty meters to port,' said a nearby voice. That was the first islet. Fletcher ran to the left to check it, and returned to the map. His finger indicated where we were, just inside the bay.

`Mr Fletcher, we are going to heave to exactly between the two islands,' shouted the Captain over the roar of the wind. `Get forrard and make sure we don't go aground.' Fletcher stared at the Captain's dim shape stupidly. This was completely new!

`But sir,' he stammered, `that is in the field of fire of the two batteries!' The Captain looked up, his face grim in the light reflected upwards from the binnacle.

`Mr Fletcher,' he said harshly, `I have just given you a direct order. Get forrard!'

`Aye, aye, sir,' replied Fletcher, his face burning in the darkness. As he descended to the deck, his mind was in a whirl. He thought he knew the Captain, and within the limits imposed by discipline had regarded him as a friend, someone who thought like he did. But this - this was crazy, and completely out of character!

`Your first duty is to the safety of the ship,' I said.

`Of course,' he replied instantly.

`Midshipman Horrocks is in the bows,' I said. `He will let the Captain know if there is any danger of going aground. There is no need for you to be there.'

`So why did the Captain order me there as well?' he asked. The only answer was that the Captain wanted him out of the way. But why?

`The Captain didn't want you there.' I replied. `It must be something connected with Midshipman Gray and what he saw from the maintop.'

`That's true,' he said, his face burning again at the way he had been dismissed. He made a quick decision.

`Horrocks can do all that's necessary here. I'm going aloft.' It was what I had hoped he would say.

But it was quite a feat to climb up the rigging in the stormy darkness. The ship was swinging wildly, he was drenched with spray and may well have been dislodged and thrown into the turbulent sea, were it not for some commands that were shouted below. Blocks squealed near him and the sails flapped wildly. We had come up into the wind and relieved of its pressure, the mast resumed the vertical. Fletcher gasped with relief and continued his climb until he reached the "crow's nest". Midshipman Gray was looking forwards intently and was very surprised to see his First Lieutenant.

`What do you see?' shouted Fletcher, climbing into the box and looking round the horizon. The wind was howling through the rigging and he had to put his mouth up to the Midshipman's ear. Far below he could see the white surf of waves breaking over the two small islands and over to the right some faint distant lights that must be the port. To the east, where the longboat had disappeared, was only blackness. To the south, where the hidden gun lay, was the faint loom of the land; nothing else. Behind the high fast moving clouds a thin crescent moon appeared intermittently.

`Well, sir, we're not in position yet. But you can see the patterns quite clearly.' He pointed downwards.

`The patterns?' thought Fletcher, looking down. `What's he mean?' But now I could see them. Barely visible in the faint moonlight but exactly like the overlapping circles Gray had drawn in the diagram I had glimpsed in the Captain's cabin. The long straight parallel waves coming in regularly from the open sea were diffracted round the two islands, producing a system of overlapping circles, spreading out into the bay. With some way on us we were slowly drifting towards the two islands and I could see that although we were pitching and tossing, the ship had similar patterns around it as the incoming waves diffracted around us too.

`Interesting,' said Fletcher uncomprehendingly. And truth to tell, my reaction too. We were in a bloody dangerous situation here. Hove too, it would take us three or four minutes to set sail and get underway, and we were in the crossed fields of fire

of two batteries which were going to wake up as soon as they saw the gleam of moonlight on our sails!

'You can see there is a chain between the islands, sir,' shouted Gray. 'They must know about it and don't want any ship to go that way.' Fletcher looked down again, and indeed he could see a line of white foam appear occasionally between the two islands as the chain broke surface through the heaving waves. We were almost mid-way between the islands. But what the hell was he talking about? Fletcher and I were trying to frame a question when Gray who had been intently looking down, reached outside the box for a speaking trumpet hung there on a short piece of rope. He put it to his mouth and leant over the side, pointing it downwards.

'Almost there, sir,' he shouted and turning to look to starboard added excitedly. 'Yes! Let her drift down to windward a bit more!' There was an answering shout from below. Hanging on to the edge of the box Fletcher looked over the side at the heaving sea without the vaguest idea of what was going on, but at that moment the worst thing he could imagine happened!

There was a red flash from the south and immediately the tearing whistle of a heavy cannon-ball. A high fountain of water gushed upwards and hung glittering in the faint moonlight, no more than five meters away from our stern! There were shouts of dismay from below.

Jesus! The hidden 32-pounder had seen us! A few hits at that range would disable us, reducing us to a slowly drifting wreck. And the other battery had now been warned. The Captain was crazy! Fletcher would have to get down to the deck, to risk court-martial and take charge. He had one leg over the edge of the cage but Gray was tugging at him.

'What?' shouted Fletcher.

'It's all right, sir. They would have one dry load in the gun. But they won't be able to fire again.'

'Why not?' Gray drew back his head and looked at him in surprise. He waved his hand out to starboard as though it was self-explanatory.

'Because the gun is flooded, sir.'

Looking down it struck me. The position of the Dorchester had in some way modified the pattern of waves beneath us. The Dorchester was not drifting anymore but was somehow locked in position, heaving up and down vertically at least two meters, the sails and their blocks rattling loosely. There was a strange regularity to the waves in the bay. They were no longer a continuation of those rolling in from the sea. The whole bay was filled with wide-spaced high waves, their crests white in the stiff breeze. But they were unlike any waves I had seen before. They were not rolling forwards - they were just going heavily and regularly up and down.

'Look sir,' said Gray, holding with one hand onto the heaving cage and pointing south. His young face in the faint moonlight was eager.

Fletcher pulled out his telescope and focussed it as best he could on a white gleam of surf on the shore to the south of us. Surf that had not been there a few minutes ago. He saw the white water was breaking over and outlining a large gun! The hidden gun that had just fired! From bitter experience with guns at sea Fletcher knew no gun could fire more than once under those conditions. After the first shot it would be impossible to re-load it with dry powder.

He didn't understand it; the fools had sited a gun where it could be flooded. He swung his telescope to the east, to the other battery. That was where the danger lay now. But thank God, there it was - lots of little flashes and over the howl of the wind the popping of pistols. The landing party was storming the battery. But then nothing - just blackness. Had they succeeded? The yellow line of a rocket soared up, bursting

with a flash-crack and on the shore a steady blue point of light appeared. Excellent - the battery had been taken!

Fletcher didn't understand what had happened to the big gun opposite. It was enough that he had seen the sea breaking over it so it was out of commission for the moment. We had a favourable wind to enter up the river-mouth. We must immediately get underway and carry out our mission to burn and destroy the pirate lair. At sea you had to seize an opportunity as soon as it presented itself. At any moment the wind might drop, the pirates might come out in boats ... He had half climbed out of the cage, ready to start his careful descent, when he saw a shadow on the other side of the rigging. Someone was ascending to the maintop from the other side of the deck. Curious, Fletcher moved behind the mast until a figure appeared, breathing heavily.

It was the Captain!

Fletcher was about to make his presence known when I said sharply:

'Hold it. You shouldn't be here. The Captain ordered you forward.'

He paused, watching the Captain climb into the cage, extend his telescope and look at the distant 32-pounder, still awash. He took his telescope from his eye and spoke to Gray who nodded and climbed out of the cage. Holding a rope, he edged his way along a spar until he was able to put his head round the flapping sail and see the other battery to port. He waited there a moment and turned to make his way back to the safety of the cage. But the unstable ship had moved and when Gray tried to scramble back, the wind direction had changed, blowing the supporting rope out of his reach. He looked across the spar at the Captain from a distance of three meters. The Captain waved him in and leaned from the cage, stretching his hand out and making a gesture for Gray to run. Gray swallowed and looked down nervously, but timing himself to the heaving ship, took three quick steps along the spar, right hand outstretched. They were about to connect when at the last moment the Captain moved his hand up and Gray with a wild cry swung forward and disappeared into the blackness below!

The Captain, with his hand still stretched up, looked down obviously shocked, his open-mouthed face white in the moonlight. He leant back in the cage and put his hands to his head.

Fletcher was horrified. Had the Captain's foot slipped at the last moment and caused him to raise his hand? Looking at the effect it had on the Captain, at the anguish he was undoubtedly showing, it seemed the only explanation. It could have been an accident. But I was sure it wasn't. Somehow Blake had been induced by his Observer to move his hand at the last moment.

But why had he killed Gray? It must be because the Asiablock Observer didn't want anything about this small naval action to be known, to be put in history books and so go forwards into the 21st Century. And it must have been because of the unusual way the position of the boat, Gray's idea, had caused waves to flood the gun.

Captain Blake was standing upright in the cage, both hands on its rim, looking around. I recognised what was happening; I had done it often enough myself. The Asiablock Observer in Captain Blake was about to say his Return codeword. But the Asiablock Observer must first kill his Host, Captain Blake, for the same reason he had killed Gray.

However he could not kill his Host while he was still inserted into him. How could he do it? I had never been faced with this problem, we had never touched it in our course at Chondisp, and I hoped I never would. I couldn't imagine myself getting to know someone so well, Empathising with him and ultimately killing him.

What could the Observer do? Make Blake go down to the powder magazine and light a fuse and while it was burning say his Return code? Impossible. He would be fighting against the Host's deepest and most primitive motivation - self-preservation. But he was going to kill him somehow, of that I was sure. Perhaps if Fletcher were to show himself I could intervene and save the Captain ...

'The death of Gray has affected Captain Blake.' I said. 'He doesn't look well. I think you should go to him.' But before Fletcher could react, the Captain had climbed out of the cage and with his feet on the spar had reached out both hands for the rope. But there was no rope! With a surprised shout he just fell forward, hit some support rigging and was deflected outwards. I could see the white splash far below as he landed in the heaving sea! With the strange motion of the ship and the wildly flapping sails, no one noticed his fall. Fletcher looked down stupidly - he was now alone in the maintops.

A shaken Lt. Fletcher climbed carefully down to the deck and as the highest ranking officer was immediately besieged with requests for orders. Putting the strange events at the top of the main mast to the back of his mind, he quickly took command and I watched the attack develop exactly as it had been planned. The sails were set and we moved away from that weird spot between the islands and headed up river towards the pirate village. As soon as we moved away I noticed the strange rhythmical sea in the bay break up into its usual choppy waves.

With the wind behind us we came down quickly to the pirate sloop, which was tied to a small jetty and dropped the boats containing Lt. Barder's party. As they pulled for the shore in the faint pre-dawn light we boarded the sloop in a rush after a broadside of grape. There was only a small watch on duty and they were quickly overcome. While the sloop's sails were being set by the prize crew, we heard the banging of pistols and the crash of bow guns. Soon smoky red flames were rising from the village.

Under control of the prize crew the sloop was untied from the jetty and with its sails spread by a following wind, made downriver towards the harbour entrance. The shore raiding party returned, their boats laden with prisoners who were thrust forwards, heaved on to our deck and placed under guard. The boats were hoisted aboard and Dorchester waited only long enough to fire two broadsides into the burning village before it too turned to leave. Unhindered, we left the port, flames and smoke from the burning village and harbour installations rising into the clear dawn air. At the harbour entrance we hove to and waited for the long-boat that had stormed the battery. It was hoisted aboard.

The crew of Dorchester were jubilant. Fletcher, who had been directing everything from the quarter-deck was very pleased too. It was a job well done and with a bit of luck he would be confirmed as Captain. And he had just remembered that as Acting Captain he would collect half the prize money! Now for the rest of the business.

About fifty prisoners had been captured, the maximum number the boats could carry. They were lined up on the foredeck under heavy guard and examined one by one, the English speakers first.

'I want ten prime top-men,' said Fletcher to Lt. Boulton, who had been promoted provisionally to First Lieutenant. 'But only those who were forced to help the pirates. Make your own judgement. The rest we hang.' He was looking curiously at one big black-haired brute who was on his own, the other prisoners having drawn away from him.

'Aye, aye, sir.'

I squeamishly tried to persuade Fletcher to spare the lives of the others, or at least take them back to Malta for trial, but he was adamant. Pirates caught red-handed must be hanged immediately. It was one of the few internationally recognised laws of the sea.

As we slowly swung round, hove to in the choppy sea, eight ropes were thrown over a cross-spar and the crew were drawn up to witness the executions. In the rising sun eight pirates were hoisted up, the three ship's drummers beating a long roll until the bodies stopped jerking. The ropes were removed from their necks and their dead bodies heaved over the side. Followed remorselessly by the next eight and the next eight until all the thirty-eight judged guilty had been hung. Some went to their death stoically, others screamed for mercy. It made no difference. Only the big black-haired pirate resisted. He snatched the bayonet off a marine's musket and tried to stab Lt Boulton, but he was overcome and hung with the rest. Only twelve were spared, mainly on the evidence of one young Spaniard who said the black-haired one had forced them and him, and could show terrible burns on his back to prove it.

The ropes were removed from the cross-spar and there was another ceremony. But for this Fletcher had to go down to the Captain's cabin to fetch a bible. He returned to the quarter-deck to solemnly read a prayer over the row of bodies of the twenty-six seamen killed in action, each neatly sewn in sail-cloth shrouds and weighted with a cannon-ball. One by one they were placed on a plank, their names read out and the plank tipped up to consign them to the deep.

After these gruesome ceremonies the subdued crew returned to their duties, Dorchester got under way again and Fletcher was able to relax for the first time in two days. He descended to the Captain's cabin, and it needed no suggestion from me to make him look through the papers there. But there was no trace of any maps with wave-patterns on them. He closed the desk drawers and sat on the bunk happily looking around at his new quarters, a patch of sunlight making circles on the floor, the timbers cheerfully creaking.

I had identified one Asiablock Observer and found what he was interested in, but had seen no sign of the other. Who was his Host? The other must surely be here for some reason. As a back-up perhaps. Or maybe Chrodisp had made a mistake and there was only one Observer. I tried to think of anything I had not done, and which I could still do to locate this second Observer. But no, I had missed him. It had been like watching a film and all my attention had been focussed on Captain Blake. To locate the second Observer I would have to rerun the film. Maybe Chrodisp would insert me again. But now was too late. The Mission was ended.

"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 26

Gradually the view of the Captain's cabin in HMS Dorchester, a frigate off the coast of Morocco on a sunny breezy morning in 1806 darkened and faded and I knew I was flying forwards in time. A distant pulsating glow appeared as though at the end of a long tunnel, grew brighter and brighter and resolved itself into a winking

green light. I was lying on my back and could feel the bed pressing against my back. I had returned to Chrondisp.

I explored my body - something had changed! Flexing my neck muscles I could feel the normal weight of my helmet. A slight movement of my left arm revealed the usual slight restraint of the drip feed. So what was the difference?

I was in a bed, that was the difference. Not just lying on a bed, but in a bed. I could feel the weight of blankets on the top of my body. I struggled to sit up, but the blankets were an unusual hindrance. Why the hell did I need to be covered with blankets? The temperature here was normally like in a hospital. I managed to struggle my arm out from under the heavy blankets, pull out the drip feed, slide off my Helmet and sit up. I was dressed in the same light white smock I had worn when I had been sitting in the Inserter cage. At that time I had complained of the cold, but it was nothing to the cold here. It was freezing! I pulled the blankets up to my chin again and looked in the dim lighting down the corridor between all the beds, wondering how long the Bedside Reception and Debrief team would take before they brought me some hot food and drink. I noticed all the occupied beds had blankets over them.

Gloomily I thought back, watching bodies jerking in death spasms at the end of ropes, of other bodies being slid into the sea and heard the sonorous voice of my Host reading the Service of Burial at Sea.

The rattle of a trolley and Joe Smith and Dan Closter, the BRD team, appeared pushing it in front of them.

From experience they knew Observers were always depressed and gloomy when they returned from an Insertion and they knew they could best avoid bad-tempered invective by giving them food and drink before they even tried to talk to them. I was no exception. Wordlessly I swallowed my hot steaming tea and crunched down on toast and marmalade. I noticed Joe and Dan were wearing sweaters under their white hospital smocks.

Gradually my gloom left me. I held up my blanket.

'What's all this? Some fuel economy measure?' I said facetiously. Chrondisp had its own reactor and surely had more than enough power available.

'Yes,' said Joe, unsmilingly tidying away the remains of my snack into another compartment of their trolley, like an air hostess.

He switched on his recorder and said some words into it, asked me the usual questions about the electro-narcosis level, and if the Mission was successful.

'Sure. I found what I was supposed to look for. Some rather odd things also like ...' He held up his hand.

'Save all that for your debriefing officer.'

'All right,' I said climbing off my bed and shiveringly opening my bedside locker to look for my clothes. To my pleasure I recognised the anorak I had brought with me from Munich and gratefully slipped it on. It must be about 15 degrees here, as cold as my apartment in Munich would be in winter, if I left the heating off.

'But tell me. Why is the temperature so low here?'

'Because it's cold outside,' said Dan sombrely. 'It snowed yesterday.'

'It snowed?! We're in the middle of the Sahara desert here, for Chrissake! It doesn't snow in the desert.' I looked at them carefully, but they weren't joking. Before I'd left on Mission a week ago the Earth's climate had been a bit irregular, but things couldn't have changed that much in a week.

'Everyone's worried about it,' said Joe. Jim had left a message to say he wanted to do my debrief himself as soon as I Returned. He had left a programmed card for me.

*

It took a lot longer to get to Jim's office than usual. The circulating train was going slowly and often had unexplained stops between stations. Also some lifts were not working and I had to climb the emergency stairs. Not a real disadvantage as I was very fit from the week or so of the electro-exercise I had had while Inserted, and the exercise kept me warm which was good. For it was cold everywhere in Chrondisp.

I entered Jim's office, welcomingly warm because of a portable hot-air blower standing on the floor. As I closed the door I noticed an anorak hanging behind it. I hung mine on top of it and glanced out of the window, half expecting to see reindeer browsing in the desert outside, but no, although there was a definite thin white covering of hoar-frost. Amazing.

Jim was sitting at his desk and looked up immediately. I waved my hand at the scene outside.

'What happened to global warming?' I said. He shook his head.

'Whole world's climate's shot to hell,' he said, grumpily, rummaging in a drawer and pulling out a recorder which he placed in the middle of his desk. I sat down.

I could see he had troubles of his own, but I felt the results I had brought back were important. He patiently asked the usual questions about time and place accuracy of Insertion, did my Host notice me etc. In the end he turned the microphone over to me, just letting me talk and only interrupting me when I got excited, as all Observers do when they relive parts of their Insertion. I asked for a piece of paper and drew a sketch of the Al Hoceima harbour, the two islets, the position of the battery and HMS Dorchester.

'I was at the top of the mast looking down,' I said, 'and I also saw these diamond shaped patterns, just like the Midshipman had drawn.' I drew in a few. 'But when the ship drifted to between the islets they all sort of got bigger and stopped moving.'

When I had finished, he sat looking into the distance. He felt in his pocket for a pencil.

'So you only identified one Observer?

'That's right.'

'And you are quite sure the Asiablock Observer you did identify was in Captain Blake?'

'Sure I'm sure,' I said impatiently. 'Blake was an conservative old officer who'd only just got made up to Post Captain. But he lit up like a lamp when he saw Midshipman Gray drawing those diamond shape waves. Complete character change. There's no way Blake would entrust his first command to the oddball ideas of a Midshipman. It would have been as dangerous as hell if they hadn't worked and that pirate gun hadn't been flooded; we'd have been blown out of the water.'

'It's a neat idea,' admitted Jim, looking down at the paper and doodling small circles on the bottom of it. 'Standing waves. It must have caused the whole bay to resonate at a sub-harmonic of the incoming sea.'

'And he didn't want his First Lieutenant, that's his second in command, to see anything of it either.' I reminded him. 'That's unheard of too.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' said Jim, filling in the circles.

'And finally he killed both Midshipman Gray and Captain Blake, his Host, when he had seen the whole thing, the - what did you call it? ... the "resonating harbour". That's gotta be because he didn't want any info about this weird weapon to go down

in history.' Jim put his pencil down and tapped on the display built into his desk. Head down he said:

`That's true enough. The only thing about it in the history books is that the pirate harbour defence was "rendered inoperative by inclement weather". Midshipman Gray was reported as having fallen from the mast-head during the stormy weather and Captain Blake was supposed to have been "washed overboard". And thirty-nine pirates, who may have seen it from the other side, were hanged on the spot.'

`There were therefore no survivors who saw and understood the phenomenon,' I said.

`Correct,' he said, looking up.

`And so the Western World have only heard of this ingenious attack method through me.'

`You put it dramatically. What could possibly interest Asiablock in an obscure naval policing action, however ingeniously waged?' he asked. I shrugged.

`Interpretation's your job, isn't it? I'm just a humble Observer. You send me out and like a vacuum cleaner I suck up facts and regurgitate them at your feet.' I was getting a little tired of his disinterest.

I tapped the drawing with my pencil. `There was an Asiablock Observer in Captain Blake, maybe even an Empathiser,' I said. `You say there were perhaps two Observers. Now Asiablock wouldn't send two Observers to look at an "obscure naval policing action" out of casual interest, would they? And then try to conceal it.'

`And in case you've missed it,' I continued, tapping the paper again, `these crossing-circle diamond patterns are just like what my Host was sketching in Indonesia, on my last Mission.'

`I remember,' he said. `We couldn't understand that either.'

`And you tell me this was Asiablock's very first unidentified Insertion. The first of a series of unidentified Insertions,' I said. `To me it looks like Asiablock thought this was just about the most important unidentified Insertion they ever did.'

He looked tired and distracted. He put his pencil down and massaged the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. It wasn't the right reaction.

`Jim,' I said, more sympathetically. `What's the matter? I've just presented you with some shiny new facts. I've located one of the Asiablock Unidentified Observers and found out what he was doing. He may even have been the same Observer I met in Indonesia. You've got to be able to fit that into the big picture somewhere. It must get you closer to finding what the YP are up to with these off-beat Insertions. No?'

`Unidentified Insertions,' he said. `Sure we're still interested in them, and how they tie up with this new Institute for Geographical Statistics. But we've had to put everything on the back burner for the moment.' He gestured to the frosty view outside.

`It's a bit unusual,' I agreed. Coming straight from Munich, ice didn't bug me perhaps as much as it did Jim, who when he wasn't at Chondisp in the Sahara desert lived in Southern California. `What's it due to anyway?' I asked curiously.

`Particles from the sun, meteor shower, ozone layer acting up again?' It wasn't anything the Institute for Chronological Displacement could do anything about anyway, I would have thought.

`Nothing like that, as far as the experts can see,' he said. `There are a number of stable patterns of air and water flow in the world, but if the conditions are right they can snap over to different and equally stable positions. Causing stable world-wide weather changes.'

It sounded right. Weather forecasts were always talking about "a stable high pressure area over the Azores" causing a weather pattern that could persist for several days.

It was interesting, of course, but it could only be some temporary derangement; in the meantime they'd just have to put on sweaters.

'Normal conditions will return soon enough,' I said, dismissively. I thought he should get back to his proper work and stop moaning about the weather.

'You think so,' he said annoyed, and reaching down below his desk, dimmed the lights. Floating before me I saw a newscast of three days ago, while I was still on Mission. It showed low-angle sunshine in Alaska shining on melting mud-flats, laughing children throwing snowballs at each other in St Tropez in Southern France, gondolas frozen in the ice in the lagoon at Venice and in contrast, smiling peasants in North Korea harvesting an early rice crop and Asiatic girls sunbathing on the deck of an ice-breaker in Haipong harbour. This was followed by a world map showing the weird temperatures. I saw South Germany was at -25 degrees.

I whistled. I hadn't realised it was so widespread. It did sort of make the Asiablock unidentified Insertions seem a bit irrelevant. A click and the hologram disappeared.

'What else do the experts say?' I asked.

'They are studying ocean currents and satellite cloud pictures like crazy but they haven't come up with any real explanations.'

'And I suppose Asiablock are helping. Their weather stations cover the other half of the world, after all,' I said. Jim screwed up his face in a grimace.

'Well, no, they're not being very helpful really, even though they've put up another new weather satellite.'

'Why not? There can't be anything doctrinaire in the weather. Between us we can solve the mystery quicker can't we?' Jim ran his hand through his hair.

'Yeah, sure, you'd think so. But the problem is that most of the weather alterations so far seem to benefit Asiablock. In general, Asiablock has got warmer and Westblock has got colder. Whereas we have had cold weather and storms, Japan has had the mildest winter since records were taken and gentle warm rain has been falling on East Africa and the deserts of Central China.'

I had a prickling feeling in the back of my neck but I couldn't think of anything to say.

'Asiablock are beginning to virtuously talk of how these changes give a fairer distribution of the Planet's resources,' he continued. 'You know, why should it rain in Virginia, USA, while children are starving in Somalia? On the face of it, they have a point.'

'If it rains more in Somalia, they will grow more food there and the population level will rise until starvation level is reached again,' I said.

'Probably, but that's not a very Politically Correct viewpoint,' said Jim. He twisted his hands, looking into the distance. 'It's a whole new ball game. United Nations haven't the faintest idea how to handle it.' He sifted through his desk and handed me a mempak. 'Here, spin through this sometime.' I put it in my pocket.

I could understand his worry and I supposed it would be worrying me too when I returned to Munich. But I tend to leave worrying to the experts and Jim was a computer expert. The only time I had ever heard him say anything about the weather was when he had advised me that "if you assume the weather tomorrow will be the same as today you'll be right 70% of the time and that's better than the weather service can do".

'But why are Chrodisp worrying about it?' I asked.

'Well, that's the first reason,' he said gesturing at the ice covered window. 'We have enough power to keep everything going at a reduced level, providing we do no Insertions. We are trying to get extra power sources, but we must now take our turn with other claimants.'

'And the second?' I asked.

'The second is that we at Chrondisp have a big computer and lots of programmers and Duluth seems to think we should try to use them to see what's happening. You know, to simulate world weather conditions.' That sounded like Duluth, all right. He was feeling cold so he was going to turn over one of the biggest computer centres in Westblock to finding out why. And yet what else could we do with the computers? If the Chrondisp reactor had barely enough output to keep us warm and couldn't be used to drive the Inserter, the computers might as well be used to try and find what was wrong. Computers didn't take much power.

'But surely you need more than computers? I dunno, don't you need a slew of weather data too? Can you get that?'

'We can access a lot, and Duluth says he can get more, but what we really need is expertise on weather simulation. You know - the theory, the algorithms, the maths. All our mathematicians here are Time Theory people. Fortunately we just managed to catch one climatologist on his way back home. He had been pissed off by all the personal questions that new "Psychological Insight" department had been asking him.'

'So what are we waiting for?' I said, 'like you said, you've got the biggest computer in the West lying idle, the time to play with it, and you can get hold of any number of experts.' I paused a moment, thinking. 'But all that junk is in books anyway, isn't it? Climatology's hardly a leading-edge technology. People have been looking at frogs in jars since the year dot.'

Jim looked at me.

'Dig,' he said, 'what do you know about "feedback"?''

'Feedback? Oh, I did all that at school in Physics. Positive Feedback, Negative Feedback,' I said glibly.

'Go on,' he said sceptically. 'Tell me about positive feedback.' I thought back to a blackboard filled with equations. There was no way I could reproduce those, but fortunately I had had a good teacher who knew some of his pupils didn't think mathematically and had given us picturesque "real life" examples.

'An actor in front of his audience,' I said brightly. 'He says his lines well and the audience applauds. This encourages him to act even better and the audience applauds even more. He ends up turning in a fine performance. Positive feedback.'

'Not bad,' said Jim grudgingly. He thought a moment. 'And I'm glad you chose that example, because you've kinda oversimplified it. You've described "linear feedback" and real life ain't like that.' He stood up.

'Right, you're an actor,' he said. 'You're doing Shakespeare or whatever, and you've gotta line like: "I never thought it could be like that." You can say it in different ways.'

He put his hands behind his back and after walking around the room stopped and looked down. 'I never thought it could be like that,' he said musingly. He turned back to me. 'Like it's just hit you what a difficult and subtle problem you've got on your plate. Do that and you'll get a spontaneous burst of applause from the intellectuals in the medium-priced seats.'

'That's where I am,' I said, clapping my hands. He waved me down.

'Now say it seriously, you know, looking into the distance with a kinda clipped British accent. Like you'd always thought the dook was just living it up and you'd

never realised what a tough job he had. You'll get a standing ovation from the front seats and yawns from everywhere else.' I was deeply grateful he hadn't attempted a British accent.

He leaned over imaginary footlights and gave a salacious wink. 'On the other hand if you say "I never thought it could be like that" with a sorta snigger, you'll have the cheap seats rolling in the aisles and the front seats collecting up their mink stoles and moving out in shocked disgust.'

I grinned at him. 'You're in the wrong job,' I said. He sat down.

'Well, I kinda pushed it a bit to show some possible responses. But the point I'm making is that in real life the actor could say his line straight and it could flip either way. He'd get his feedback but it would be random - depending on how he'd been playing the part before, was the audience filled with half-drunken convention delegates on a night out, how the rest of the cast had been doing it, and so on.'

I must have looked unconvinced.

'He's getting his feedback,' he repeated, 'but it's "non-linear feedback". And once it's flipped in one direction, he'd have to carry on playing it that way.' I shrugged.

'Okay, another example. Imagine he'd just read his line out straight and no one reacts, no one knows how to take it, and at that point one of the drunken bums at the back goes "Har, har!". Everyone would fall about, he'd have flipped into mode three and the whole cast wouldn't be able to play anything straight for the rest of the evening.'

'Could be.' I'd been in army concerts like that. 'But what's all this got to do with the weather?'

'Ah, yes. The weather.' He sat down. 'Well, the weather processes are chaotic and can flip into stable states too. Weather is produced by all this warm air and water at the equator expanding and moving to the cold poles. But to get there its gotta get over a spinning earth, of which two thirds is covered with water to different depths, and the other third is covered with irregular bits of bumpy ground. And when it's got there, it cools down and it's gotta get back.'

'Complicated' I said.

'Damn straight,' he said. 'But over billions of years it's found a way to do it. Most of the ways are pretty stable. You know, like a river that has dug itself into sandstone. But there are points where it ain't so stable - like where it flows over hard flat stone. Completely random. Can go either way.' Like this conversation.

'What are we talking about, Jim?' I asked.

'Well, about dynamical systems, about the problems of weather prediction, of course.'

He looked up at the wall clock.

'Look, Dig, we're having an impromptu conference on the subject in a few minutes. We're making it a tele-conference. You can listen in if you promise to ... to keep a low profile,' he said. "Keep your mouth shut", he meant. 'Now if you'll just let me check some data ...' He began tapping on his computer screen and I sat there thinking.

Things were a lot worse than I had thought. After centuries of stable weather, the countries of the Federation were getting warmer and Westblock countries were getting cooler. What a coincidence and how convenient for Asiablock! My experience with the wily Oriental showed that if anything to their advantage and to our disadvantage occurred, they had caused it, until I saw irrefutable evidence to prove the contrary. For my money they were as guilty as hell until proven innocent.

My train of thought was broken by a click from Jim's desk and the room darkened. A vague shimmering square appeared in front of us and split into six smaller squares. Some were empty and in others people were sitting at desks, doing the various things people do before a meeting. In top right, Dr Duluth was on the phone. Bottom left, Al was drinking a cup of coffee and looking through a file. Professor Kaplan the Geology man was blowing his nose and John Smith the spook was looking into the distance. Al's face appeared distorted in close-up as he leant forwards to adjust his camera. The others I didn't know. Neither Janette nor any military were present.

Dr Duluth put his phone down and looked at us. His square expanded to fill most of the holo, while the others shrank into smaller squares around him. He was looking directly into the camera and his lips were moving. Jim impatiently moved a control on his desk.

`...unofficial and for this reason I am making this a tele-conference. One last thing, everything said at this meeting is confidential. If you wish to stay I must ask you to give me your Word.' I heard various voices saying "You have my Word".

`Thank you,' he said and paused, looked down at his desk for a moment. Then raising his eyes to the camera he began:

`We have collected a lot of data from a patrol which was sent out to investigate one of the mysterious towers. And by following up several Asiablock unidentified Insertions we have collected more. You are all specialists in your own fields and so I have called you together to try to correlate some of this data.' His eyes lowered and I heard the rapid clicking of computer keys. He looked up again.

`To start with, the towers Asiablock has constructed in Northern China. You will remember that at our last meeting we decided to investigate one. This has been done and we are convinced it is as it appears - a passive concrete tower.' There followed some of the pictures Jim had taken. `But from interrogation of a prisoner, we have discovered it was indeed built as part of this mysterious "Tsonah" project. I will now pass you over to Dr Dalt, a climatologist at Glasgow University in Scotland.'

The bottom right square expanded to fill the screen with the face of a solid looking square-faced bald man of about fifty-five, wearing a brown jacket and a colourful tie. I hadn't seen him before but he looked more like a bookie than a scientist to me.

`At the request of Dr Duluth, my department have been examining satphotos of the area around the Tsonah towers,' he began in a strong Scottish accent. British climatologists were supposed to be the best - probably because there was lots of climate to practise on in Britain.

His face disappeared, to be replaced by a complex weather map. Apart from the usual tangled swirling curves, there were six red points, arranged in an arc.

`Here is the tower that was investigated.' A green ring appeared around the second red point from the bottom. `Other similar towers have been found here and here.' The green ring circled in succession the top point and the third down. `These other three red points are not towers but are isolated mountain peaks of about the same height as the towers. You will notice all these red points are regularly spaced.'

The green ring collapsed to a dot and he swept it over the weather lines. `These isobars were measured almost exactly a year ago and you can see there is nothing special. But look here. These were measured last week. Still nothing special.' The picture changed. `Now during the night of 24 Jan, the wind direction veered and from about 02:00 to 09:00 it blew from the west - almost at right angles to this arc of towers and mountain peaks. See the difference. We were fortunate in having a weather satellite overhead,' he said in an aside, as the picture changed.

There was a difference, but apart from some sort of regularity based on the red dots, I couldn't see what it meant and Jim muttered to himself. Perhaps irritated by the lack of response, the weather map was removed, to be replaced by another.

`This shows speed and direction of the jet stream, thirteen kilometers up,' said Dr Dalt. And now I could see it. A narrow band of wind was blowing from the west. When it arrived over the line of dots, it seemed to narrow, like light focussed in a lens, widened out and went off in a slightly different direction. Interesting.

A babble of voices in the background, and flashing lights in the corners of several of the small pictures, meaning their owners had questions.

`Dr Dalt,' said Duluth's voice. `I think it would be useful at this juncture if you could refresh our memory on the jet stream.' There was a pause and a picture of the Earth appeared in the centre screen.

`A jet stream is a narrow elongated stream of air thousands of kilometres long, hundreds of kilometres wide and a few kilometres deep,' said the voice of Dr Dalt in the practised tones of the lecturer. `Speeds can be greater than three hundred kilometers per hour. The streams are produced by temperature differences, for instance between the equator and the north pole, which would normally cause air to expand and move north from the hot equator. But this air is deflected westward (in the northern hemisphere) by the Coriolis force of the rotating Earth. The deflection effect of the Coriolis force is different at different latitudes and so produces long sinusoidal horizontal meanders in the jet stream, called Rossby waves, which have a wavelength of about ten thousand kilometers. Rossby waves with great amplitude cause warm and cold air masses within the jet stream to detach, producing the well-known low-and high-pressure systems of the mid-latitudes and thus our local weather. These Rossby waves tend to stay in one position over the Earth's surface, being "locked" to prominent ground features, such as a continents, which are warmer than the surrounding sea.' We looked at the meandering sine-waves.

`And you think this line of towers and mountain peaks forms a "prominent ground feature"?' asked Al.

`Hardly prominent, compared with a continent,' said the hidden voice of Dr Dalt.

`But perhaps enough, now and then, when the conditions are right, to nudge the jet stream to a new position?' persisted Al.

`It's not inconceivable,' said Dr Dalt reluctantly. `But it wouldn't hold it in position for long.'

`But the fact it can hold it at all means the overall weather within its range has changed,' said Jim. `Changed statistically,' he amended hurriedly, hearing Dalt drawing breath to protest.

There was the crash of a chair falling over and Dr Kaplan's face disappeared from his screen.

`Maybe that's the connection!' his voice broke in excitedly. There was a surprised silence. `That business in the harbour you showed me, the gun flooded with extra-big waves - that was the use of "natural forces" to defeat an enemy,' he continued. `And that's also what we're seeing here. Wasn't there some gobbledegook about Tsonah doing that?'

I held my breath. It fitted!

`That's gotta be it,' said John loudly. He must have stood up too as his face had also disappeared from his screen. `The god Tsonah used "natural forces", or "essential energy" to defeat his enemies. That's it. The YP are using the weather as a weapon. Goddamn it!'

`Kee-rist!' said Jim, next to me.

Of all people Dr Kaplan! I still thought he was an egotistical nerd, but I had to admit he'd seen what we'd all missed!

"Tsonah" was the name of an Asiablock project to modify the Planet's weather in their favour!

Dr Kaplan had reappeared and was smiling proudly.

But Dalt was scowling. 'Rubbish! All I say is that when certain conditions obtain, this jet stream has been observed to have higher than average probability of temporarily moving to a new position,' he said. 'Based on a verra small sample size,' he added.

Not for the first time I noticed it was like drawing teeth to get an expert to make a definite statement.

He didn't like his work to be simplified and dramatised. He wanted to distance himself from this emotional nonsense. He was probably imagining the comments of his co-workers and rivals when they saw the headlines: "Scot Doc Dalt tips YIPs for weather switch".

'But you yourself said the position of the jet streams influences the weather on the Earth's surface,' said Dr Duluth. 'It seems plausible that a position for them exists which would cause an increased flow of cold polar air over Europe and North Africa and warm equatorial air over China and Japan.'

'Even more conjectural,' said Dalt. 'There is coupling between ground air movements and the jet stream but it is extremely complex, depending on local topography, vegetation cover, latitude, time of year, past history of recent weather, etc. etc. The unusual weather we are experiencing could just be random. In order to attach probability figures we have to be able to simulate the Earth's weather at least over the whole of the northern hemisphere and probably over the southern hemisphere too.'

'So we need to build a weather simulator,' said Jim, who now he knew what the enemy were doing, liked to have a defined objective. It also reinforced what he and I had been talking about just before this meeting.

'You could put it that way,' said Dr Dalt with a pitying smile. 'There have been many attempts to do that but quite simply the problem is far too big for our computers.'

'But Asiablock must have built one,' said Al, bottom left. 'How else would they know where to site these Tsonah towers?' It was a good point.

'I have already said we have no proof these towers are having any consistent effect,' snapped Dr Dalt. There was a disagreeing silence. The spook, John Smith, came on the centre screen.

'I think the meeting should know we have found two more construction sites where we think more towers are being built. They link up with three more mountain peaks. This will extend the wind lens aperture to eleven elements and therefore make it almost twice as long.' His face disappeared to be replaced by a satellite photo of Northwest China. Red dots showed the original three towers, green dots the mountain peaks and red crosses the new suspected construction sites. They were all in a continuation of the original line! There was a gasp from the rest of the meeting, followed by a babble of voices.

'Kaplan is right,' said Jim to himself, beside me, as the screens were filled with gesticulating figures. 'The YP know what they're doing and are building extra towers to increase the effect.'

'One other thing,' added Smith. 'We have noticed that further constructions are taking place at or near some of the towers. Constructions typical of an "Avenging Wind" anti-missile site.' There was another burst of exclamations.

The chatter died down and the centre screen was filled by Dr Duluth's face.

'It seems quite clear to me Asiablock have built these towers in order to modify the weather. That they are prepared to defend them only proves their importance.' There were sounds of assent in the background. 'We need more data.' He thought a moment. 'The whole Tsonah project must be directed by the Asiablock weather simulator computer. Jim, do you have any views on the size of the computer installation we would need to imitate Asiablocks's performance?'

Silence.

'Jim?' I looked round but Jim was still looking out of the window. I took my feet off his desk and picked up the microphone.

'He's coming. But aren't we forgetting something? I haven't heard anyone tying up all this Tsonah stuff with Asiablock's interest in old catastrophes yet.' Dr Duluth's face frowned.

'I didn't know you'd got Digby there,' he said, apparently looking over my shoulder.

Jim took the microphone out of my hand.

'I'm getting an idea,' said Jim. 'I think I know why Asiablock were sending guys back for info on catastrophes.' The two academics spoke together:

'Oh, that's quite obvious now,' said Dr Kaplan the Geologist. And:

'I thought you all appreciated that,' said Dr Dalt, the Climatologist.

'Sheet,' said Jim, beside me, 'and I thought I'd discovered something new.'

There was a confused pause and Dr Duluth said, with an edge of impatience to his voice:

'Could one of you explain what you mean? Dr Kaplan, perhaps?'

'Well, in all the unidentified Insertions you have showed me, Asiablock were in principle looking for numbers,' he began. 'Numbers that can be plugged into the well-known equations of catastrophe theory. I'm not a mathematician but I have used programs for these sort of problems often enough and the computer always asks for the feed-back constants.'

'And can we infer these constants from what we have seen of the Asiablock Insertions?' asked Al.

If I was keeping up with this, we were going to use our computers to build our own version of the weather simulator Asiablock must have built and which told them what to do to change the world's weather in their favour. Asiablock had gone into the past to get the fancy feed-back constants they needed. Constants that were only seen in catastrophe conditions. Neat. A new application for time travelling. But would we have to repeat all the Asiablock Insertions to get the same constants, or could we somehow get them from what we knew already? He was sharp, was Al.

'With help from a mathematician, perhaps,' replied Dr Kaplan hesitantly.

'Dr Dalt?'

'It's possible. But I would first need to see the detailed debriefing reports of our Observers.' Christ, a positive statement!

There was a long pause with various people chatting excitedly amongst themselves in the background. Dr Duluth was on the phone. I heard Jim and Al talking to each other quietly.

'What was the interest in that Tambora explosion then?' asked Al.

'I figure they were using it to do a delta pulse test,' said Jim. 'You know, like you can find the stability constants of a system by giving it a nudge and seeing how it recovers. The high frequency components of the response they'd get from the tsunami; the slow stuff they'd get from farming statistics later.'

'Jeez, some nudge,' said Al.

`And what about my second Insertion?' I asked. `How does that fit into this scenario?'

`That was the very first of the unidentified Asiablock Insertions, wasn't it, Jim?' asked Al. Jim confirmed. `And they Inserted two people, didn't they?' he added thoughtfully and paused. `Well, this is kinda way out,' he continued diffidently, `but if I had an idea for a new project and I wanted to hoist it up the flag-pole, I would first try to make a demo to some top man, you know, some guy who could get the funding.'

`A demonstration?!' asked Jim.

`Yeah. You know. Find an influential guy. Fill him up with some politically correct bullshit about Chinese gods and "natural forces" and then have him actually see an example. Of course, it would have been better if it had been an Asian example, but perhaps this British one was the only thing he could find in a hurry.'

`And the example was suppressed in case we stumbled on it and it gave us a clue?' hazarded Jim. I could imagine Al shrugging.

`Well, like I said, it's kinda way out. Did you see any other Observers when you were there, Dig?' he asked, as an afterthought.

`No, but if they were just passively Observing, they would be undetectable,' I said. I thought a moment. There could have been another Observer in one of the hanged pirates. He would have seen the use of "natural force" from the other side, all right. And he would die afterwards. That big black-haired one, for example.

Dr Duluth cleared his throat. `The key to our response to this attack by Asiablock is the construction of an equivalent weather simulator,' he said. `Jim. How long would it take for us to link together enough computers to imitate the Asiablock computer?'

There was a lot of conversation in computerese between Jim, Al and Kaplan, and also some telephoning. But it didn't help any.

It was an important point though. If our only way to reply to the Asiablock "weather-changing" attack was by destroying the towers on their own land, we were going to run the risk of conventional war. And already Asiablock had begun to realise how vulnerable their towers were and were building anti-missile sites to defend them. They must know of our interest in them by now. Perhaps they had found the IFF beacon lost by the Carstairs patrol. I dragged my attention back to the conversation.

`We'll have to work on it,' said Jim in an apologetic voice. `It's not only the computers but also the specialised programming which influences the architecture of the computers and ...'

`How long did Asiablock take to build their weather simulator?' I interrupted.

`Dig,' said Jim irked, `if I knew that I would know how long ...Oh, I see ...' He tapered off.

`The first unidentified Asiablock Insertion, the one Al suggests was the demonstration Insertion, was made four years ago,' said John. `We can assume the whole idea of weather modification began at that time. At any rate, we began to hear about Tsonah shortly thereafter. The construction of the tower we investigated can be dated by the newspapers that our patrol found there. It was built six months ago. We can therefore assume it took Asiablock at least three and a half years to get their weather simulator up and running.'

Further speculation was cut short as Duluth cleared his throat and came on to the centre screen. He politely thanked everyone for their time and effort, told them he would keep them up to date on the outcome of the meeting, reminded them of their oath of secrecy and courteously bid them adieu. A few minutes later Jim's phone beeped. He snapped it open.

`Yeah, sure ... Sounds great ... No time like the present ... and what about er ...? Okay.' He snapped the phone closed.

`The Doc,' I guessed. `We're going to build a weather simulator too.' He said nothing. `Tell me,' I continued, `how come no one thought of doing this before?'

`Doing what before?'

`Global weather manipulation. Apparently the math is in place, we must already know a lot of these fancy feed-back constants and we've been able to go back in the past for the more extreme ones for five years now. So what's held you? And how come we let Asiablock get to it first?'

`I'm not responsible for keeping Westblock up to snuff, science-wise,' he said testily. `We're ahead of them in most things, we can't do everything, they've got a bigger population to feed, ...' he ran into silence as I just looked at him.

`Okay, okay. Someone boobed,' he admitted, `But in answer to your question, the only reason I can think of, off the top of my head, is that gradually computers have got bigger and faster until ultimately their performance has gone over some sort of threshold and Asiablock noticed this before we did.'

I walked around the room and looked out at a crescent moon hanging high over the frozen desert.

`And are these towers really enough to change the weather?' I asked. `Dalt didn't seem to think so.'

`Well, there are lots of other things they can be doing as well that aren't so obvious,' answered Jim. `You can spread oil on lakes to reduce evaporation, pump up cold water from the sea bed, increase ground vegetation cover, spread black coal-dust on ice-fields and so on. John says that now they know what the YP are up to, we can look for these things too.'

Chapter 27

I retired to my room dazed and lay on the bed thinking. My two Missions were over and I would get extra pay for that interesting excursion into China, so financially I was in well in the black. But what now? All efforts in the immediate future were going to be spent on linking up Westblock computers to make a super-computer capable of simulating the world's weather. I had no delusions about my abilities in that direction. My biggest contribution would be to keep out of the way. I was wondering about all this when I remembered the mepak Jim had lent me. I rolled off the bed and put it into the room's small computer. The titles came up immediately and I saw it was an educational film called "Our Climate Heritage". A young man was speaking.

`The assumption goes like this:- If you're born in some part of the world; that place belongs to your Tribe, Society or Nation. It's yours for ever - including its mineral resources, wildlife, mountains and lakes, the sea for two hundred miles around it, everything. Even if you can't exploit these resources yourself, you can have other people exploit them for you and pay you for the privilege.'

The face disappeared, to be replaced by beautiful travelogue-type pictures. The voice-over continued:

`Like the inhabitants of South Sea islands bring in holiday syndicates to build hotels, like the Arabs have foreign engineers prospect for and pump out their oil, like the Boers in South Africa had foreign mining engineers dig out their gold and diamonds. These resources are theirs in perpetuity and they can sell them for what the market will bear.'

The scene changed and we saw pictures of a small native market in the forest where white men in bush jackets were buying rhinoceros horns and loading them into Landrovers. In the background trees were burning.

`And if the rest of the world doesn't like the way you are, say, killing the elephants or whales that had the misfortune to be born in the same part of the world as you, you can use them as hostages and make the rest of the world pay you not to kill them. In the same way, the world will also pay you for not cutting down or burning the trees on your land.'

The pictures changed and we saw tanks under the title "Desert Storm", rolling over a desert.

`And if some other nation tries to steal your land and its resources from you, the rest of the world which has been buying your oil, for instance, will rush to your defence. The land you have been born in is your birthright.'

`You can now even claim your "birthright" retroactively. The North American Indians, or the Aborigines of Australia; they've all found hungry lawyers who will argue for them.'

The scene changed again to show rain falling on growing crops, skiers on a snowy mountainside, sun-bathers on a sandy beach.

`Because the climate has so far been very stable, the climate of your land has just been regarded as another natural resource which you inherit along with the rest of your birthright.'

We saw an impressive dam with water squirting out of its sluice gates.

`But it isn't always so clear. There have been cases where one country diverts more water than it "should" from a river that also goes through a neighbouring country. In the past, countries have gone to war over this. Today it's normally a matter for negotiation with the United Nations as adjudicator.'

There was a whistling sound and I saw a large transport jet flying over clouds. Its cargo bay opened and discharged clouds of white powder. Cut to rain falling on parched fields.

`But here we enter the grey area. Man can to some extent influence the weather. There have already been legal cases where one country, by deliberate cloud seeding, has "stolen" rain that would normally have fallen on another country. So far these cases have been decided in favour of the plaintiff only if he can prove loss by showing weather records. But what if his neighbour steals his water by slower and more subtle means of weather alteration, such as by intensive tree planting?'

The film ended and the computer went into the save-screen mode. I lay there looking at the faint slowly moving patterns on the monitor and thinking.

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So mankind had discovered how to globally modify the weather. And Asiablock were planning to use it as a new way to upset the balance of power between us. Yet another case of technology moving ahead faster than our culture could absorb it.

What could we do? The immediate simple way would be to physically resist, by destroying the towers and any other gadgets they were building to change the weather. But that would mean war.

Alternatively we, once we had built our weather simulator, could build structures that would put the jet-stream back where it was. Asiablock would use some other method to change it back. It would mean a new form of warfare with Planet Earth as the battle-field. And battlefields always became disaster areas. It would be a very messy war, with wild climate swings all over the place.

Asiablock had taken three and a half years to build their weather simulator. Assuming we could build ours in half the time, the option of a Weather War was still not open to us for another year at least. And in that time the Westblock public would find the YP were deliberately changing the climate of Westblock countries. There would be a hysterical outcry. Weather Warfare was too cerebral for mankind. If heating bills and food prices rose and holidays were spoilt because of a changed climate, and those towers or any other constructions were identified as the cause, they would be bombed, and to hell with the consequences. It could lead to WW3.

Chapter 28

And so I found myself back in Munich in February. February is Carnival time in Munich and the worst-for-150 years cold winter had not prevented it. Various art museums, theatres, hotels and Beer Palaces transform themselves into fairy grottoes with the most fantastic decorations. They hold public fancy-dress balls where up to a thousand people attend. During Carnival time (or Fasching as they call it here) it's not much use calling up anyone, even employees in big respectable companies. The phone will usually be taken off the hook in reply to your call and all you will hear is drunken singing, laughter and the clinking glasses of some office party.

Carnival is also a good time to trade in your partner for a new model. Couples, married and otherwise, separate and only find each other again after it's all over. If they still have the same partner, of course. But I hadn't seen Helga for almost a month because of my extended trip to Chrodisp, so we had decided to "prolong our Mutual Benefit Contract" (Helga is at a business school and it sounds more impressive in German.) We therefore visited the more sedate balls together. The ones where you keep most of your clothes on.

There were some articles in the press about the unusual world-wide weather conditions, but no one had yet discovered that the instability was caused by Asiablock tinkering with the jet-stream. I wondered how and why Dr Duluth had managed to smother this information.

I find my personal popularity peaks twice a year in Munich - in February and October. Friends who I had not heard from for a year remember me during Fasching and Oktoberfest time. But this year, there were none of the usual calls from friends saying they "just happened to be passing through and as they couldn't find a hotel room wondered if they could ..."

Very unusual. A friend of mine, a programmer from Siemens, the local electronics firm, told me his department had received a big contract from an obscure branch of UNESCO (the science arm of the UN), to do some very complicated programming.

'Not really programming,' he said. 'More like linking up lots of different program modules, so they all flow together. But, Gott, the modules are complicated. I've never seen anything like it!' He also said friends of his in America had received orders from the State Dept. to drop whatever they were doing and do this. He couldn't tell me what "this" was, except it was way out and top secret.

I naturally assumed all this activity was to do with Westblock building their weather simulator.

Towards the end of April I received a rather unusual brochure in the post, advertising a "Peace and Reconciliation Conference". I barely read it, it was some glossy rubbish about bringing the two power blocks together through cultural connections. (One of the fringe benefits of owning a "Waffen", or "Weapon" shop, is we are normally free from junk mail asking for contributions to save the seals, plant a

tree, send church Missions to Africa ...) But this one had been posted in Kazmir, one of the few towns in the Sahara desert and the nearest outpost of civilisation to the Chondisp Institute.

And under the stamp was pencilled what I recognised as a phone extension number at Chondisp!

As I said before, my privacy is very precious to me. I therefore went down to the main railway station, mixed with the tourists, took a train trip well out of Munich and sitting on the side of a mountain opened my satellite phone and dialled the extension number. Very expensive but at least no one would know I was calling Chondisp.

I immediately recognised the voice of Al and he told me to use Code 43. I carefully lifted a plastic chip labelled "43", out of a small box Jim had given me when I had left Chondisp last, opened my phone and clicked it into the socket revealed. The modern equivalent of the old "one-time pad", the only truly unbreakable code ever invented. My Chip No. 43 contained the equivalent of five minutes random noise, which when mixed with the random noise Al's identical Chip No. 43 made of his speech, would turn it back into recognisable speech for me. And the same for my voice in the other direction, of course. After five minutes, the chip would be exhausted and could be thrown away. I closed the phone and lifted it to my ear.

'Al?' I said. A burst of irritated-sounding noise spat into my ear. Hastily I opened the phone again and pushed the small slide-switch to "Code".

'Sorry,' I said. 'Forgot the switch.'

He started talking about the "Peace Conference", like he thought I had read the brochure. I listened to him rather blankly - events occurring in the world outside have to be very important for them to have any impact on me. But he quickly filled me in. There was going to be a big "Reconciliation Conference" in Pakistan at the end of April. In Pakistan because it was neutral (neutral only because Westblock had fought a bitter war there to prevent it being taken over by Asiablock, incidentally). And the conference was going to take place at Dil Kush, a small town in Northern Pakistan near where a key infantry battle had taken place. One I had played a minor role in. With folk-dancing, lots of culture and a big firework show at the end to symbolise peace between our two great peoples. There were cynical overtones in Al's voice as he related all this.

'So what do you want me there for?' I asked.

'You were at Dil Kush, weren't you?'

'Me and about fifty thousand other Westblock soldiers. Not counting the air support and assault artillery.'

'Well, the Doc thinks you might like to revisit the old battle-ground.'

'I'd like to revisit ..?! It's just a crummy valley between two ridges of stony mountains. There's barely enough grass for half a dozen goats to feed on. It's a high altitude desert, it's the most boring place you ...'

'"At Pay-scale seven", I was to tell you,' he interrupted, zeroing in immediately on my weak spot.

Jesus! If the thrifty Doctor was paying out that sort of money, I would be living on borrowed time. The last time I had been on Scale seven was when I went to look at the tower.

'Danger money to go to a peace conference? There must be something wrong with this decode chip. Are you serious?'

'Sorry, I can't say any more. But Jim said you would regret it if you didn't come.'

Did he indeed. I thought a moment. There seemed no obvious reason why I couldn't go. In fact it was an ideal time. After Fasching, Munich was very calm, not to say numb. All my friends had made for the ski-slopes or the sun. Al went on to tell me they would be staying at the Hotel Ramada in Islamabad, twenty kilometers from Dil Kush, and was going to tell me more when his voice dissolved into high-pitched hissing. I opened my phone and returned the switch to "Normal".

`We ran out of time,' he said, `do you want to stick in another chip?'

`No, I think I got it all. I'll make it there and contact you when I arrive.' We signed off.

As I returned to Munich I pulled Chip No. 43 out of my phone, snapped it in two between my fingers and absently flipped it out of the train window.

Pakistan, and the battlefield of Dil Kush. Dil Kush was everything I said it was, but I began to think it could be interesting to revisit, to relive some of the most exciting events in my life.

Chapter 29

My flight from Madrid to Bahrain skirted Asiablock territory and touched down in Islamabad at 17:20 local time in an airport filled with "Reconciliation!" and "Welcome!" signs. As well as big photos of Chairman Wang Tae, the benevolent smiling Asiablock Head of State and the small bespectacled face of Nam Bok, the United Nations Secretary General.

Holding my carry-on luggage I walked along the off-ramp, hiding behind a large Spaniard and made straight for the nearest toilets. Here I waited for the next but one flight to arrive which I knew was from Milan, using the time to part my hair differently and wad my cheeks with foam rubber. I unfolded and put a pair of thick-rimmed slightly tinted glasses on my now chipmunk-like face .

I went through Customs with the Italians, a copy of La Stampa casually under my arm, and showed an Italian passport Chondisp had given me once. I managed to drop it at a critical moment so I would not be seen by the video camera. Clearing Customs I took the airport bus into the city.

Here I used my few words of Urdu (remembered from the Affair) to take a taxi to the main railway station, paid him off, removed the foam rubber from my cheeks with relief and took another taxi to the Bristol Hotel on the outskirts of the city.

Islamabad is five hours ahead of Munich. It was now getting dark. 19:40 local time and 14:40 for me, so I wasn't hungry. I booked into a modest room, left my luggage unopened and after automatically leaving a few intrusion "traps", descended to the lobby where I hired a small car which I used to drive over to the Hotel Ramada, about two kilometers away, where the Chondisp party were staying. I left it in the hotel car-park and walked around to the front.

The Ramada Hotel was in the luxury hotel quarter being surrounded by the Hilton, Sheraton and Adelphi hotels. It was filled with Westblock delegates, mostly from Europe.

As I casually approached I could see there was also a massive Pakistani police and military presence. Police cars and busses filled with waiting troops. Engines running and radios hissing. Tough-looking riot police. How the hell was I going to get through all that without revealing my real identity? In the hotel lobby there was even a pool of bright light where a television crew was interviewing all the arriving guests or delegates. And I was sure somewhere there was also an Asiablock observer with a camera. I imagined my photo being shown on a screen in CERE headquarters and someone explaining to the various agents:

"This person turned up at the last moment. You notice he is wearing a two sided coat, so he is probably trying to arrive clandestinely. We showed this to our agent at the other hotels and we find he has booked into the Bristol. He almost certainly arrived on a flight from Munich, but delayed his appearance to pass customs with an Italian group. Send his photo to our man in Munich and see if he can locate him there ..."

Yuk. Exactly what I wanted to avoid. I looked at all this with dismay. Jim must have some way of getting me in.. I pulled out my phone and dialled the Ramada Hotel.

The receptionist answered but I remembered; I couldn't ask for Chrondisp.

`Could I speak to Dr Prince? He is one of your guests.'

Pause.

`I'm afraid we have no one of that name staying here.'

I tried Dr Duluth and some other names, but with the same result. Damn it, I knew they were in there. There was just too much bloody security around. Jim could easily have got me in unobtrusively; now I'd have to go in the hard way. Sod it. It wouldn't make me very popular if anyone found out.

I positioned myself near the hotel entrance, where I could observe the brightly lit interior. Behind the TV team a few guests were leaning on the reception desk, checking in and out. One guest was patting the pockets of his white raincoat; he had forgotten something in his room. He left his suitcase and disappeared up the lift. I looked at his green suitcase standing isolated in the middle of the floor. It would do. I inconspicuously pulled out my phone and re-dialled the number of the Ramada Hotel. I heard the call tone and saw the receptionist pick up the phone. I stuck a finger into the side of my mouth to disguise my voice.

`Ramada Hotel. Can I help you?'

`Ve are dair Bayerischerversicherungsgesellschaft und ve have planted a bomb in a green suitcase in zer reception. In four minutes it vill explode. Down with the lick-spittle running-dog collaborators of Pakistan. Now you are hafing only three minutes.'

The receptionist dropped the phone and screamed at a heavily-built man standing near the desk who spun round to look at the green suitcase standing prominently alone in the middle of the reception area. The man shouted at the guests and waved his arms.

Instant panic! The guests at the desk turned, dropped everything they were doing and as one bolted for the door, falling over each other and the TV team's cables and cameras as they fought to get out. Some rushed out of the door and threw themselves down behind the steps leading up to the hotel entrance, with their hands over their ears. The rest disappeared with shrill cries behind the row of waiting taxis and busses.

Silence.

With a squeal of brakes a police car pulled up outside the hotel. Two men leapt out and crouching behind the steps, examined the green suitcase with binoculars. One spoke into a radio and the other had a long rope coiled over his arm with a grappling hook swinging from it. Hand outstretched and eye on his wrist-watch the first man motioned him flat.

After two minutes the man with the rope cautiously got to his feet and sheltering behind the side of the entrance door began to unwrap his rope. When it lay in a loose pile at his feet he took the grapnel hook and swung it through the door towards the case, keeping carefully behind the hotel wall. The grapnel clattered across the marble floor and struck the case side on. Everyone ducked. He wound the

hook back and tried again but this time missed completely. Nerves. But the third time the hook swung around the case to hold it firmly. Slowly he began to tug the suitcase along the floor, sliding it towards the door. Everyone was watching tensely, probably wondering what he was going to do with it when he got it out of the hotel, when the lift door opened and the man in the white raincoat walked out. He looked down with surprise at his suitcase with the hook wrapped around it. Everyone ducked again as he unconcernedly lifted up his suitcase and carried it over to the counter, glancing around in surprise at the empty foyer. He impatiently rang the bell.

Order slowly returned and the hotel guests gradually reappeared. The bomb-disposal man was wagging his finger at the man in the white raincoat who was indignantly shouting back at him, pushing clothes back into his case and pointing out the marks the hook had made in the green leather. I entered the hotel amongst the chattering crowd of returning guests and unobserved made for a side door.

Gratefully I left the noisy lobby behind me and walked up the quiet service stairs, peering inquisitively in at each floor, wondering how I would know which floor Chrondisp was on. It turned out to be quite easy.

On the fifth floor two bulky men with sunburnt faces and white foreheads were sitting at the end of the corridor opposite the lift. One was reading a French novel with a garish cover and the other had his hand hidden under a French newspaper. French UN troops assigned to guard duty.

Their heads spun round as I unexpectedly appeared from the service stairway door and I heard the newspaper rustle.

I advanced cautiously, arms apart and hands open.

'Chrondisp,' I said handing over my card. The man with the novel slid the card into a reader and wordlessly turned it to me so I could tap in my ID number. A green light came on and the tension relaxed. The newspaper reader leant down to pick up a hard-wire field telephone and spoke a few words into it.

'Room twenty-five, knock twice,' he said and they both silently watched me as I followed the wire down the carpeted corridor to where it disappeared under the door of Room 25, also called "The Ho Chi Min Suite". I tapped twice.

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In response to my double knock the door was cautiously opened from the inside by another burly figure. Behind him was Jim with a phone up to his ear and Al was standing nearby.

'Jeez!' he said. 'And it was a dummy after all?' The phone chattered but he didn't seem to be getting anything from it. He put it down and looked at me angrily.

'That was you, wasn't it?' he said. 'You couldn't just walk into the hotel like everyone else?'

'No,' I said. 'There's a TV crew down there filming all the arrivals and reception said you weren't staying here. It was that or go home.'

'So why didn't you use the name Al gave you?' I transferred my gaze to Al, who had the grace to look embarrassed.

'Waal, we got cut off before I could give it him. I figured he'd find a way in,' said Al.

Jim turned to Al wrathfully but I pushed my way past them into the room. It was very full, but if I had expected some sort of party atmosphere I was quite wrong. It looked more like an Ops Room. In the dimmed lighting I could see Dr Dalt, our climatologist, standing behind three young men. They were all looking at a big computer screen, covered with crazy swirling and pulsating diagrams. Dr Dalt glanced over and nodded at me but no one else looked up. Through the large picture window I saw a beefy figure standing outside on the balcony, leaning on the parapet

smoking and looking down into the street. By his side was the circular shape of an upward pointing antenna. Two cables snaked across the floor, connecting it to the computer. To the right was a door leading into a small kitchen. I walked in and helped myself to a beer from the fridge. I returned to the main room and stood behind the group at the computer.

`Try it for 10:07,' said Dr Dalt. There was the clicking of the keyboard. I moved away impatiently and looked around the large suite. Dr Duluth was sitting on a bed reading some papers and Al had moved to a far table and was tapping in his PC. Beer can in hand I made for the bed to announce my arrival and find why I was here.

A telephone on the computer table beeped. The guard picked it up, muttered into it and raised his hand to Dr Duluth who stood up. A minute later the door was opened in response to a double tap and a young woman entered, to be greeted by Dr Duluth with his usual cool handshake. They exchanged a few polite words and turning to me he said:

`Mr Digby - Ning McGregor.' I shook a small proffered hand.

Wearing a plain pale yellow sarong, Miss/Mrs McGregor was small and looked about eighteen - but I find Asiatics always look much younger than they are. Although she was only partly Asian, she had the full lips, snub nose and rounded baby-face which seems so expressionless to us. Caucasians have their facial muscles closer to the surface and it makes for much livelier facial expressions. Ning had only slightly slanted eyes, with no epicanthic eye fold. Slightly yellow skin, as near as I could see in the dim light of the hotel room.

`You'll recognise me again, will ye not?' she said sharply in a Scots accent. The voice was so at variance with the face I involuntarily looked around to see who was speaking.

`Ning is our interpreter,' said Dr Duluth.

`I see. And what am I? What am I doing here?' I asked.

`I'm not sure yet,' he said frankly. He turned to Ning. `Mr Digby was in the Affair at Dil Kush and we use him as general handyman,' he said with a faint smile. He nodded to us politely and turned away to the group around the computer. Of course he couldn't introduce me as an Observer.

I guided Ning past the crowd and offered her a chair by the table. I sat down too.

`Ye were a soldier,' she stated. I nodded. I didn't know what to make of her. To me, Asian women seem to have only two expressions - either cute giggling little girl or a remote inscrutable exotic beauty. Perhaps that is why they are so often used as models. That and their slimness, of course.

`Did ye kill many Wipe?' she asked. I looked at her startled. "Wipe" was a contemptuous abbreviation of YP or Yellow People. I didn't like this question. If you admitted anything, you were looked on ever after as a killer, a pariah, and not really a member of the human race.

`In the Artillery you pop one off and never know where it's going to land,' I said ambiguously. And that was nothing but the truth. Front-line troops were very nervous of "shorts" and were always sending panic-stricken messages back to their guns, screaming at them to increase the bloody range.

`You have a Scots accent and name and yet look Chinese. Everyone must ask you about that,' I continued with a disarming smile, changing the subject. `Why don't you just print up some sort of hand-out?' It was a line I had used at parties in Munich. For the first time she looked at me in a more friendly manner.

`I'll think about it,' she said. She really was quite pretty and there was the silvery ghost of a lisp in her speech. I heard Al click his PC shut.

The ice broken, she became more forthcoming. Her father was a Scots engineer who had married a Chinese girl from Hong Kong. Born just before the transfer of the Crown Colony to Mainland China in 1997, she would be twenty. She had been educated mainly in Chinese schools as she and her mother followed her father from one job to another, both in Westblock and Asiablock.

`And what languages do you speak?'

`Mandarin, Hindi, French and Urdu,' she said. I was less impressed than I would have been once, as in Munich I know lots of girls who spoke four or five languages. Unfortunately they could only say the same things in each language.

`And a wee bit of Gaelic, I'll be bound,' said Al, who had moved around the table. He was now sitting proprietarily by her and looking rather challengingly at me.

`Hi, Dig. So there you are,' said another voice in my ear and I looked at Jim's held-out hand. I had only spoken to him ten minutes ago, and not very amicably at that. But he seemed to want me to shake it, so I shook it.

`Ning's our interpreter,' he said, smiling down at her. Sit by a pretty girl and be instantly popular. A few minutes later I found myself occupying a chair on the far side of the table, taking care of Al's PC for him.

Bloody Americans. I glumly watched them boisterously slapping each other on the shoulders in false bonhomie.

`And how did you make out with that little number I saw you with at the bar last night? ...' `Hey, you gotta watch this guy he ...' `No, well, I just got back off Mission, and you know it was a real toughie ...' `So I said to this Asiablock Colonel, he was only yea high but so wide he'd'a never got through that door, "Listen shithead", I said ...'

I levered myself off my chair and wandered over to the group around the computer. They had been very quiet for a while and were all leaning forwards intently. Someone tapped on a single key and there was burst of suppressed excitement.

`That must be it!' said Dr Dalt, pointing with his pencil to a part of the screen.

`Well, I'll be damned!' breathed one programmer.

`A chance in a million!' whispered another.

`Ten oh four - "Butterfly time",' said the third of the young men quietly and I saw "10:04" in the top right-hand corner of the screen.

There was a reverent pause as they all looked at a tangled pattern, frozen on the screen.

`We knew they intended something and the timing is near enough to the firework display scheduled for tomorrow morning at 10:00am,' said Dr Duluth intensely. `That has to be it.' His face had sharpened and his eyes glowed. He noticed me.

`Get Jim and Al,' he said. With pleasure.

I went across the room to see Al on the carpet demonstrating with some effort how to do a one-armed push-up and Jim, sitting beside him mockingly telling him they had to do twenty of those in Basic training in the US Marines. Ning, her slim legs crossed, was looking rather boredly down at them.

`The boss wants you both,' I said, hooking my thumb in the direction of the main table. They climbed to their feet, rather embarrassedly dusting themselves down. Al gratefully as well, I thought. Ning also stood up, looked at her wrist-watch and said she was going to retire. Gratefully too, I would have said.

At the corner of the main table we pulled up chairs, a small compact group.

`We've just had an amazing stroke of luck,' said Dr Duluth, quietly. `We've found there is a "butterfly time" here tomorrow at 10:04am!' There was a pause while

Jim and Al digested this. Jim had a ball-point out and was heavily shading the corners of a beer-mat. I said nothing: I hadn't the faintest idea what they were talking about.

'The firework show,' said Al. 'They must be doing it with the fireworks somehow.'

'We've gotta stop them!' said Jim, looking at his watch. 'Let's get some of the guys together. The escort can cover us.' He turned to me. 'You gotta heater?' I looked at him uncomprehendingly. With Jim's tendency to slip into slang when excited, this conversation was becoming more and more enigmatic.

'Butterflies? Heater? What are you talking about?' I asked.

'Bring him up to date,' said Dr Duluth and turning aside pulled out his phone and slipped in a code chip. I looked at Jim expectantly. He took a deep breath.

'Dig. You must know from your last visit to Chrodisp that we are trying to build a weather simulator to match Asiablock. We at Chrodisp have been co-ordinating this. We have split up the problem so several computing centres can work on the problem in parallel.' That tied up with what my programmer friend had told me in Munich. Jim clicked his ball-point.

'It will be another six months at least before we think we can match them, but we can already see what they are trying to do here.'

'Do here?' I said, 'I thought this was a Peace and Reconciliation Conference.' He looked up at me, surprised at my naivety.

'We've just had confirmation the YP are taking advantage of a great coincidence,' he said, waving his hand towards the group round the computer. 'Dil Kush is very near a "butterfly point" and tomorrow, the First of May, at approx. ten am is a "butterfly time".' He looked at me expectantly.

Before I could say anything, Al picked the conference brochure up and waved it in front of me.

'It would be a wonderful and symbolic gesture if they could permanently change the world's weather in their favour at the place where they suffered their first military reverse,' he said. 'And on their greatest holiday.'

Butterflies again. What were they on about? Unwilling to show my ignorance I concentrated on what I understood.

'How are they going to change the world's weather?' I asked impatiently. Al turned to the back page of the brochure and put his finger on an oval. It was the Conference stadium at Dil Kush.

'An Austrian company has been commissioned to build a large firework display which will be let off here at the end of the Conference, tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock.' He tapped the map.

'Just a minute,' I said. 'Fireworks? Fireworks in the middle of the morning?'

'Yeah, well, they're not those sort of fireworks. They're supposed to be some sort of coloured smoke fireworks,' said Al. 'Anyway, in combination with those towers, we think these fireworks will produce just enough atmospheric turbulence to nail the jet-stream to a new stable position. We have just discovered this through our link to Chrodisp and our world-wide computer network.'

Jesus!

'So what are we going to do?' I asked. 'Stop the firework display?' Duluth snapped his phone shut and returned to the conversation.

'We must try to,' he said, 'but the installation is very well defended.'

'And if we can't stop the fireworks?' I asked. 'Can't we twitch the jet-stream back to its original position ourselves later? Our own coloured smoke fireworks?'

`Dalt says butterfly points are very rare and he thinks Asiablock have only stumbled on this one by accident. It will be some years before they (and we) have the computing power necessary to determine these points on a regular basis. By that time Asiablock with their improved weather may be the dominant power block.' I looked at him amazed.

`What? A few degrees temperature change isn't going to make much difference!' I said incredulously, seizing on the only thing I understood.

`Take it from me, Dig,' said Al `a few degrees ...'

A commotion from the group around the computer screen made him pause and look round. I saw the patterns on the screen had stopped moving and were frozen in a complex spiral. One of the engineers rose and was impatiently examining the connections to a box behind the computer.

There was a thump followed by a shout from the direction of the large picture window! I spun round and through the glass I saw the guard lying in a crumpled heap on the balcony. A fine blue line came over the balcony parapet from slightly above and to the left.

`Laser attack!' I shouted and ducking, dashed out onto the balcony. Someone clicked the room lights off behind me. The whole balcony was illuminated with a flickering white glow as though from a welding torch, apparently coming from the front of the antenna! As I crouched behind the stone parapet I could hear a sharp hissing sound and smell scorched metal. Moving my head slightly I saw the antenna stub was white hot, dripping red-hot globules onto the balcony. The blue line snapped off.

I crawled over to the fallen guard and put my hand up to his neck. He was alive and beside him on the balcony was a big plastic bullet, of the type used in riot-control. A pistol had also fallen out of his shoulder holster. I picked it up and carefully raised my head. The attack on us had been made in silence and no one else had noticed it: there was the undisturbed roar of traffic in the street far below us. Al and Jim had appeared and were crouched at my elbows, breathing heavily.

`What's going on?' asked Al.

`There's a laser in the building opposite and they've taken out our antenna. The guard is KO but I don't think he's too bad; they got him with a baton round.' I pushed the plastic bullet towards them.

I looked around. The attackers wouldn't be satisfied with just destroying our antenna - it could be too easily replaced. And sure enough, there was a snapping sound over our heads and a small brilliantly glowing white dot appeared in the glass picture window behind us! We ducked down as it disappeared inside. Rasping, the white dot moved around rapidly, carving out glowing red-rimmed pieces of glass which crashed and tinkled on the concrete floor of the balcony. There were warning shouts from inside and the darkened room was filled with an eerie flickering light as the laser found the computer.

`The bastards!' said Jim as we watched helplessly.

`Can't you shoot at them?' said Al to me. I was holding the guard's pistol but it's a brave man who stands up to shoot a pistol at a power laser. It can change its target so quickly.

The laser beam changed colour, weakened and disappeared. Out of power. We waited a minute, listening to muffled shouts and thumps in the hotel room. With a quick swishing sound, the curtains were closed.

Crouching, we crawled off the balcony and through the door, pushed the curtains aside and entered the room, now pitch black except for some glowing embers and small yellow flames coming from where the computer had been. The air

was thick and choking with the smell of burnt wood and plastic. Someone was beating at the flames.

`They've trashed the computer,' said a voice.

`Keep down,' said another.

I stood to one side with the wall behind me. God, what a mess! Through the acrid smoke I saw a deep black runnel in the plaster wall opposite the window, showing the track of the laser. The runnel led down to where it had sliced through the computer and through two legs of the table holding the monitor. The whole caboodle had slid off the table and was lying on the carpet in a mess of glass shards.

Clicks from the door switch. Nothing.

`There's no power,' said the voice of Dr Dalt.

No power! The hair on the back of my head rose and I tingled. That meant destroying the computer was only a preliminary to the main attack! I pushed my way to the door through the milling bodies, a handkerchief over my mouth and nose. I fumbled for the key, turned it and carefully pushed the door open. Cool clean air but darkness. All the corridor lights were out. I closed the door behind me to cut out the noise from the room and crouched with my back to the wall, listening.

Silence. I glanced at my luminous watch. Midnight. This whole floor was occupied by Chrodisp personnel - either in the suite behind me or asleep in their rooms.

We were in a neutral country and relations were fairly good between West and Asiablock at the moment. So was this an attack on Chrodisp key-personnel by some hot-heads? Some crazy part of the Pakistani branch of "Tao" who wanted to curry favour with Beijing? There was no answer. I would have to assume the worst. As I crouched down in the intense darkness, I found I was still holding the guard's pistol. I ran my hands over it. A Heckler and Koch P7 or near enough; the same as used by the Munich police. 9mm and up to thirteen rounds.

But what had happened to the guards at the end of the corridor? They didn't seem to be reacting.

I quietly worked the pistol's slide and holding it in front of me climbed to my feet and cautiously started to move up the corridor, my left hand touching the wall. My finger-tips dragged across a closed door. I tried the handle. Locked. I continued moving, my feet absolutely silent on the carpet. The door to Room 25 opened behind me and a voice said `Dig?' but I didn't answer. The door closed again. In the meantime I had passed two more locked doors in my stealthy progress towards the lift and could see the corridor was not completely dark; there was some light coming from the lift Call button. So the lift was probably still working. My fingers dragged across another door. Unlocked. I opened it cautiously and heard a soft click inside. I was about to call quietly to the occupant when I felt a current of air and a loop of soft material was thrown around my neck and tightened!

Chin up I was pulled sideways off-balance through the doorway! I put out my left foot to stop myself falling but stumbled over a hard knee-high object. I tripped, crashed noisily to the carpet and the pistol flew out of my hand. Immediately I curled up my knees and brought my hands in, ready to climb up but felt a blade, sharp and cold against my neck. A low voice snapped at me in sibilant Chinese.

I froze and gradually started moving my legs up once more. The cloth was tightened and the voice hissed again, more insistently. Warm blood trickled down my neck. Lying flat on my back, my arms started slowly moving around the carpet, looking for the pistol, a shoe, anything, and stopped. I had found a hard object, the leg of a chair perhaps. I mumbled and heaved. Whatever it was almost came away in my hand, there was a pause and a crash. A table, I must have thrown it to the

ground. Instantly my hand flew up to my neck and grasped the wrist holding the knife. Small, so small I could wrap my hand around it, but strong, and my position didn't give me much leverage. To the accompaniment of spitting curses I forced it gradually away from my neck, and manoeuvred myself over the carpet until I was able to throw my light assailant over my shoulder and arms outstretched grabbed for him. In the pitch blackness he gasped and wriggled like a wild cat as I fought for a kata gatame, using my superior weight. But as I crossed my hand over I heard the tearing of cloth and felt the sudden warm softness of breasts!

`Jesus!' I said involuntarily and immediately my assailant froze. There was a short gasping silence.

`Ye're Digby!' said an unmistakably Scots accented voice.

`Ning! What the fuck are you playing at?' I whispered furiously, sitting up and pulling a scarf from around my neck.

`Ye dinna have to use language like that,' she panted. `I heard a noise and woke up. The lights wouldn'a come on and then someone opened the door.'

`Help me find the pistol I dropped,' I said, sweeping my hands over the carpet. Explanations could wait.

`Here,' she whispered after a moment and its small heavy hardness was pushed into my hand.

I checked it and continued: `Someone attacked Room 25 with a laser from the other side of the street and has destroyed the computer terminal. And all the lights have gone out on this floor.' I climbed to my feet.

`It's the Wipe,' she asserted. `What about the guards?'

`I don't know,' I replied, hand stretched out in the total darkness, feeling for the door. `Stay here, I'm going to find out.'

`Then I'll be coming with you.' There was the slithering whisper of clothing being hastily donned.

`Very well. But don't make a noise.' Behind me, she would guard my rear. I opened the door to the corridor and put my head out. Now my eyes had adapted and I could see two figures lying on the carpet in the pool of faint light coming from the lift Call button.

I ran softly up to them my pistol muzzle swinging around, but there was no one else. I tried the doors to the service stairs. Unlocked. I went back to the two guards. Before each of them was a small tray with a half-eaten snack.

`Call the lift,' I whispered to Ning. She thumbed the Call button and we pressed ourselves to the wall on each side.

There was a quiet thump as the lift arrived. I pulled its door open quickly, pistol searching its bright interior, but it was quite empty. I jammed the door wide open with one of the plastic trays and in the light flooding out of the lift I examined the two unconscious guards. I put my hand up to their necks.

`Are they alive?' asked Ning.

`Yes,' I replied. `But they'll have bad headaches tomorrow.' I quickly felt through their clothing. Both had shoulder holsters, but they were empty. Who had taken their pistols? Perhaps the waiter who had brought them the food and drink and waited chatting with them until they had drunk the coffee.

Instant darkness! The lights in the lift had gone out too! This time even the Call button. Floor 3 was cut-off from the rest of the hotel!

Ning was right; this had to be the YP! I had no time to work out their motives. I must secure this end of the corridor and report back to Duluth. How could I jam closed the door to the service stairs? In the darkness I felt around them. They opened inwards. One was bolted to the frame, top and bottom, the bolts fortunately

on my side. The other was the one I had entered through and was unlocked. But both had handles.

`Get the guards' belts,' I said to Ning. There was a rustling sound and I felt one being pushed into my hand. I took it and wrapped it as tightly as possible around the two knobs. Followed by the other, knotting it firmly. And in the nick of time! There were footsteps outside and I heard the door handle being turned.

`Keep to the side of the corridor,' I hissed. The doors were of metal but could be cut through easily enough with a laser.

The door strained against the creaking leather belts but held. A faint light appeared under the doors and someone cursed in Urdu. A foot kicked the door and the light went off. We waited in the pitch blackness but nothing else happened. They didn't have a laser or they could have sliced through the belts easily enough.

There was click and a faint glimmer of light as a door opened at the other end of the corridor and I heard Jim say loudly:

`Dig? Are you all right? What's happening?' I took a breath to shout back but at that moment a bright white light appeared between us, half way down the corridor and at the doorway to one of the rooms. It made a brilliant circle on the corridor wall opposite and turned to shine straight down the corridor towards us.

`Get in the lift!' I shouted to Ning, holding my hand up against the glare, and leaping behind the jammed-open lift door.

`Surrender!' said an Indian accented voice.

The prick. I aimed well above the light and squeezed one off. In the enclosed space the pistol made a tremendous bang and the light jerked and went out. In the distance I heard the door to Room 25 slam.

Silence followed by some coughing sounds and the hissing of bullets flying by and clunking into the metal lift door. I fired another shot, this time along the side of the wall and low down.

Exposed in this corridor we were in a hell of a dangerous position! Survival came first.

`We've got to get out of this corridor,' I whispered to Ning. `Crawl down to the first door on the right and wait for me.' There was a slithering sound and:

`It's locked.'

Shit. There were some more silenced shots but this time the slugs ricocheted off the floor and walls. I fired again and crawled swiftly around the lift door, along the corridor and up to the door. Ning was standing up, sheltered inside the door jamb. I cautiously stood up beside her and tried the door. Locked, but there was some slight movement.

`I'm afraid,' she whispered, holding my arm. I gave her a comforting squeeze.

`We'll be safe in a minute,' I replied. `I'm going to charge this door. Move over to this side.' The side with the hinges.

I took a deep breath and hands out dashed across the corridor to the opposite side, I needed space to charge. Damn, there was no sheltering doorway!

`Keep back, here I come,' I whispered. I triggered off another shot up the corridor, thrust the pistol into my belt and hands covering my head leapt across the corridor and crashed into the door. It gave way immediately with a brittle snap and I blundered across the faintly lit room and collapsed onto the bed. It was unoccupied.

I lifted myself up groggily.

`Shut the door!' I said urgently. The room was empty, the windows uncurtained and the faint light coming through them would shine out into the corridor showing where we had gone. I heard the door close and the rattle of a chain. Good girl, although I didn't think that chain would offer much more resistance than the lock had.

I went straight to the window and opened it, letting in the noise of traffic. In the reflection of city lights from the low clouds I could see the room had a small balcony with a concrete parapet like Room 25, but smaller. I put my head out and looked to the left and there it was, that's how they'd entered that room! They'd abseiled down a rope, still hanging from a balcony on the sixth floor and silhouetted against the sky. I stepped cautiously out onto the balcony.

Our room was at the end of the hotel. Right next to our balcony was a small vertical ladder, fixed to the wall and disappearing downwards in the faint light. I scanned up and down and from side to side. No fire-escapes. That was the only way down; it must be some sort of maintenance ladder.

'Come here,' I said over my shoulder. She stepped out onto the balcony besides me. There were three unsilenced shots from the corridor. Christ! Was that them or us? I put my hand on Ning's shoulder. 'Can you climb down that?' Her slanted eyes widened and she instinctively drew back. I watched her beautiful profile calculatingly. She turned to stare directly at me.

'Ye'll go without me if I can't,' she stated. I looked back at her steadily.

'Aye,' I said, unconsciously imitating her Scots accent.

'Then I'll have to, won't I?'

I held her arm as she climbed over the balcony parapet and reached out to put a foot on the ladder. She hung her small handbag around her neck but her skirt was too tight. She glared up at me and I glared back; it wasn't my fault she was wearing one of those stupid impractical sarong things. I was going to tell her to hitch it up when I remembered and dashed back into the apartment.

"QUOB," I kept saying to myself, looking around the small room. "QUOB", "QUOB." The Army uses management course tricks to remind us what to do in stressful situations. "Quick", "Unexpected" ... I remembered what "B" meant, but had forgotten the "O". "Observe?" "Obliterate?"

Through the side door and into the kitchen. Good. Smaller, but otherwise like Room 25. I turned the cooker's four gas taps on and left them hissing as I vaulted over the parapet and on to the ladder. Hand over hand I descended, looking up nervously. I was a easy target here if anyone wanted to shoot down at me from a balcony. But the bloody ladder was rusty and its supports were coming away from the brickwork in little clouds of grit! It was more dangerous than the threat above!

Arm over arm I pantingly made my way down it and was still at the level of the first floor when I heard a rusty squeak below me. Looking down, I could see the ladder ended about three meters above the ground but there was a folded up extension. Ning was struggling to bend it down.

'Kick it!' I said urgently. Scratchingly the section unfolded out and she put a foot on it gingerly. Her weight straightened it and she stepped down it onto the ground. I followed her and was about to ask her if she was all right when I saw she was looking up. Her eyes widened.

'Watch out!' she said and pulled at me. There was a hiss and a thump in the ground where I had been standing. High above us a man dressed as a waiter was leaning out over the balcony of the room we had left, holding a long pistol. I raised my P7 but took my finger from the trigger. An unsilenced shot out here would attract all sorts of attention. Another man joined him and they both leant over the balcony looking down. We pressed ourselves flat alongside the wall and I glanced round hastily. We were at the side of the hotel, at the edge of the car-park and there was no cover within fifty meters.

'We're going to have to make a run for it,' I said. The guys up there surely had some way of communication and soon other YP would appear around the side of the

hotel. We'd got to keep up our momentum, we'd got to get away from here. Another hiss and the thump of a heavy calibre bullet burying itself in the ground beside me, but followed immediately by a deep gut-thumping boom, like the distant supersonic bang of an aircraft! Our eyes jerked upwards and Ning grabbed my arm. A large cloud of smoke and red flames jetted out of the window of the room we had just left and silhouetted against it was an amazing variety of objects; chairs, tables, books and ... two spread-eagled human figures. Everything arced out and seemed to hover, circling gently far above us. As we watched they approached slowly, still circling but growing bigger and bigger. And at the last moment everything accelerated and landed with a long drawn-out splintering crash in the flower beds at the edge of the car park, about twenty meters away. The two bodies landed with limp thumps and didn't move any more. As we watched stunned, they were covered by lighter pieces of debris, cushions, and finally a fluttering cloud of pieces of burning paper and books.

`Ye did that! Ye left a bomb!'

`It's what can happen if you forget to turn the gas off,' I replied. "B" for "booby-trap". A muzzle flash must have set it off.

`Verra guid!' said Ning looking up at me in what could only be called surprised admiration.

I seized her hand and pulled her over to the car park, swerving around the heap of burning gas-explosion ejected furniture. We ran down between the rows of cars, me looking desperately to left and right until I found mine. I opened it and let Ning in. Quick! Quick! We'd got to get away.

I had expected some difficulty in exiting the car park; when I entered it there had been a Pakistani policeman sitting in the glass box next to the hotel employee. But we had no trouble at all. Both of them were standing outside their box looking up open-mouthed at the scene behind us. The barrier was open and they barely took the time to signal us through. They didn't even ask for money. I glanced back as we drove off. The corner of the hotel looked as though it had been hit by a shell. Red flames spurting out of the hole where the window had been were licking up the side of the hotel.

I drove the five minutes to the Bristol, parked outside and switched the engine off. A fire-engine roared past with flashing red lights and a hoo-harring siren. I pulled out my phone and tried the Ramada Hotel, but there was only a phone replier asking me to "leave a message and they would get back as soon as possible." I closed my phone slowly. If I couldn't get hold of Chondisp I was on my own.

`What are ye waiting for?' asked Ning. I waved her to silence and pulled a map out of the folder the hire company had given me. I'd got to think.

`The YP are going to set off fireworks at the end of the conference at ten o'clock tomorrow,' I said, more to myself than her. I looked at my watch, 0:44am. I meant today. `They've got to be stopped.'

The attack on Chondisp in the Hotel Ramada must have been a diversionary or harassing manoeuvre. To stop us thinking about the importance of the fireworks. But there were at least ten of our men on the fifth floor. They had been warned about the attack, had weapons and could defend themselves. And that gas explosion must have distracted the Wipe a bit.

The Chondisp party would have to take care of themselves. But could they stop the fireworks? According to Dr Dalt, once the fireworks had gone off the Earth's climate would change to favour Asiablock and it would be a long time before anyone could change it back.

`And how on earth can we do that?' asked Ning. I didn't know, but I liked the "we".

`Up to my room,' I said abruptly. We climbed out of my car, entered the empty foyer (it was after all 0:49am by the clock over Reception) and the duty porter sleepily handed me my door card. Not without a long stare at Ning. Her hair was all over the place, her sarong tucked up and torn and she was wearing bedroom slippers. God knows what I looked like.

Arriving outside my room I slid in the card and stood back, pulling Ning to one side and pushing the door open with one foot. A friend of mine had once run into a booby-trapped room.

Nothing. Crouching I ran in, pistol pointing in all directions.

Empty. Ning made to enter but I told her to stay out while I examined the windows, cupboards and drawers and the nap of the carpet for footprints. All clear. None of my "traps" had been disturbed.

I motioned her in and shut the door, but put my finger up to my lips. I opened my luggage and pulled out a bug detector. Ning made some noise and impatiently disappeared into the bathroom. The detector made the usual clacks and howls and the green came on, showing it had not been able to detect any radiation. There could still be a hard-wired microphone, of course. I checked the phone and the usual places, but the room seemed to be clean. I phoned the Ramada again, but still no answer.

I turned to the bathroom. Behind the closed door was the sound of running water. So I helped myself to a cold drink from the small fridge, sat down and switched on the holo wondering if there was any news, but they were just showing a documentary on the Conference. I stood up.

`How long are you going to be?' I said irritably through the bathroom door. With a click the door opened and Ning appeared. She had washed herself, somehow straightened her dress and her black Asiatic hair was combed back neatly. She took the drink I offered her and brushed past me.

A few minutes later I came out of the bathroom to see her curled up on the sofa watching the holo.

I sat down and looked at a map of the Conference stadium. It was an enormous oval one kilometer across and could seat thousands. At one end (the easternmost end, of course) were the Asiablock stands - Japan, China, North Korea, Indonesia, India. And at the other, the Westblock stands - USA, Europe, British Commonwealth. And in the middle, on the north side, the UN delegates; south side the Third World.

I knew that for the last week the stadium had been filled with orchestras, dance troupes, marching bands, choirs, massed gymnasts, flower parades etc. etc. I had seen some of them on the holo in Munich.

Most of the visitors and subordinate members of the various delegations were housed in an enormous temporary "Peace Village", within walking distance of the stadium. The heads of delegations and distinguished visitors were accommodated in the city, and were flown out each morning by a fleet of helicopters.

But the stadium had been closed the last afternoon, yesterday afternoon, to give Asiablock contractors time to set everything up for the Grand Finale, in particular the so-called "Firework Display".

I had to stop the firework display. I had no idea of the technical arrangements, I supposed they would be installed in or around the stadium and ignited by remote control. They would surely be all in place by now, so my only hope was to somehow sabotage the remote firing control. This must be in the Asiablock stand. Or would

they want the UN Chief Secretary to set them off? I carefully re-read the program. It said "Grand firework display contributed and organised by the Yellow Peoples Co-prosperity Sphere". That must surely mean they were going to actually light the touch-paper themselves.

It was 01:24am and Ning had fallen asleep, her long hair falling over her face. I picked up her surprisingly light weight, laid her on the bed and pulled the coverlet over her. I lay down on the couch, set the alarm on my watch for 07:00 and closed my eyes.

Chapter 30

A prickle on my wrist and I was awake. Quietly I washed and shaved and woke up Ning. Her black hair was spread out on the pillow and with her snub nose and long eyelashes she looked very defenceless and childlike. I put my hand up to her face to wake her. She murmured in French, put her hand on top of mine and opened her eyes. She stiffened and pulled the sheets up to her chin.

'Time to get up, Liebling,' I said, thinking of other occasions.

'I'm no your Liebling,' she snapped, now fully awake.

I turned my back on her and selected a dark suit, cream silk shirt and a striped tie. Today I wanted to look like a diplomat. Behind me I heard the bathroom door open and close. I carefully knotted my tie and looked at myself critically in the wardrobe mirror. No. I tapped on the door.

'I'm coming, I've only bloody well got in!' came the muffled answer.

'Do you have any make-up?' I asked. 'Liquid make-up,' I amended, remembering my married years.

The door popped open and through a cloud of perfumed steam I saw her grimacing in front of the mirror, wiping the mist off it.

'Of course I do,' she said through twisted lips. I waited a moment but she carried on applying lip-stick.

'Well, give me some,' I said. Without comment a slim arm stretched out towards me and I took the small bottle.

I returned to the wardrobe mirror and carefully dabbed some of the thick creamy liquid over my cheek. After six years the laser burn had almost disappeared and the make-up finished the job.

I looked at my watch, 7:32am, and turned round. Ning had transformed herself. I examined her critically. She had tucked in the torn bits of her sarong, but the bedroom slippers wouldn't do.

'You're a diplomat's interpreter,' I explained. In her turn she examined me, as though estimating where my suit placed me in the hierarchy. I suppose as an interpreter she met lots of diplomats and officials. She rocked her hand.

'Third secretary,' she murmured to herself. Thank you, Ning, I thought. 'I'll need other clothes,' she continued, 'but I'll no be able to buy anything until nine o'clock.' Too late.

'Check if there's anything in reception,' I suggested, nodding at the telephone. Hotel reception lobbies often had extravagantly expensive clothes on sale. She picked up the hotel phone.

I glanced outside. The sun was just rising on what looked like being a bright mild day. I took my wallet and phone out of the sports coat I had arrived in and pocketed them. I picked up the pistol from the side-table where I had left it last night. Eight rounds left. I weighed it in my hand. Did diplomat's carry pistols? I decided this one did and jammed it into my waistband.

'There's a boutique, but it's closed until half-past eight,' said Ning, putting down the phone. Good enough. I unlocked the door and we walked along the empty corridor and took the lift down to reception. There was no one at the desk, and we could hear the rattle of cutlery from the nearby breakfast room and smell bacon and eggs. I felt a stab of hunger, but we had no time. We crossed Reception and made for the glass door of the boutique.

'See anything?' I asked. Hand up to the glass to shield off reflections, Ning was looking around and making disparaging noises.

'Perhaps that Shantung,' she said at last.

'Could you go in a taxi with it?' I asked.

'No, I'll be needing that coat too.'

'Size?'

'A bit big. They're intended for western tourists.'

'And shoes, beads and things? Jewellery?'

'There's nothing on view.' Real diamonds would be locked up of course.

'Unless that costume jewellery - it might just do.'

'Is that it all?'

'Well, I'll have to try them on first of course. In daylight the colours might not ...' But I only heard her voice faintly as I was at the counter.

'I need a limousine with chauffeur,' I said to the receptionist who had appeared from the breakfast room, wiping his mouth. 'Quickly,' I added. I put my bank card on the desk. He scanned it, looked impressed and made a phone call.

The laying out of a few Euros, plus some charm from Ning, persuaded him to look for the key to the boutique and open it. He doubtfully let Ning take what she wanted, nervously noting down the price of everything. She changed in the boutique's office.

In a glass case there was also a collection of small flags on wire holders. As an afterthought I took a small Commonwealth flag.

In less than a quarter of an hour a large black Peugeot limousine squealed to a stop outside and the chauffeur, a slim young Pakistani entered, chewing a hamburger. He swallowed the remains, folded the wrapper and dropped it in the lobby trash-can. Ning explained what I wanted, spinning him some story about a flight that had been delayed. Unconcerned he nodded.

We went out to the car and Ning gave him the flag, which he resourcefully mounted on the hood with Band-Aids from a first-aid kit.

I saw Ning into the front of the Peugeot and climbed into the rear. And soon we were bowling down the main highway leading to Dil Kush, the Commonwealth flag fluttering proudly on the front of the gleaming black limousine. We met two small road-blocks immediately but by driving at undiminished speed and everyone staring straight ahead, the flag got us through.

It was a funny day, dark turbulent clouds with heavy slashing rain, even sleet for a few minutes, which all miraculously cleared away to be followed by blue skies and hot sun. A few minutes later the dark clouds closed in again and there was the rumble of distant thunder.

As we sped down the well-surfaced road there was the constant clatter of helicopters overhead and the route was lined with troops and police. On the crests of nearby hills I could see pairs of camouflage uniformed soldiers carrying rifles and binoculars. Anti-sniper patrols.

Buffeted by the turbulent wind, we drove through the next road-block with no difficulty either, probably because it was now pouring with rain again. The single soldier on duty was sheltering under a small improvised awning and merely saluted

and waved us on; the weather seemed to be as much a surprise to them as it was to us.

At the next road-block we were pulled to one side, the car steaming in bright warm sunlight. Ning wound down her window and spoke a few words to the young officer which made him shout to a sergeant standing outside the guard hut. About twenty armed soldiers pounded out and I thought for a moment we were going to be arrested and was about to signal the driver to go on regardless, but they all formed a line and presented arms! I nodded and waved my hand regally as we drove off. I leaned forward.

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

'I said you were Prince William, heir to the British throne.'

Je-sus! I looked at her in new respect. If you've got to tell a lie, make it a big one. Fortunately we were away before their officer started to wonder about the absence of an escort.

Now we were approaching the mountains and I shivered as I saw the familiar silhouette of Dil Kush rise over the horizon. Six years ago this road had been no more than a churned-up muddy track but had been our main supply line.

Ning who had more experience of these things, was directing the driver and I just sat in the back, smiling benevolently at the various saluting police officers and soldiers, but thinking furiously about how the hell I was going to get to the firework control panel. I glanced at my watch. 9:05am. In the distance the faint echoing sound of amplified music was borne on the breeze. Some sort of preliminary build up.

Our driver swung us silently up the wide drive-way to the stadium, lined with the flags of all nations, Westblock to the right and Asiablock to the left. The sun had disappeared behind high clouds and the wind had risen to a stiff warm breeze, fluttering the flags out straight and making their wire hoists tinkle musically against the steel poles. We drifted gently to a stop before an awning booming in the gusting wind and an equerry-type person in white gloves stepped forwards and saluted. Holding his hat on with one hand he opened the car doors.

Ning said something to the driver, the car doors slammed and it drove away. We followed our guide along a strip of lawn towards a double line of soldiers in the dress uniform of the Pakistani Army who came smartly to the "Present Arms". I shot my cuffs and stood to attention nodding at the young officer who was saluting us. Ning had left her coat in the limousine and dressed in the long white silk sheath of her "Shantung", looked very regal. The officer said some conventional words of welcome which Ning quietly translated into my ear. No reply seemed necessary so we slowly paced down the row of soldiers, Ning's hand lightly resting on my arm. All smart young men, not a medal in view, probably selected from the conscript Pakistani army and given three weeks special training. Poor bastards.

At the end of the row we were given a final salute by the officer and another white gloved equerry approached to conduct us farther.

I was looking round rather desperately. I didn't want to go to the British stand, first because I would be revealed as an impostor and second because it was a long way from the firework control point. I had to get loose somehow.

But fortunately our guide, after indicating a distinguished looking group of people standing around a buffet, drinking champagne, saluted and disappeared. One or two of the Ascot-type characters turned our way, but not recognising us, turned back to their group. I slowed down to let the equerry get out of sight and with my hand on Ning's arm guided her unobtrusively off to the right, away from the party.

That was better; no one knew where we were. But how was I going to get to the Asiablock stand? My formal suit had got me so far, but now it was only a

hindrance. And as for Ning in her white silk dress - I would have to ditch her and go on my own. We had passed a partition and were in a sort of no-man's-land, under the raised seats that encircled the enormous stadium, in an area given over to construction workers' caravans and mobile homes. Workers of all nationalities were milling around on the muddy grass.

The sun was shining at the moment. I would take off my coat and tie and give them to Ning to take back to the British Commonwealth stand. I should be able to find a pair of overalls somewhere; I would make my way to the Asiablock stand by walking under the seats. And from there I would have to play it by ear.

I was just eyeing a caravan which had an invitingly open door, when behind my back I heard a few words and I felt Ning's hand tighten on my arm. Turning to her I saw a look of shock on her face. But before she could say anything I heard a voice in my ear. A voice in English with an Asian accent and hissing with rage.

'Lieutenant Digby! I am so pleased to see you again! No, don't turn round, I have my laser on the half-breed prostitute. Walk straight ahead.' A figure in red Asiablock dress uniform appeared at my right side and reaching across deftly removed the pistol from my waistband.

Chapter 31

I looked round wildly, things had happened too quickly for me to follow. Who was he? How did he know my name? How did he know now was the exact moment we were unprotected?

By the side of the caravan was parked the Asiablock equivalent of a jeep and four flat-faced Neanderthal-looking Mongol soldiers were sitting in it. They vaulted quickly out of the jeep, seized our arms and thrust us onto the back seat, sitting between them. The driver pulled up the jeep's weather hood to conceal us and screwed it in place. Our captor, who I could now see was a Korean 2nd Lieutenant, sat in front with the driver. He turned back in his seat to me, a laser in his hand pointing at me and seething with fury.

'I did not know you were still alive,' he hissed. 'But now I know and next time I will not miss.' He reached out and drew his thumb nail painfully down the scar on my cheek. I looked at his contorted face blankly.

'Who are you?' I asked in amazement, recoiling before his hate. I tried to move my arms, but they were immovable between the hands of the enormous soldiers on my right and left.

He turned away brusquely, snapped something to the driver and we took off along the service road under the stands, heading for the east side of the stadium. I looked at his profile. Who was he and how did he know me? We could only have met during the Affair. And the only time I had ever come close up to the YP was during the five paradrops I had made, to collect information or sabotage specific targets. If I could only remember where I had seen ... yes, that was it!

Towards the end of the Affair, as a young 2nd Lieutenant, I had been dropped about ten kilometers behind the enemy lines - second in command of a six-man team for a rather unusual operation. Six men and one woman, I remembered. She had been a Pakistani auxiliary. Our target had been a blockhouse containing a tactical battle-computer and there had been a guard post commanded by a bored Korean infantry Captain. The girl had driven up to the post in a staff-car we had stolen, obviously drunk and carrying a bottle of Scots whisky. The Captain had been summoned and thinking she was the friend of another officer, had invited her into the post to wait and had inevitably sampled the whisky. In the meantime one of our men

had broken into a store-room containing tapes destined for the computer and had slightly doctored them.

It had been my job to rescue the girl from the possibly foul embraces of the Captain, which I did, but he had proved to have a stronger head for whisky than we had thought possible. It had taken us both our maximum effort to subdue him. He had managed to get his hand on his service laser and had burnt me in a near miss. We had left after damaging (but not too seriously) a radio direction-finding installation in the same defence perimeter. Our recovery team had picked us up as arranged, and for me that was the end of the operation.

The YP had rapidly repaired their DF receiver, just in time to pick up the output of a "secret" transmitter we had installed to guide a number of our remote controlled tanks in support of an infantry assault. The YP had located and destroyed this transmitter, thereby immobilising the armour. Our unsupported infantry had had to retire and our attack had been ignominiously beaten off. Jubilation at YPHQ.

But a few days later the doctored tapes found their way into the battle computer. We knew when, because the YP armed forces on our front had started to behave irrationally. We immediately attacked and had been able to easily prise them out of the key position they had been holding. It had not been the end of the Affair, but it was now recognised as having been the beginning of the end.

And the Korean 2nd Lieutenant sitting in front of me had six years ago been that careless Captain. As soon as the sneaky Westblock trick was discovered there would have been a court-martial and he would have been lucky to have been merely demoted.

A video camera somewhere must have photographed everything and no doubt a vengeful search through records had identified me. It was a chance in a million we had met!

In the meantime we had been driving along under the stands. A five minute drive, dodging between busses, catering services and maintenance trucks, all the time jammed between the two soldiers.

The Korean had been looking to right and left and leaning towards the driver directed him until we were in a small hidden square of piled crates. The jeep stopped and he turned round in his seat and laser in hand, looking at us calculatingly.

What was he going to do? The war was over; he couldn't officially arrest us for anything, but that didn't cut any ice with him. By a fantastic stroke of luck he had recognised the one person who had made him lose face and ruined his career. He was probably now known as "that stupid Korean who had been outwitted by Westblock". He had recognised me and impulsively kidnapped me. I saw his left eye twitch uncontrollably and sensed the warmth of his laser on low power on my chest. I struggled against the iron-hard clamps on my arms and felt the sweat running down my back. I was close to death.

Secret murder - right now? His four brutal-looking soldiers didn't look as though they would protest on moral grounds. Ning would have to be killed too, of course, but a woman didn't count. On the other hand killing me, although it would give him deep personal satisfaction, wouldn't do anything for his career. He would still be "that stupid Korean". Unwillingly his finger relaxed on the trigger.

I could see his mind working. How could he use the opportunity chance had given him? Asiablock Military Intelligence would be very interested to have a chat with an ex-Westblock officer, especially one who had been on undercover operations. A lot of Westblock tactics, methods and weapons were still on the secret list.

And there had been no witnesses to my kidnapping!

I guessed he would turn me over to his superiors who would be overjoyed. And he could well be reinstated. Having reached his tough decision, head over heart, he took a deep breath, thrust the delightful temptation behind him and holstered his laser. He turned away regretfully and signalled the driver to move on.

We were safe for the moment. But when Asiablock MI started to probe me they would immediately find they had struck a gold mine with my knowledge of Chrondisp. My priorities had changed. Forget the fireworks - I must escape!

We drove on for five hundred meters in semi-darkness, music from the performance above echoing eerily in the empty space under the stands. To a sudden ballooning roar of applause we stopped at a door in a big steel partition that went up to the sloping roof about twenty meters above us. The driver descended and spoke through a grill. The door clicked open by remote control and we drove into the space between the partition and a further steel chain-link fence, that also went from floor to roof. I looked through the fence and saw an amazing amount of activity on the other side!

Beneath bright lights about a hundred Asiablock fatigues-clad soldiers were swarming over various impressive pieces of machinery under the urgent orders of a few white civilians in overalls. Parked to the right were about fifty large fuel bowsers of the type seen on airfields and their thick rubber hoses snaked pulsatingly across the ground, connecting them to an enormous contraption looking like an oversize fire-engine pump. This was butted up next to a thirty centimeter diameter steel pipe, mounted on struts, which disappeared upwards through a hole cut in the sloping roof of the stadium. The fuel bowsers had their engines running, thumping out black smoke and everywhere there was the strong hot smell of aviation fuel. This had to be the "firework" installation! In spite of fear for my future I looked around intently. In the army sabotage school I had been taught everything has one critical, sensitive, irreplaceable point and if you could destroy that, you could immobilise the whole shebang. But where was the sensitive point here? How did the firework system work? Could I sabotage it and escape in the confusion?

A door through the fence remained closed, guarded by three white-capped military police watching us hostilely.

We waited and after a while another door opened in the fence, farther to the left, towards where the roof sloped down. That door must be the entrance to the front row of seats of the Asiablock stand.

Two figures were walking up towards us. As they approached I recognised with a chill the squat bespectacled figure of Shan Tien! Supposedly high up in the dreaded Committee for Ethical Re-education and also thought to be patron of the Tsonah Project. I could understand why he was on the front row of the Asiablock stand; the ignition of the firework would be the culmination of Tsonah. But why was he coming to see me? I was much too small a fish for him. The other was a tall slow-pacing high-cheeked cold-eyed officer in the black and silver uniform of a police Commissioner. The Korean and the jeep driver leapt down and stood at attention, saluting. The two arrivals ignored them and climbed into the front seats of the jeep, turning round to wordlessly look at us. The three soldiers' hands tightened tensely on our arms.

I raised my eyes nervously to Shan Tien's face and felt a superstitious tremor of fear. A short ugly man with a hairy mole on his right cheek. Flat saurian eyes set in a suet-like podgy face. He was of the CERE, given absolute power to punish with pain. Rumour was that some of the punishments he devised sickened even his hardened assistants.

Shan Tien said something over his shoulder to the Korean.

`Are you sure it is the special-services officer seen entering the Ramada?' Ning translated softly into my ear.

Without taking his eyes from mine, Shan Tien made a slight movement and the Commissioner lashed out with the flat of his hand at Ning's face. I saw her body jerk and heard her cry of pain. I had a red haze in front of me as I stared into Shan Tien's brown empty eyes.

`My great-grandfather had coolies whipped for looking at a white woman,' I said. He gasped. His face went first red and then all the blood left leaving it a dirty yellow. Sweat sprang out over his brow and his arms came up to claw at my face. But slowly, with visible effort, he lowered them as he mastered himself. Then he made one of the cruellest and most obscene gestures I have ever seen.

He reached out and gently put a fingertip to Ning's face. He brought his finger back to his mouth and licked the salty tears appreciatively with a thick red tongue.

`Tomorrow night, after our victory, when you see what we are doing to the half-breed, you will beg us to ask you questions,' he said, softly, licking his finger again in anticipation.

I shivered with disgust and horror, straining madly, but couldn't move a millimetre. I was in the presence of a devil. I forced myself to look into his dull eyes, thrusting back at the pressure of degenerate evil insidiously trying to seep into my soul. I tried to think of him rationally, clinically. In the too merciful West, he would be safely sedated in a hospital. In Asiablock the ruthless rulers gave him power and cynically used him and his like as tools to terrify and keep their population submissive. This was why Westblock had to constantly fight Asiablock.

With a last long look at me he slowly eased his bulk out of the jeep and after a sharp word to the Korean, rejoined the Commissioner and waddled by his side back down to the front seat entrance. I was trembling and sweating from revulsion - the revulsion of the sane for the perverse.

In dead silence the driver and the Korean took their places in the front seats. The Korean turned and looked back at me with a wide-eyed almost frightened look.

`My report was to Military Intelligence,' he said defensively. `I didn't know the CERE was here. What did you say to him?' But I didn't answer. I was trembling with reaction and my mind was filled with white-hot images of cleansing fire. We must escape!

The Korean looked at me a little longer and then seeing I was not going to answer, turned and pointed out the gate to his driver. The jeep started up and edged forwards. The gate opened but before we could drive in a chunky smartly dressed Japanese MP sergeant stepped forwards and with upraised white-gloved hand halted our jeep. He snapped at the Lieutenant and I could sense the contempt in his voice.

I knew from indoctrination lectures of the strains in the Yellow Peoples' Confederation. The Asiablock military police were almost universally recruited from Japanese nationals, who through all history had been the frequent and cruel conquerors of the more gentle Koreans.

For answer the Lieutenant pointed arrogantly over his shoulder at us and made as though to drive on. But the MP made a gesture of negation and pointed to a red sign with a Chinese character on it. After an argument the Korean had to unbutton his holster and hand over his laser. I noticed the MPs had empty holsters too.

Of course, fire risk, no guns or lasers allowed.

The Sergeant MP paced purposefully round to the back of the jeep and I guessed what he was going to do. This was our only chance!

'I'm gonna scarper,' I said to Ning without moving my lips. 'Try to hold the guy on your right when I say so.'

The MP stopped and peremptorily held his hand out to the Neanderthal on my right. I felt his left shoulder go down as he groped for his laser. I braced my feet.

'Now!' I shouted, and Ning leant towards the soldier on my left, screaming open mouthed at him and trying to bite his ear. For an instant he relaxed his grip on my left arm. I tore it free and pushing sideways at him with all my force, slid the guard on my right along the shiny bare metal seat. He tried to grab the back of the seat in front but his right hand was tied up withdrawing his laser. He keeled over the cut-away side of the jeep and fell sprawling onto the ground. I leapt out of the jeep, dodged under the surprised MP's chopping hand and scooped up the laser. A click as the safety came off.

The Sergeant MP shouted and the soldiers became an instantly frozen tableau. The Asiatics knew precisely what I was going to do! No explanation needed. In my position they would do exactly the same. A simple pressure of the trigger and everything here would go up in a monstrous fireball! That would stop the firework, burn alive the top brass of Asiablock who were sitting above us on wooden seats and also remove the danger of me revealing anything under interrogation. A neat solution they could only admire. From their paralysed faces I could see they realised they had made a ghastly mistake!

The only problem was I would have to make good on my threat pretty quickly or they would start to think. And they soon would remember that cowardly Westerners don't have the fanatical dedication of Asians.

Ning pushed aside the unresisting arm of the guard who had been holding her and climbed weakly down. She stood by me, shivering with reaction, one hand up to her face. Everyone was looking at the laser, like animals in a cage looking at the trainer's whip.

'You won't do it. You will die too,' said the Korean softly, reason gradually returning. The Japanese sergeant, surprised to find himself still alive, was waking up too and making stealthy movements towards me.

Chapter 32

But Ning reached forwards and grasping the laser put her finger over mine. She hissed at them and they instantly froze again. Holy mother of Chan! Another Asian, an unpredictable woman too, and with infinitely more to lose if she stayed alive!

'Give it me,' she snapped and I had to unresistingly let her take it or have her press the trigger. Jesus! My shocked face did more than anything else to convince them the situation had slid out of my control. Ning was half Asian too and I was caught up in the strange maniacal Asiatic world of death-wish, honour, hara kiri. The Korean had his eyes closed and his lips were moving as he prepared to meet his ancestors.

Ning swung the laser to point at the fuel bowsers and I must have gone white.

'Get a muive on! Are ye going to stand there all day?' she said quietly. The Scots accent brought me down to earth.

I released my breath and glanced quickly to the right. Somewhere over there was a square of sunlight on the ground. That must be a way out!

'That way then,' I murmured. Holding the laser in front of her, she ran in front of me towards one of the bowsers, as though looking for a more certain point to aim her self-immolating laser bolt.

Following closely I guided her in and out between several wooden crates; we paused a moment panting. We had not been followed. I looked down at her hand.

`Give me the ...' I began. Shit! She didn't have it!

`I threw it away,' she said. `I was about to use it.' I looked into her calm brown eyes, just realising there had been an internal Scots-Chinese personality clash.

`Yes,' she said, `I'm half Asian.' I took a deep breath and pulled myself together; my shirt was wet with sweat. A white technician was looking at us curiously.

`Straighten your clothes,' I said finally, doing the same for myself. She took my arm and we walked purposefully out from between the crates, towards the square of sunlight which I now saw was at the bottom of a broad flight of steps leading upwards. One or two soldiers looked up at us but because of my suit they must have thought I was a supervisor of the white technicians with his wife, and turned back to their work.

The steps were surprisingly unguarded so we ascended them with quick business-like steps. The sky widened and we found ourselves in the open air. We were standing alone in a narrow gently curved carpeted gallery running round the back of the Asiablock stand. And we were alone on this gallery! In front of us were the backs of the last row of seats; behind us a small railing and a sheer drop of about twenty five meters to the ground. Looking nervously over my shoulder I moved Ning quickly along the gallery to the left, until we were brought up by a high unscalable barrier, separating this stand from the next. This seemed to be as far as we could get away from the entrance steps.

Ning gasped at my side and for the first time I glanced down. And by God, there was a lot to see!

We were looking down at a vast panorama. Immediately before us were the backs of the heads of about five hundred Asiablock delegates sitting in rows of inclined seats, all looking forwards and down at the arena. They were mostly civilians and mostly dressed in formal blue suits. Another rainstorm must have just passed as a big awning was being rolled back. Way down, just in front of the delegates, a low parapet separated the Asiablock stand from the arena. And the vast arena itself, filled farther than the eye could see with dancers of all nationalities and cultures and all waving palm-leaves in unison to the "Peace Song" which was being bellowed forth from loudspeakers.

I barely glanced at all this as I was much more concerned in looking for guards. But to my amazement we were still standing alone in this gallery! Why were there no guards?

I saw the reason. Over the sound of the "Peace Song" I could faintly hear raucous shouts and as my eyes darted down again I saw there was a disturbance off to the right, at the bottom of the stand. A wire grill fence separated the Asiablock enclosure from the next stand and people were struggling around it, like at a football match when the supporters wanted to get on the pitch. It was a big fight - about fifty people were trying to get in, mostly white but I could also see brown and black. They were heaving at the fence, had pushed a section of it down and were struggling to climb over it and get into the Asiablock enclosure. They had some crudely printed banners waving over their heads. A smaller number of Asiablock soldiers and police were fighting to keep them out. The guards I was looking for were down there! Arms with riot sticks or pick-axe staves were rising and falling and there was the occasional gleam of a knife! Fighters on each side were falling or turning away with blood-covered faces. This was a serious attack and it had to be by Westblock! Asiablock reinforcements in riot gear were running up the steps to my right, the way I had

come, and ignoring us dashed down between the seats and the fence to help staunch the break-in. Asiablock delegates sitting nearby were standing up in alarm and climbing over the seats to get away.

Asiablock had now cleverly reinforced the sides of the gap, preventing it from being widened, and the burly riot-police in rubber capes, helmets and riot shields were blocking the attackers. Two of them also had electric prods. Fighting desperately the attackers were slowly pushed back. Another group of soldiers hurried up the steps carrying a heavy cylinder and when they reached the gap I saw them unwind razor wire from it, fastening it to the fence on each side. I had to reluctantly admit the attack had been very competently contained. But of course Asiablock riot police got lots of practice.

As all Asiablock attention was on the attempted break-in, I pulled my eyes away from them and looked down, over the heads of the seated delegates.

Crouched down here and hidden round the curve of the gallery, we seemed to be safe for the moment, although I still couldn't see a way out.

I told Ning to keep an eye on the top of the steps and looked down at the firework machine, trying to guess how it worked. A large gleaming stainless steel pipe, about thirty centimeters in diameter appeared from beneath the stand, descended into the arena, curved off to the right and after presumably encircling the entire stadium, no more than five meters from the parapet, came back to us here. Jesus, a loop more than three kilometers long! I could see its sealed end, barely twenty-five meters from the beginning. There were small objects, (jets?) mounted on the upper surface of the pipe every couple of meters or so.

I saw the idea. Fuel was going to be pumped into the pipe from under the stand. It was going to squirt out of the jets and be somehow lit. I supposed the enormous volume of rising hot air would create the turbulence necessary to flip the jet stream to its new position.

Far below us, visible over the heads of the massed Asiablock delegates, a number of white-haired figures were sitting in the front row. I immediately recognised the aged Chairman Wang Tae with his long beard, so often lampooned in the Western media. I shivered and my eyes went slightly out of focus for a moment as I recognised Shan Tien sitting on his right. On Tae's left was Dr Lin Chung, dressed for once in a black suit. In the strict hierarchic structure of Asiablock this was an incredibly high honour for one so young. Shan Tien was talking to Chairman Wang Tae but Lin was looking ahead and even from here I could see he was nervous, his hands uncontrollably fluttering on his knees. It was his great moment.

To the right, just in front of the parapet, were two camera teams. One of them was panning over the spectators, in particular the front row, and other was pointed out over the arena. This was going to be one of the great events of Asiablock history, to be triumphantly shown and shown again to the world and to future generations of young Asiablock students.

Down in the arena the build-up to the Grand Finale of the magnificent Reconciliation Conference was reaching its climax. The Peace Song had come to its jubilant conclusion and in the following silence a large clattering cloud of doves was released from the centre of the orderly rows of dancers. They flew upwards, circling for height in the odd turbulent air. And it really was turbulent - some of the doves were sucked up into the sky and were soon black dots before they disappeared completely. Others were spun around and dashed to the ground, landing in clouds of feathers which were instantly whirled away. The audience before us clapped their hands and like the distant sea a deep roar of applause echoed around the arena

On some hidden signal the massed dancers dissolved into confusion and reformed in the shape of an enormous circular clock with the two fingers standing at 9:45. As I watched, the line of dancers forming the minute hand all took little steps forwards and the hand moved slightly - 9:46. It was really very well done.

Only fourteen minutes before the firework was to be ignited! The Westblock attack below had been beaten off. My heart sank when I realised there was nothing we could do here to stop the firework being lit. We would just have to stand by helplessly and watch the Asiablock victory. But I must watch carefully, as our best opportunity to escape would probably be when the firework was burning.

The clock now read 9:55 and I felt activity under my feet, heard the roar of the pump and smelled the pungent aviation fuel. The stand vibrated slightly and there was a faint hissing sound from the pipe as the contents of the aviation fuel bowsers was pumped into it. After a few minutes the note of the pump ran down the scale and stopped and I now knew the pipe running around the arena was brimmingly filled with a million liters of inflammable fuel. Any more and it would start to squirt out of the jet holes.

I looked down at the enormous construction again. Was there really no way to sabotage it? As I understood it, the thing had to be ignited at a special time, too soon or too late and the air turbulence it produced wouldn't have any effect. 10:04am was the best time, Dr Dalt had said. It couldn't be lit until the pumps came on again so there was no way to set it off too early. The best way to stop it working was surely to sabotage the pump. So what was the Westblock attack up here supposed to achieve? Fighting up here ... Of course! The fight up here was a diversion, the real attack must be going on now, under the stands! This was confirmed when I saw the officer in charge of the riot police stiffen, put his radio up to his mouth and after a few words order most of his men down the steps to my right, leaving just enough to contain the attackers. I helplessly looked at them clumping down in riot kit, but there was nothing I could do.

After the release of the doves there was a silence over the arena and we could hear the well-known heavily accented voice of Nam Bok, the UN Secretary General, making the closing speech and announcing the long-awaited final contribution of Asiablock; the Firework Display.

At this point Shan Tien and Dr Lin Chung stood up and the cameras zeroed in on them. Lin had a short aluminium cylinder in his hand, like the Olympic torch. He bowed towards Chairman Wang Tae, symbolically offering it to him but with a benevolent smile Wang merely reached out and after laying a hand on it, waved Lin forwards graciously. There was complete silence, not only around me in the Asiablock stand, but all over the enormous stadium, as everyone craned forwards expectantly to see the amazing firework display promised by Asiablock.

Beneath us I heard the note of the pump rising again as it turned faster and faster. Gloomily I realised our attack below had obviously failed. This was verified by the relaxed pose of the police officer who had snapped his radio shut and was just calmly looking down, waiting for the firework to be lit. Lin, standing in front of the massed Asiablock stand, tugged at a small lanyard hanging down from the cylinder and a white flame spurted from the end. Now I understood how the display worked; the pressure in the pipe was going to increase until fuel spurted out of the jets. He was going to light the first jet, which would light the second jet, which would light the third jet ... and the flame would run around the enormous arena like a gas-ring is lit on a domestic stove.

Lin had a rapt look on his uplifted face. It was the pinnacle of his life. He was the one who had thought of the Tsonah project. He had sold it to Shan Tien by

making a demonstration back in time. He had designed and built the towers and now he was going to ignite the enormous gas burner, the culmination of the Tsonah project. "Natural forces" were going to give Asiablock mastery over the Planet's weather, to at last put the chaotic, money-grubbing materialistic West in the subordinate role history had reserved for them.

And he would revenge his father's death in the Pakistan Affair.

The throb of the pump rose to a roar and I could see a slight haze over the jets as fuel vapour spurted out of them.

The fence on the right began to sway and bulge as the attackers on the other side, seeing the burner was about to be lit made a last frenzied attempt to break in. But it was useless.

What could I do? What could anyone do? The attack below had failed and the only option now was to delay ignition in some way, until the special time had passed. Could I stop it somehow? We were on our own at the back of the stand; every one was looking at Han holding the flare.

Ning grabbed my arm and at the same time, just by the side of my head, I heard the "crack" of a laser bolt! I ducked and looking behind me saw the Korean Lieutenant at the top of the steps. He had a laser in his hand and was pointing it at me! He had found me again! As there had been no explosion he knew I had after all behaved like a Westerner and merely run away from my duty. Desperately he had set his men to searching for me under the stands. But they had returned empty handed and so he had been forced to the unbelievable conclusion that I had dared to climb up onto the Asiablock stand itself!

I grabbed Ning's arm and leapt to the side hoping the presence of so many distinguished delegates would inhibit him and protect us. But he had deliberately missed me - he had just wanted to show me he was armed and was prepared to kill me. He really wanted to re-capture me alive.

The Korean was advancing tigerishly towards me, brown slant eyes glittering. He could hardly believe it. He had recognized and arrested me and showed me off proudly to his superior. But in the middle of the Asiablock camp I had made a fool of him and almost contemptuously escaped from him again! He must be doubting his own sanity by now. When his superiors discovered this he wouldn't be demoted again; he would be executed. Because of Shan Tien's involvement, he would be lucky if he wasn't handed over to the CERE.

This was absolutely his last chance: surely he could recapture me now? He could see I wasn't armed; he may even have discovered the discarded laser.

I looked around wildly. In front of us were the rows of filled seats; behind me, over the low rail was the steep drop down to the ground and to my left the partition. There was only one way out. At least he wouldn't be able to use his laser.

'There's only one way out!' I said to Ning. 'You've got to run down there on the back of the seats, climb over the parapet and get lost amongst the dancers. Can you do it?'

For answer she tucked up the hem of her Shantung and looked at me, holding out her arms. I picked up her light weight and set her feet on the back of the first seat.

'Go!' I said urgently, slapping her bottom like a show jumper, then vaulted up myself. With one foot on the back of one seat and the other on the back of the seat in front, it was quite stable. But the occupant of the seat I was straddling had seen Ning's long bare legs pass and made a grab at my foot. I leant down and made a quick stab at his eyes. He recoiled, released his hold and I took a step to put my right foot on the back of the next seat, followed by my left on the next. I ran forwards, pacing from the back of one seat to the other, catching up and running parallel with

Ning so the occupants of the seats had no warning of our coming. Under my feet I felt the hard narrow edges of the backs of the seats, just the right distance apart. Sloping downwards they were very easy to run on, providing I looked down to see where my feet were going. Left, right, left, right! High above all the well-dressed delegates we could not stop; the only stability was in running.

But there was a momentary silence from the arena and behind us the delegates were shouting a warning to those in front! Yellow faces were looking up in surprise but we were past before they could do anything. Except one old man who reached up and seized Ning's Shantung. Off balance, she swung around on one foot and would have fallen between the seats if I hadn't grabbed her hand and pulled her forwards. There was a quick ripping sound and the white dress slipped off her, revealing her to be wearing nothing underneath but a pair of white briefs! I just caught a glimpse of the startled face of the man holding her white dress, and we were past. Left, right, left right.

Still holding Ning's hand we were now almost at the front of the stand. We had traversed the fifty rows so quickly that although there had been massed shouting behind us, only that one man had had time to react. Most of the delegates, seeing a man and an almost nude woman running across the tops of the seats must have thought they were hallucinating.

But we were not on our own running down on the back of the seats! The Korean had seen his future running away from him too and realised that if he could recapture me in front of the highest rank of Asiablock notables, on full camera, he might just be saved.

I heard his feet thumping on the seat backs behind me. He was coming the same way! But now I was at the front row.

I let go of Ning's hand, jumped over the startled yellow face of an aged general sitting there, and landing on the carpet, rolled over and turned round to see Ning just alight on the back of a seat in the next but last row. A man was standing up, arms extended to intercept her!

'Jump!' I shouted. Arms outstretched, hair flying, Ning leapt at me from the rear of the last seat and I staggered back, my arms instantly filled with the soft sinuous body of an almost naked woman! I sank to my knees but recovering, turned and more or less threw her over the parapet and down the two meter drop into the arena!

I too jumped for the parapet and straddling it heard a scream of rage behind me as the Korean saw me escaping yet again. I cringed as I knew what was going to happen. There was a crack near to my ear. Missed! Running down the back of the seats was not the steadiest platform for shooting, even though I was only twenty meters or so in front of him.

Behind me, over the other side of the parapet, I heard a soft thump from the firework pipe. His laser had ignited the fuel gently trickling out of the very last jet and a small flickering yellowish flame stuck up from it! The heat couldn't be too bad yet, and thinking I still had a chance, I was just about to drop down from the parapet into the arena, when the high pressure wave from the other end of the pipe began to arrive! The small flame bloomed up and ignited the next jet which lit with a soft "plop" and passed the flame on. And at that moment the full pressure pulse arrived!

The jets started to roar and stretched upwards stiffly in shimmering incandescent plumes more than three meters high. The heat flash hit my face and hands and instinctively I recoiled, ducking down behind the parapet for shelter. I couldn't climb over it now; in the radiated heat I would be broiled alive! But on this side of the parapet I would be burnt too! The Korean Lieutenant had come to a stop

about three rows back with his right foot on the back of one seat and his left on the back of the seat behind. He had a steady platform; his laser came up to the aim and he wasn't going to miss this time!

But at that moment occurred one of the strangest events I had ever seen. Dr Lin Chung, who was no more than three meters away, put his head back and gave a desolate wolf-like howl, a howl of despair and horror, heard even over the whistling roar of the near-by flames. He had dropped the unused flare, which lay smouldering on the red carpet in front of him and pulled a small revolver out of his pocket. I heard the hammer click back and peered up at him in despair.

But he wasn't looking at me. In the classical one-handed stance of the pistol shooter he took aim at the Korean and fired twice, the revolver kicking up in his hands each time and the bangs echoing around the stand. The Korean dropped his laser and his dead body fell limply across the lap of two elderly Indonesians. Open mouthed I looked at Lin. What was going on? Helpless and stunned I watched him, waiting for the pistol muzzle to swing down to me. But he just turned stiffly and looking upwards, put the muzzle into his open mouth and pressed the trigger. A muffled bang and the back of his head exploded, spraying out a cloud of blood and brains over the front row of delegates. He slumped lifeless to the ground!

Chapter 33

The row of blood-spattered faces in front of me looked down in horror and one or two tried to stand up. But the first to react was Shan Tien who took a step towards Lin's body, or to me, his face grimacing. There was only one thing I could do. I turned and vaulted over the parapet. I had expected to be badly burnt but although there was a intense flash of heat there was also a curtain-like uprush of cold air. I rolled under the pipe to find crouching there the small white rounded figure of Ning! The pipe above was protecting her from the down radiated heat. I pulled her upright and sobbing she weakly put her arms around me.

'Snap out of it!' I said as she hung limply from my shoulders; I shook her but she was trembling and could hardly stand on her legs. We must get away!

'There'll be plenty of time for all that later!' I shouted, over the roar of the jets. Her tear-stained face looked up at me blankly so I pushed her away and looked down suggestively at her small pointed breasts. She gasped and stiffened; pulling at my jacket. I shrugged it off quickly, handed it to her and she slipped it on. She had stopped sobbing.

'Run as quick as you can!' I shouted into her ear, seizing her hand and tugging her out from underneath the pipe, towards the middle of the arena. There was a wild moment when we left the shelter of the pipe - a blast of heat and the sucking uprush of cold air blowing our hair back, but we were away, running over the soft grass, heads down. The heat on our backs rapidly diminished and we panted to a stop. I looked back over my shoulder at the tall quivering jets, like an endless row of three meter high pale-blue cypress trees marching over the horizon to the right.

The dancers' formation had completely broken up. Many had run forwards looking at the flames, holding their hands up to the heat, laughing and clapping at the firework jets. That was our way; we must get amongst them and escape. We thrust our way in; they were of all nationalities, no more than twelve or thirteen years old, boys and girls and obviously having the time of their lives. It was hard work getting through; they had abandoned all pretence of dancing and were just laughing and hugging each other.

But danger again! Oh God! I was congratulating myself on our escape when there was a despairing whimper from Ning and her other hand grasped my arm. Behind us, still only fifty meters away, there was movement on the Asiablock stand. Shan Tien, the Commissioner who had been with him, the Japanese MP and two big soldiers were climbing down into the arena from a door set in the parapet! They had seen us - we were taller and stood out amongst the children! The children were no protection. Worse, they were a hindrance - they formed a thick crush in front of us and our pursuers would be on us before we could force our way through them to safety!

Our pursuers ducked under the unlit beginning of the burner pipe and Shan Tien made a chopping gesture towards us with his hand. And then hands on hips he just stood there while the others, led by the jogging figure of the MP made directly for us. Shan Tien's face was expressionless but I could feel his cold malignancy reaching out as he impatiently waited for us to be picked up and brought back to him.

I thrust Ning away behind me; she was small and would have a better chance without me, and crouching turned to face our pursuers. Perhaps I could delay them long enough for her to escape.

The MP was no more than twenty meters away, knees pumping, arms swinging, closely followed by two enormous soldiers and the Commissioner, when I heard a distant popping sound. It grew louder and louder until with a rush it intensified into a roar and I felt the blast of a wave of heat. The laser ignited flame had run right around the stadium on top of the burner pipe and had reached the beginning! The entire firework was now burning! The pipe above Shan Tien had also sprouted its quivering row of blue-cored burning jets.

But that wasn't all! With a soft "whoomph" the whole area in front of us was converted instantly into a glaring smoky yellow lake of fire! Hands to my face I staggered back from the heat flash. Unburned fuel must have spurted out of the unlit jets while we were watching and had soaked into the turf. The flame running along the top of the pipe had ignited it. And our pursuers were in the middle of the burning lake! Running in the puddles had soaked their boots and trousers in fuel and now they were burning too! Mouths wide open they were running in frantic circles and beating at their clothes but there was no escape. The flames from their burning bodies were pulled aside by the tremendous updraft, making them look like candles fluttering in a high wind. I could hear their thin screams over the blare of the burning fuel and the whistling roar of the jets. One by one they fell down, jerking and writhing, to finally lie motionless, yellow flames streaming away from them as their body fat was consumed in the howling firestorm.

The nearby children were shrieking and running away, flowing to each side of me until we were standing alone, the gale sucking at my clothes. Through the flames and smoke I looked for Shan Tien. Where was he? With a superstitious chill I saw him! Arms behind his back he was completely untouched; some fluke of the firestorm had spared him! Shan Tien the connoisseur of women's tears. He was on some freakish patch of fuel-free turf and with horror I saw he was going to survive! But then he put his hands up to his face; he was surrounded by a yellow wall of flames - he must be feeling their heat. He turned and his arms moved agitatedly. Was he calling on Satan to save him? If he was, his master was bringing him home the hard way. Shan Tien's mouth was open and his clothes began to char and blacken in the radiated heat. Gradually they were burnt off him and for a moment I could see the fat obscene whiteness of his body. He turned around screaming but was surrounded by flames. Whichever way he tried to run was yet hotter than where he stood. A quicker

death would be to run into the flames. But he stayed on his small smoking patch and his skin turned through pink to black, peeling off as he was slowly broiled!

I watched hypnotised as he fell on his knees, hands hammering on the ground and hair burning; he collapsed forwards and lay there writhing.

Three minutes later the roar of the flames diminished, they shrank, grew yellower and wider - the fuel supply was exhausted. The jets popped out irregularly one by one and there was a sudden silence; the firework show was at an end.

In front of the Asiablock stand was a large area of still smoking burnt grass, the smoke rising vertically now the ferocious updraft had ceased. And on the charred ground were four blackened patches and one reddened mound of flesh, still moving slightly and making mewing sounds. Third degree burns over the whole of his body - Shan Tien wouldn't live much longer. Significantly no one ran down from the Asiablock stand to help him.

On the stand all was confusion. The wooden parapet had caught fire and through the black smoke came shrill cries and I could see crowds of people in fancy uniforms stampeding around. I felt a hand on my arm. It was Ning.

'Ye burnt them for me,' she standing by my side and tightly holding my hand. I pulled my gaze away from the remains of the holocaust and looked down to see a look of intense satisfaction on her baby-like face.

I looked around but no one was paying us any attention. I tugged at her and we turned to go back through the dancers. The nearby ones were swirling about in noisy confusion, their faces white and some were crying, but those farther in had seen nothing and were still singing and celebrating.

The weather had changed once again and now it was raining, the steady penetrating rain of Dil Kush I remembered so well. With my arm around Ning's slim shoulders, we trudged through the wet but still excited dancers, ignoring their outstretched hands and making for what I judged to be the Westblock stands. The flames had gone out and there was now only a warm gusting mechanical smelling wind, like at an airport. And this soon blew away, to be replaced by icy blasts, normal for Dil Kush in May.

I looked upwards at the sky hanging down like a dirty grey sodden towel, the nearby mountain peaks hidden in the mist. There was nothing to be seen, but I knew with sickening certainty that fifteen kilometers up, in the bright sunlight of near-space, the thin high-speed jet stream had snapped over into another slot and sun warmed air from the tropics had found a new path to the frozen ice-fields of the north. A path that was going to change the Planet's weather to favour Asiablock.

Pulling Ning through the dancers, I played back the events of the last hour - was that all? - it seemed like the last week - but I couldn't think of anything I could have done to have stopped it. We were lucky to have escaped with our lives, indeed our souls. I shuddered, thinking of Shan Tien. He was dead but there were others like him in the CERE.

The film continued to unwind in my head until I came to the next but last scene. I jerked to a stop, unconscious of the driving rain. What the fuck had all that been about?! Why had Lin Chung shot the Korean Lieutenant? And why had he shot himself? I ran my free hand through my wet hair and turned back to look at the still smoking Asiablock stand as though there would be an answer there. I hadn't the faintest idea of what had motivated him. Ning was tugging at me and saying something so I thrust everything to one side and we joined the crowds of dancers jogging through the squelching mud and icy rain towards the sides of the arena.

By accident we arrived opposite the British Commonwealth stand and were helped through a door in the parapet by an open-mouthed steward holding a large

umbrella. As Ning climbed up the steps in front of me I noticed, with a shiver of goose pimples, that my jacket was not nearly long enough and left some deliciously swelling curves visible around her tiny wet briefs.

I absently agreed with his automatic remarks that the fireworks had been jolly good, and yes, it was a pity the weather had taken a turn for the worse.

'Pissing down,' I agreed. 'Can we get a cuppa somewhere? And something to cover the lady?' He stared at us. A small wet snub-nosed Asian-looking girl wearing hardly anything more than a soaked but indisputably well-cut gentleman's jacket. A man, also soaked, wearing the rest of the suit and one of the better regimental ties. He visibly grasped for clues as to our position in his ordered hierarchical life.

'I think you should be able to get one in the buffet at the rear of the stand,' he got out eventually. Dazed, he didn't make any move to take us there and as I had no intention of walking in this rain anymore, I grabbed the shaft of his umbrella and pulled him along, still clinging to it and bleating protestingly.

With cups of hot tea in our hands, a dry table-cloth wrapped around Ning and my phone under my chin, I got someone at the Ramada Hotel to take a message for Dr Duluth or Dr James Prince, who I bloody well knew were there someplace. Conscious as ever of possible eavesdroppers, I just said Ning and I were safe and would get back to them later.

We both needed dry clothes but in the now almost empty stand all I could find were three grimy pairs of workman's overalls. Ning sniffed at the smallest pair, but there was nothing else. We disappeared to our respective toilets to dry ourselves and change.

Chapter 34

Cold and silent we sat jammed together in the crowded international shuttle bus that was taking us back to Islamabad. The holo in the bus was showing a mish-mash of excited interviews with people who had seen the spectacular fireworks. I hadn't noticed it but the flames had produced huge multicoloured streamers, coalescing into beautiful spirals which had disappeared up into the sky, magically stilling the turbulence. It had then started to rain.

In all, the Conference seemed even to my disparaging and sardonic mind to have been a success, although perhaps not exactly in the way the mainly Asiablock organisers would have wished. The unexpected downpour had broken up the spectacular Asiablock dance-troupe finale and the young dancers had fled to the sides of the arena in the streaming rain. Here they had been helped over the parapet by the delegates of dozens of lands whose names they had hardly heard of, and hospitably received. I saw five young Chinese boys holding steaming mugs of tea under an awning in the Australian stand and even their impassive faces couldn't quite hide their emotions as they cautiously sipped it. Stewed tea loaded with sugar is an acquired taste. But of the interest and hospitality they could not be in doubt. They would go back to their own lands and spread the word that Westerners were not the cynical monsters who just wanted to re-colonise them.

I turned my head to speak to Ning to find she was looking unexpectedly "piquant" in the coarse brown overalls, far too big for her, with the sleeves and legs rolled up. Unexpected too was the warmth of Ning's body as she sat pressed against me in the overcrowded bus. And as I looked into her slightly slanting velvet-brown eyes I remembered with another shiver of goosepimples that like me, she was not wearing anything else under her overalls.

The shuttle-bus took us all around the damn city, dropping people off at various hotels and airline pick-up points. I wanted urgently to get back to my room and get out of the rough grimy overalls, but the Bristol hotel seemed the last on the bloody list.

However, we ultimately reached it and hand in hand dashed from the bus through the cold lashing rain into the shelter of the lobby. The receptionist fortunately remembered me, perhaps attributing my clothing to some eccentric English custom on the First of May.

Arriving at my room I opened the door and with a total lack of caution tugged Ning in and locked it. I entered the bathroom, turned the hot shower on and started to unbutton my overalls. There was a click as Ning prudishly switched off the bathroom light and closed the door. So it was in steamy blackness that we stepped out of our coarse cold wet overalls. The plastic shower curtain hissed open and I felt a small cold body brush against me as Ning climbed in. I followed her in and for a while nothing was heard but sighs of pleasure as the warm water splashed off and ran down cold skin. In the dark I found some soap and turned the shower down.

'My grandmother used to say that germs can hide in all sorts of places,' I said softly in Ning's ear, 'and that it's very important to not miss any of them.' There was an acquiescent silence. For a further period there was just the slip-slop of creamy lather being applied to silky brown satin. But after a period devoted to scrupulous hygiene the water began to run cold. Reluctantly I turned off the shower and helped Ning out. In the darkness I felt for the towel.

'What did your grandmother say ye should do after a hot shower?' she asked, gasping as I towelled her.

'To avoid catching a cold she said "it's very important to get into bed immediately afterwards and gradually return to normal temperature,"' I quoted.

'Well, I sairtainly dinna want to catch a chill,' said Ning. 'So we'd better follow your grandmother's advice.'

When I opened the bathroom door I found night had fallen so it was in the cold darkness that we left the tropical heat of the bathroom and shiveringly located the bed. There was only one and so we must have mutually decided to return to normal temperature together, although I don't remember having any discussion on the subject.

But what with one thing and another, "normal temperature" took much longer than usual to return. In fact, it was about seven pm before Ning decided it would be safe for me to get out of the bed and go down to Reception to buy her some clothes.

I returned and thrusting the parcel at her, undressed and returned quickly into the bed. In the strange way women often switch over from maidenly restraint to wanton immodesty, Ning clicked the bedside light on and climbed out of the bed to examine, try on and criticise my purchases.

For as long as I could I watched her posing in front of the mirror, slipping garments on and off, asking my advice and looking at me sideways. Exasperated, I sprang out of the bed and swept her up.

'Ye think there's still a wee risk of catching a chill?' she giggled, looking up at me, her arms around my neck.

'I don't think we should gamble,' I said, dropping her onto the bed.

Around eight pm I felt the danger of catching a chill was past so we dressed and descended to the restaurant on the first floor, Ning holding my arm. In the meantime my phone beeped several times but I ignored it.

Entrance to the restaurant was via a wide staircase and as we descended it I looked around for an empty table. There was a pause in the roar of conversation.

Almost everything in the boutique had been too big for Ning so she was wearing one of my white shirts tucked into a child's short black skirt and looked about fifteen. She also had a wonderful colour and the way she was moving must have made it very obvious what we had been doing.

We sat down, someone coughed and the level of conversation slowly returned to normal. I examined the menu as Ning smirked at the other diners. As expected, many Chinese and Indian dishes. The waiter approached and I was hesitating between Nasi Goreng and Go Beng when Ning spoke to the waiter in Urdu. He looked surprised and returned to the kitchen. A few minutes later the short fat Chinese chef came up to our table and was addressed in high-speed Mandarin (I think). Ning waved her hands in the air and tapped decisively on the table. The chef nodded respectfully and repeated some of her words.

My order for a plebeian beer was brushed aside and small glasses of a sweet liquid arrived.

'What was all that about?' I asked her. Ning picked up the big menu and clicked her fingernail against it contemptuously.

'All these dishes were prepared last week and would just be warmed over. What I've ordered he'll have'ta cook fra scratch.' Great, but I hoped it wouldn't take too long.

However, after a few more glasses of what I decided was rice wine, the chef appeared with two of his helpers and laid out a number of small bowls each containing delicious smelling dishes. I rubbed my hands; I had the hunger of a lion.

'And which one is the sweet and sour haggis?' I asked jocularly (the wine was surprisingly strong on an empty stomach). Ning looked at me wide-eyed, then down at the row of bowls.

'Just a joke,' I said hastily. I'd noticed before that Ning was quite a serious girl. Ignoring me she served out generous portions of the wonderful smelling food.

'I'll trouble you not to joke about the haggis,' she said.

I agreed absently and started in on the various dishes, trying them in the order Ning rather imperiously pointed out to me with her chopsticks. They were wonderful, even discounting the fact that I had eaten nothing for twenty-four hours. Fresh bamboo salad smelling like a walk through a vegetable garden after rain. Followed by sweet and sour pork, not too sweet but nutty and crunchy, followed by a delicious ...

In the end, replete and sweating, feeling I couldn't eat another mouthful, the chef returned and Ning said a few words to him which made his face split into a wide grin.

He returned about a quarter of an hour later with a dessert. As his two waiters cleared away the table, he served each of us a portion and looked at me.

'Good for jigajig,' he said unexpectedly with a chuckle, making an obscene gesture with his two hands. The waiters grinned. Red-faced I felt the eyes of the nearer diners staring at me as though I was a child abuser.

'Just a joke,' said Ning, putting her hand over mine and looking up into my face.

After this example of bad-taste humour (Asian? Scottish? female?), I sat back and watched the other guests eating what for many was probably their final meal in Islamabad before booking out. The glow of the wine had worn off and with a sudden lurch I returned to ground.

The guests here seemed to be mostly British Commonwealth and were restrainedly bidding each other goodbye, shaking hands, promising to look each other up and so on. Little did they realise how their world had just changed. Ning and

I were safe and that was wonderful. But the firework had gone off on schedule and produced its baleful turbulence. Westblock had lost a battle and a technical battle at that. The sort we supposed we were best at fighting, I thought angrily. The world's weather had changed and when the Westblock public discovered this, as they inevitably would, it would be war. Not just the brush-fire skirmish of the Pakistan Affair, but real war.

I had to find out what had occurred in my absence. I dug in my pocket and opened my phone to find the last two calls had been from Jim. He had left the Ramada hotel number.

I got through to him very quickly and introduced myself gloomily. I seemed to have lived another lifetime since I had heard his voice last.

'Yeah, it's him,' I heard him say. There was a burst of laughter and in the background two male voices were singing a parody of the "Peace Song" in terrible discord. A crash as Jim's phone fell heavily. He picked it up and I heard his voice again.

'Are you lot all right over there?' I said. The last time I had seen the Ramada hotel, flames had been pouring out of their floor.

'Fine, fine. Dig, how soon can you get over?'

'Er, in half an hour, I suppose,' I replied, puzzled. There was something wrong with Jim's voice, I couldn't place it. But then I realised what was wrong - his voice was normal; it hadn't changed. It wasn't the stressed voice of someone who knew we had just lost a battle and that the world would soon be at war. It was totally relaxed - in fact I would have said he was drunk.

'And how's Miss McGregor? You won't believe the stories we've been hearing about her.'

'She's sitting by me. We've just been eating.'

'Why don't you bring her over?' I passed on the invitation, but received a shake of the head.

'She says she's tired and asks to be excused,' I said. There were some more bangs and crashes followed by the dialling tone. What the hell was going on there? I considered redialling, but snapped my phone shut.

'You go on over,' she said. 'But dinna be long,' she added her hand on my sleeve.

"Don't be long", I said to myself. The world was trembling on the verge of WWII and ...

It was now eleven o'clock and I could have really done with bed, bed to sleep in that is, but I just had to find out what was going on. I saw Ning up to my room, drove over to the Ramada and parked in their almost empty car park.

Chapter 35

I found the Chrodisp party, and this time it really did seem to be a party, gathered in a small dining room downstairs. There was a silence as I entered and they all turned round to look at me. Rather embarrassed I would have said, as though they had just been talking about me.

Jim, Al, Dr Dalt, two of the young men who I had seen at the computer, two pretty waitresses and Dr Duluth. It would be a wild exaggeration to say Duluth was drunk, but his features lacked the usual razor sharpness and yes ... the top button on his shirt was undone and his tie was ever so slightly loosened!

'The firework thing went off,' I said brusquely.

`We know. Fabulous,' said Al happily. It was the wrong reaction. `But tell us, how the hell did you get onto the Asiablock stand?'

`How the hell did you know I was there?' I asked surprised and angry. One of my worst fears when we had been captured was that no one of our side knew about it.

`Oh, we've been able to follow you pretty closely.' said Jim sourly. `That gas explosion at the end of our corridor bore all the signs of you leaving a hotel.'

`Then a report Prince William had been seen on the motorway with a half-Asian interpreter told us where you were going,' said Al.

`We thought you had arrived at the Asiablock stand when we saw someone deliver a message to Shan Tien and Commissioner Fang Lu - important enough to make them leave Chairman Wang Tai and go under the stand,' added Jim, pouring out a beer.

`But it was only when the burner went off the wrong way and the Asiablock stand burst into flames that we were certain that you were there,' completed Dr Duluth. Jim handed me the beer.

`I'm sure glad he's on our side,' said one of the young techs.

`I didn't set it off,' I protested.

`There is a French expression "porte malheur", which describes rather neatly how ...' began Dr Duluth.

`And what do you mean "the wrong way"?' I interrupted.

Al rose groggily to his feet and moved over to Dr Dalt who was sitting at a green baize covered table, his head leaning on the monitor of a small computer. There was an empty Scotch bottle on its side by the keyboard and he was singing quietly to himself.

`Frank, can you run that thing again for Dig?' said Al loudly. Frank bestirred himself and after two tries pushed the right key.

The screen blurred and we were looking at a view of the Earth from space and I could see the usual swirling cloud spirals. Al found the mouse under the table, unknotted the cable and offered it to Frank. But when Frank jokingly tried to shave with it, Al carefully prised his fingers loose and himself clicked on a menu. A series of narrow red lines appeared superimposed, snaking over the two hemispheres.

`Jet streams,' said Al. I only had a vague memory of them but I did remember there was a tropical easterly jet stream which started near Burma and ended near the coast of Africa, about ten-thousand kilometers to the west. It was still there, as far as I could see. I made a non-committal noise.

`The YP set off their firework here,' he said pointing to the hills of Northern Pakistan with his finger, `which was a butterfly point at ten o'clock this morning.'

`Stop, stop,' I said impatiently, putting down my beer. I would just have to admit my ignorance. `What's all this "butterfly" crap?' Al looked at me in surprise and apology.

`I'm sorry, we've all picked up the jargon from the climate people,' he said putting the mouse down on the table. `Well, there's an expression they use to describe how weather patterns can sometimes be very unstable. They say "a hurricane in the Pacific was caused by a butterfly fluttering its wings in the Azores". It's a sort of joke. They really mean there are points on the Earth's surface where at some specially unstable time, a little rising puff of air can go in one direction or the other. And whichever way it goes gets amplified, so it causes a bigger puff, which produces a light breeze and so on, up to a hurricane. There's a whole branch of

mathematics called "catastrophe theory" which deals with non-linear positive feedback.'

Ah. "Non-linear positive feedback". I remembered Jim talking about that. The actor speaking Shakespeare. I began to see what it was all about.

'And the YP ...' I began.

'Their firework should have produced a small but intense anti-clockwise vortex which would have nailed the jet stream over to here.' He looked around for the mouse but Dr Dalt was sitting on the floor crooning "I belong tae Glasgow" into it. He patiently retrieved it and clicked on the menu bar again. I saw the red lines all move to cover the Earth's globe in a completely new pattern.

'But when you lit it from the wrong end it produced a clockwise vortex,' he said. I thought back to the actual ignition of the burner - yes, it had been lit from the wrong end. But not directly by me.

'How the bluidy hell did you know that clockwise would stabilise the jet stream where it was?' asked Dr Dalt, raising his head and looking at me in angry puzzlement.

I put my hand up to my head and felt a wave of relief. The firework thing had gone off but it hadn't worked! It had produced a clockwise instead of an anti-clockwise vortex! The world's weather would not change! I felt another bigger surge of relief. There would be no war! And with relief came fatigue. I'd had a busy day and the last part had been particularly exhausting. I was dog tired and felt my report could wait until the morrow.

'Look Jim, I'm bushed and I've gotta crash out. I'll see you in the morning.' I looked down at Dr Dalt as I stepped over him. 'I'll explain the theory then,' I said. I left before they could offer me a room here and wonder why I refused it.

I descended to the lobby, went into the car park and drove back quickly to the Bristol Hotel. I was soon climbing into a warm bed with soft sheets between sleepy welcoming arms.

Chapter 36

Well, that was more or less the end of the affair, at least as far as I was concerned. And I suspect as far as Tsonah was concerned too. Jim had put the whole story together for me.

The Asiablock rulers had listened to a young scientist who had promised them the moon, and they had liberally financed him. He had greatly extended the Asiablock computer facilities and conceived of the ingenious idea of going back into the past to discover certain data that were only seen under catastrophe conditions. These data had enabled his team to build a "Weather Simulator" more accurate than anything seen so far.

This Simulator told him how relatively simple structures (the towers), in conjunction with other simple devices (like covering a big lake with a super-thin layer of oil) would change the weather in Asiablock's favour. He had built them and they had worked, but not consistently. The Asiablock rulers wanted permanent results and were prepared to pay for them. And if Lin couldn't provide them, they had wasted the money already spent. Lin must have felt he was riding on a tiger. He had feverishly worked on the problem until one night his Simulator must have turned up a special once-in-a-thousand-years solution. The weather changes could be made permanent if a rising anti-clockwise cyclone occurred at a certain place and time (a "butterfly point"). The time and place of this golden opportunity would be at Dil Kush at 10:04am on May the 1st.

Unfortunately Dil Kush was in neutral Pakistan. Asiablock had therefore undertaken a big diplomatic effort to organise a peace conference there, whose sole purpose was to allow Lin to set off his contraption and so produce this cyclone at the right place and time.

The burner was lit at the right place and time but by accident in the wrong direction. It had produced a clockwise instead of an anti-clockwise vortex. The whiz kid must have immediately realised the jet stream would not be moved; the world's weather would stay as it was. The golden opportunity had been wasted. So he committed suicide.

Not only was Shan Tien, the whiz kid's patron killed, but the front rank of the Asiablock dignitaries had been lightly toasted. Asiablock had literally had their fingers burnt by Tsonah.

Later that day, as a side effect, a sandstorm had swept across southern China. Some sand had even fallen on the May Day parade in Beijing. It had got into the steering gear of one of their latest model battle tanks which had slewed round and seized up, right in front of the reviewing stand. The whole parade had backed up and been thrown into total confusion until it could be towed away. On world holo.

If it got out that this was Asiablock playing the sorcerer's apprentice, they would be even more the world's laughing stock. Asiablock could be relied on not to say anything and would go a lot more carefully in the future. In particular, they would not try again to unilaterally change the Planet's weather.

The end result was that both power blocks knew the Planet's weather could be modified. At the moment only unreliably, but accuracy would come with experience.

Westblock had started late in the "Weather Race" but if they had not won it, they had at least nobbled Asiablock.

The weather, like so many things on the Planet's surface had become another Resource for mankind to divide up as it wished. How it was to be divided up would lie in the hands of the politicians and the lawyers.

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Interrogation of the prisoner and further investigations from space had revealed other parts of the Tsonah project. Not satisfied with merely changing the Planet's weather in their favour, Asiablock were experimenting with more aggressive methods of attacking Westblock. Jim showed me sketches of big steel caissons which could be floated to a critical location and filled with sand or stones to sink them onto the sea bed. They would focus and intensify storms onto a chosen part of the coast - like a big port. And if a tsunami came along ... Computer simulations showed diamond-shaped patterns just like I had seen in Gili Trawangan.

Alternatively, a few caissons mounted in a critical position off the Bahamas could flip the Gulf Stream over to a new stable position - one which didn't keep Europe warm.

Jim looked at me oddly and cleared his throat.

`Just one last thing. What did you have against Shan Tien and Commissioner Fang Lu? That was a pretty nasty way to go.'

`They were both nasty people, but I didn't have anything to do with their deaths,' I said, surprised.

`Ning says you burnt them for her.'

I shrugged my shoulders impatiently.

`Ning thinks! For Chrissake, Jim. Take your choice - she's a psychic Celt or mysterious Oriental. The whole goddamn thing was a fire hazard and that Korean Lieutenant lit it anyway.'

`Yeah, maybe,' said Jim. `And he's dead too, isn't he?'

Chapter 37

Ning and I took off for a week's seaside holiday on the coast of North Africa. In Al Hoceima.

Apart from "The Pirates' Bar", the port's colourful past is long forgotten. There is a marina, a holiday complex and tennis courts. There is a breakwater between the two small islets, joining them together, but no one could explain to me why this was necessary. The old pirate village, five kilometers up the river Moulouya and therefore just out of cannon shot from the sea, now contains a shopping centre and an artists' colony selling African Art.

We found a lonely beach-hut farther down the coast and only visited Al Hoceima for provisions. "Security" prevented me telling Ning anything about my experiences here, more than two centuries ago. And in any case we had far more important things to do.

And yes, it was a wonderful holiday and I grew very close to Ning. We did all the things lovers do and she was just about the perfect companion. She was beautiful, intelligent, tender, an excellent cook, played a fair game of tennis, could sail a 420 sailboat and was deeply in love with me.

And I was in love with her. As much as I could be. And that was the problem.

I remember looking at her that last warm night, the moonlight shining through the shutters making faint stripes over her sleeping body. I listened to the cicadas in the long grass at the back of the hut and was deeply conscious that I was at a Critical Point on my Timeline. We had met by chance and danger had pushed us together. In the last week we had experienced more than most couples do in a lifetime.

But this was it; decision time. Not a word had been spoken on the subject but I knew what she wanted. To take any more of her youth and beauty I would have to give something equally fundamental in return. And there was only one thing she wanted from me - my freedom. And that for me meant freedom to live in a dirty cluttered apartment, to wear friendly old sweaters, to choose my own friends. Freedom to be alone when I wanted.

I know myself. I am the sailor who yearns for a safe harbour when he is on the stormy sea, but after a few days in the peaceful harbour yearns equally strongly for the storms and brisk gales outside. I would make her unhappy.

Only adults should get married. In the emotional atmosphere of the Affair, I had impulsively tried it. But we had both wanted things the other couldn't give, or wanted to give things the other didn't want. I had found I was too young - I didn't want to or couldn't "settle down". I probably never will. I recognise it as a character defect.

I leant forwards and gently brushed the fine black hair back from her brow. She woke and putting her hand over mine looked up at me. It was our closest and our last moment together.

'I'm a Venusian and you're a Martian,' she said, her cheeks wet. There was nothing I could say; I suppose she had caught me looking out to sea.

Tomorrow was to have been our last but one day but in the morning she silently packed her bags and I took her to the airport. I returned to the empty beach hut and wandered sadly around Al Hoceima, trying to identify parts I had seen two hundred and ten years ago.

At least the weather was good.

Epilogue

I was back in Munich, Heidi's mother and father were out for the evening and I was looking after her. Dressed in her pink nightie and ready for bed, she was down in the workshop with me.

We had been playing a game called "Detektiv" where each player is given more and more clues as to the identity of the murderer. Heidi had as usual revealed an excellent memory and a positive genius for interpreting the rules in her favour.

'If the butler looked in the mirror he would have seen Lady Palmaston stab Doctor Schnurrbart,' she explained patiently. 'And she stabbed him because ...er... because she knew he wasn't going to marry her daughter and so let her get the Secret of the Pyramid Stone. And that means I get to look at another clue.' A small hand reached out to the box.

'The butler was in the garage,' I protested. 'There's no mirrors in a garage.'

'He saw her reflected in the driving mirror of the Rolls.'

'Just a minute. Didn't James the chauffeur take Lord Bartlett out in the Rolls at ten o'clock?' I asked, turning over a page in the text. I was getting confused.

'Oh, well,' she said airily, 'it must have been in the garage windows.'

'Heidi,' I said, 'you look like a Venusian but you're really a Martian.' Her blue eyes zeroed in on me.

'What are you on about, Uncle Dig?'

'It was an underground garage, that's what.'

'Ah, well then, ...er ...' Before she went off into another arabesque flight of fancy I remembered I wanted to speak to her about something. I had thought of it that afternoon, while she was at school.

'Heidi, how would you like to have a job where you travel all round the world, meet lots of interesting people and earn lots of money?' Intrigued, she put the box down and climbed up onto my knee. She looked into my eyes.

'And will I have lots of people to do what I say?'

'Well, some. But the people who pay you, will pay you to tell them what to do.'

'And then they'll do what I say?'

'Well, if they don't, they've wasted their money.'

'H'm.' She ran her hand through her blond hair and stared into the distance, considering this rather spineless alternative. 'And what will I tell them about?'

'In the future people are going to be able to alter the weather. And what's good weather for some people is bad for others.'

'Like I always want sunny weather but Uncle Sepp sometimes wants it to rain?' Uncle Sepp has a farm in Lower Bavaria.

'That sort of thing.'

'Well, I'd just tell them to make it rain at night.'

'But some people don't like driving cars at night in the rain. It makes them have accidents.' Reflective pause as she rubbed her nose. Her mother hated driving in the rain.

'So they're going to need someone who decides when it rains and when it shines,' she said at last. It was a bigger problem than she'd thought.

Near enough. That would do for today. I knew she would think about it and a lot later realise she was going to have to study law, specialising in a new branch whose name I had just invented - "Climate Law".

I looked at the clock, it was her bedtime.

'All right,' she said philosophically, noting my glance. 'But remember, you promised to finish that story of how the English ship caught the pirate using "magic forces".'

'"Natural forces",' I said, hoisting her light weight onto my shoulders.

The End
