

CHECKMATE
FOR A PRINCESS
by Lee Edgar

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OPENING MOVES

WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST - 1100 hrs.

The aircraft carrier was remarkably steady as the helicopter gunship slipped sideways a little and then dropped gently onto the flight deck with a chatter of rotor blades. Immediately, the note of the engine changed and the door in its side was thrown open to allow Major Alphonse Slazinski to drop to the deck, his battle-dress stained with the smoke of recent action and his cigar firmly in his mouth. The machine carbine he carried was slung loosely in his hand, all danger now gone, and his manner was almost jovial as he gestured to the group of civilian personnel inside the body of the 'copter. The last of the McDonnell Douglas F-18 strike aircraft hit the arrester net on the flight deck with a banshee scream of reverse thrust as six people dressed in pale blue overalls and baseball caps followed the Major down from the helicopter onto the deck and towards the bulkhead hatch recessed into the side of the superstructure.

The relative quiet inside almost hurt their ears as the group stepped, single-file, across the raised threshold and the black major removed the unlit cigar from his mouth and stuck it into the top pocket of his battledress as a smartly-uniformed officer approached the party. He saluted lazily though respectfully. 'All present and correct, Commander.'

'Very good, Major Slazinski.' The officer smiled as he looked from one face to another of the male members of the group. 'And which one of you gentlemen is Monsieur Dubois from the French Embassy?'

The tallest of the group stepped forward with a smile and shook his hand. 'A votre service, Commander,' he said, his smiling, suntanned face complementing the rest of his handsome features.

'Welcome aboard U.S.S. Columbia,' said the officer to them all. 'I am John

Jakes, Commander of the United Nations air and ground forces in the Mediterranean. If you would be so kind as to follow me, I will take you straight to the Admiral who is eager to meet you all.' He turned to the Major. 'Your report soonest, Al.'

'Aye, aye, Commander.' The Major saluted and then mischievously winked at the shortest member of the group who grinned.

They were led to the boardroom where Admiral Michael Davison, US Navy, rose from his chair beside the polished table and greeted them with a smile. 'So, we meet at last, Monsieur Dubois. It seems we have you to thank for saving our skins.'

'Not me, Admiral,' said Philippe. 'I could not have accomplished a thing without the help of my friends.'

He gestured towards the group which had accompanied him from Laroque and introduced them. 'My accomplice, Mr Roger Blackman, from England.'

The dark-haired Brit smiled as he stepped forward and shook the hand of the Admiral. 'Pleased to meet you, sir.'

'His sister, Suzette,' added the Frenchman.

The Admiral's right eyebrow lifted slightly as the young woman removed her baseball cap and shook her head to allow her long, dark hair to fall to her shoulders.

'Thank you for inviting us aboard, Admiral,' she said pleasantly, smiling as she looked around the room at the big, polished table with its comfortable chairs and luxurious fittings. 'This is my first visit to the US navy.' He bowed. 'It is indeed a very great pleasure to have you aboard my ship, Miss Blackman.'

Philippe coughed to regain the Admiral's attention and indicated the slim girl on his left. 'Miss Blackman's cousin, Mademoiselle Marianne de Bosville.'

The blue eyes before him seemed to pierce right into him and his heart skipped a beat as the long, golden hair fell from her cap as she removed it.

'Enchanté, Monsieur,' greeted the slim, nineteen-year-old beauty. 'Alors, Je ne parle pas beaucoup de l'Anglais.'

The Admiral glanced at Commander Jakes who laughed. 'The young lady apologises for not speaking very much English, sir.'

Flustered, the Senior Officer nodded and passed on the the third male member the group who introduced himself. 'Jim Marshal from Cambridge, sir. I worked on the computers with Suzette before the... er... war started.'

The Admiral shook his hand and looked at his companion who hovered in the background.

'This is our friend, Gillian Green. She used to live near Newmarket and train horses.'

'Welcome aboard, Miss Green. Your initials are correct, then.'

'Pardon,' said the young woman.

'Gee-gee. A trainer of horses. Appropriate, eh?'

Gillian's face conveyed the "ha, ha, I've heard that one before" look as she attempted to force a smile. Looking very tired, she was glad of the chair which was offered to her and they all sat down around the table as another officer walked in.

'Ah, Captain.' The Admiral turned to the now-seated group. 'This is Henry Whittaker, Captain of the Columbia. He is also grateful to you for saving his hide, not to mention his precious boat.'

The Captain glanced briefly around the group and smiled. 'It is a rare occurrence to have ladies aboard, especially such beautiful ones.'

Suzette smiled, Gillian scowled and Marianne didn't understand a word.

Introductions were completed again and drinks served to relax the atmosphere. It seemed that no-one wanted to ask the questions which desperately needed to be asked. How had the war started? Why had the superpowers reacted in the way they had? Was it just France that had been almost completely devastated by multiple nuclear warheads? Or were other European countries in the same state? Where had the destruction finished? Who was left alive?

'We are having a party aboard ship in your honour tonight,' said the Captain.

'We would be very pleased if you would attend.'

'A party?' queried Gillian. 'After all that has happened? Are you out of your mind?'

'Miss Green,' interrupted the Admiral. 'Captain Whittaker means no offence, I'm sure. It is simply that the war is now over. The Consortium which planned it has been defeated and it is now time to unwind a little, just for one evening. There is plenty of work to be done tomorrow.'

'Have all the members of the Consortium been dealt with?' asked Philippe quickly to take the heat out of the moment.

'We believe so. The missile dump they had taken over at Aix is now totally obliterated as well as their headquarters at Mandagout.'

'What about their base at Geneva?' asked Roger.

'No rebels were found at Geneva.' said the Admiral, looking at the plush red carpet under the polished table.

'But that is where Louis and Corrine were headed when we banished them from Rouen, wasn't it?' asked Jim.

'It certainly was,' agreed Philippe. 'But we don't know whether they ever made it.'

'I suppose you're right,' conceded Jim.

'Who are these people, Louis and Corrine?' asked the puzzled Commander.

'They were in the Consortium and it was they who tricked Suzette into coming to France to operate the equipment for them. At the time, we were convinced they were working for NATO.'

'What happened to them, precisely?'

'We found out they were in the Consortium and then let them go.'

'You didn't kill them?'

'Of course not,' said Suzette. 'That would have made us as bad as them.'

'So, they could be somewhere out there now, planning revenge?'

'Unlikely. They were alone in their Fourtrack when the fallout rate was still high. They most probably died on the way.'

'We will know more when the pictures are developed,' said Commander Jakes.

'Pictures?' queried Roger.

'The aircraft we sent north had cameras mounted beneath them in the hopes they might spot something on the ground.'

'What if they are under the ground?' asked Suzette.

'Under the ground?'

'Yes, Commander. At Rouen, we stayed for a while in a tracking station built under the ground, just outside the city.'

'That reminds me,' said Philippe. 'My helicopter is still there.'

Suzette suddenly turned and gave him a strange look but said nothing. She watched him closely as he conversed with the naval officers and discussed possible alternatives for the future.

'I gather we have you to thank for saving our skins,' said a voice close to her elbow.

'Sorry?' she queried.

'With the computer and the satellite,' prompted Commander Jakes.

'Oh, it was nothing. Just playing with figures mostly.'

'Do you do it for a living?'

'I did before all this started. I worked at S.I.E.D. in Cambridge,' she pointed to her colleague who held Gillian's hand. 'With Jim.'

'S.I.E.D.?'

'Satellite Information Evaluation Databank. We interpret the data from Princess.'

'I'm sorry.' He looked confused. 'Who is Princess?'

She laughed. 'Not "who". The Photoconductive Radiation Network Communications Satellite, PRNCS for short, is in Geostationary orbit. It has heat sensors that scan Western Europe and provide data which can be used to interpret weather patterns.'

'Oh, weather,' he said, suddenly bored.

'And other things,' Suzette added. 'The French placed Princess in orbit last

year with Ariane. Unfortunately, the rebels gained control of the satellite and used it for their own ends.'

'How do you know all this?' he asked suspiciously.

'Louis was the former Chief of Security at Rouen and, before we sent him away, he told us about how the Consortium which started the war was founded by businessmen who were sick of the restrictions placed upon them by their respective governments and longed to be free to act as they wished. They managed, somehow, to trick Western Europe into a war with the Russians.' She shrugged. 'The rest you know.'

'All we knew at the time was that a large number of nuclear detonations registered right across Europe before all communication went dead.'

'Was the USA affected at all?'

'Very little. The weather is all to pot, as it seems to be earthwide, but no actual attack took place on the States itself.'

'Russia?'

'Again, no strikes there, or anywhere in Asia as far as we could tell. The main area of destruction is Europe. There would appear to be little life left in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy or Eastern Europe.'

'Britain?' she dared to ask.

'No contact since just after it all started. There were no actual detonations recorded on the islands but the winds were Southerly at the time and the fallout from France very considerable. Until we land there, it will be impossible to know for certain how many have survived.'

'I see.'

'When we left the Azores to come here, a separate fleet left for there and they should arrive there tomorrow. Then we should have more news.'

'Are you in radio contact with them?'

'Some of the time. Atmosphericics are not good until the heavy cloud cover disperses from over central France.'

'What is the plan?'

'Our initial brief was simply to observe and report back. The Admiral was given instructions as to what to do in the case of hostilities and he reacted accordingly, as you know. When the fleet was attacked by the Consortium, he launched the aircraft which attacked the main rebel bases.'

'How sure are you that all the rebels are now dead and gone?'

'As sure as we can be.' He paused. 'What will you do now? All of you?'

'I don't know. Return to England, I suppose. Jim and Gill have... had... homes there and so did I. I don't know what my brother will do. He might return to England or stay in France with Marianne.'

'And Monsieur Dubois?'

'Philippe? He was attached to the British Embassy in London. He will probably want to stay in France to help to supervise the return to normality, if such a thing is possible.'

He placed his hand lightly upon her arm. 'I regret that France will never be the same, Miss Blackman.'

'No,' she said sadly. 'I don't suppose it will.'

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WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST - 1600 hrs.

Suzette wandered aimlessly through the damaged shell that had been her mother's home in the valley close to Sorède. For many years, the family had lived in the valley since her father had met the fair-haired French girl, Juliette de Bosville, who had become his wife. They had bought the villa and renovated it before her mother had died.

She looked around sadly at the damage the Consortium had inflicted on the house in their attempts to dispose of her. Daylight could be seen through the roof where the cannon shells from the helicopter had hit. Signs of fire were everywhere as was the smell of charcoal as the bed was burnt and the mirror had been smashed from its position above the hearth.

Perhaps, in time, something could be done to put right the damage inflicted but not now, there were more important issues at stake. She eventually found

what she had been looking for and, with a last look round, walked through the gap where the patio doors had been and met Marianne as she stood beside the pool with Roger and Philippe.

'Have you got everything you wanted?' asked Roger cheerfully.

'I think so,' she said non-committally. 'I shall be glad to get out of these clothes at last. If you can find anything that might be useful, take it.'

'Thanks,' said her brother. 'But Philippe and I raided a shop in Argèles this morning and got all the clothes we need.'

'Isn't that looting?'

'Not when everyone died from the fallout. Legally, there is no owner any more.'

'I got some of my things from home,' said Marianne quickly, as if on the defensive.

'Then we are ready?'

Roger nodded and Philippe watched thoughtfully as Suzette opened the door of her white Ford Cosworth and got in behind the wheel. She was not as friendly as usual and seemed to be keeping something from him but he couldn't, for the life of him, think what it could be.

The engine burst into life as the last door closed and Suzette turned onto the track that led through the forest, up the side of Pic Neulos atop which the tracking station sat, its main receptor dish focused on a tiny piece of electronics wizardry 40,000 kilometres away. The Cosworth left behind a cloud of dust as it roared up the forest trail, the sound of the Cosworth engine echoing from the trees on the far side of the valley. Eventually, they were at the top and turned down the road to the tracking station where Jim, Gillian and Major Al Slazinski of the US Marines awaited their return.

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WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST - 1630 hrs.

Jim Marshal toyed with the main console as the other two watched. A picture formed and then kept changing as the data came in from Princess and was sorted and filed by the CADE (computer assisted data evaluation) software.

'Well?' asked Gillian as he punched at the keys. 'What have you found?'

'I don't know,' he said, looking puzzled. 'When Suzette returns, she will know what it means.'

'Can't you even guess?' asked the concerned Major as he stared at the flashing console.

Jim smiled. 'Not a chance. I was trained as an operator, not an evaluator. Besides, much of this information is in French and only Suzette will understand what it really means.'

The sound of the car drawing up outside made them look up.

'That will be Suzette,' said Marianne, running to open the door.

'Is this Blackman girl really that good?' asked the Major.

'Suzette is brilliant,' said Jim. 'She was trained by the French Agency when Princess was first launched and only Suzette knows the code to break into the programme to adjust the deviation angle.'

'Now you've got me real confused, boy.'

'Never mind. It just means that, without Suzette, the language might as well be in Swahili. I can operate the equipment and catalogue the data but only she can understand the full implications.'

'You mean she can read all those blips and things and tell exactly what they mean?'

'Oh, yes. How do you think she knew your ships had entered the Mediterranean? In fact, she even knew there was going to be a war before it started.'

'She did?' The cigar hit the floor.

'I did what?' asked Suzette as she walked in.

'I was just telling the Major how clever you are.'

'Oh, you were, were you?' she scolded playfully. 'And what have you found?'

Jim scratched his head. 'I don't know for certain. It's just that there is an odd movement in EX zone.'

'EX? Under the sea?' She looked surprised. 'Let me look.'

Suzette leant over the console and punched a few keys and waited for the printer to stop before tearing off the hard copy. She smiled. 'It seems that the UN fleet is going to have visitors this evening.'

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GAMBIT

WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST - 1900 hrs.

The party on board Columbia that evening was a little too formal for Suzette. Already Gillian, dressed in floppy pink sweater and pleated skirt, had immersed herself in the throng of sailors, dancing with as many as she could. The more subdued Marianne, immaculate in a black chiffon micro-dress, clung tightly to Roger, turning down all other offers while Jim and Philippe mingled and were introduced to all and sundry by the jovial Al Slazinski. Admiral Davison kept the smiling, brown-eyed Suzette all to himself - he was not stupid.

'Well, Miss Blackman,' he said over a drink. 'The Major informs me we are to have visitors this evening. Would you care to enlighten me?'

Suzette smiled and fluttered her long eyelashes. 'Now Admiral. Would I try to hide anything from you?'

'I don't know. Would you?'

'Show me how you dance and I will let you into my closest secrets,' she said cheekily.

The Admiral took her suntanned arm and led her to the floor as other officers stood respectfully aside. Placing one arm around her slender waist, he led her into the waltz as her dark hair swirled around her bare shoulders and her long, white dress hugged her slim body like a second skin.

'You dance well, Admiral. You must have had years of practice.'

'I've been around, Miss Blackman.' He changed the subject quickly and neatly.

'The er... visitors?'

'Thirty minutes!' she said without hesitation.

'Eh?'

'They will be here in thirty minutes, give or take an hour or two.'

'Are you pulling my leg, young lady?'

'Now would I do a thing like that?'

'I don't know. I hardly know you, though I feel that I would like to.'

'I'm afraid there's not much to tell. My mother was French and my father was in the forces until he died in the Falklands.'

They suddenly stopped dancing and the Admiral stared at her as the penny dropped. 'Well, I'll be darned! You're John Blackman's daughter, aren't you?'

Suzette looked surprised. 'You knew my father?'

'Very well. He was my contact after the Normandy landings.'

She laughed. 'That was a long time before I was born.'

'Yes, he was just a boy himself really but, even then, he knew what he wanted.'

I knew him when he first met your mother, did you know that?'

'No. Tell me about it.'

'He was dropped by submarine into southern France in 1945 to make contact with the resistance. As he could speak both French and Spanish, he was invaluable to them. It was while they were regrouping in the Pyrenees that the Germans arrived in Laroque to smuggle some escapees into Spain. Your father was a very brave man.'

She looked sad. 'I loved him very much and missed him when he was killed.'

'He was on HMS Sheffield, wasn't he?'

Suzette's head went on one side. 'How did you know? He was not listed, they tell me.'

'No. None of the SAS personnel were listed.'

Her mouth dropped open. 'SAS?'

'I don't suppose you knew and it certainly doesn't matter now. His mission was a secret one which could have ended the Falklands conflict much sooner if he had been able to reach his destination. Then that Exocet came out of the blue. What a waste.'

They were silent for a long time as Suzette laid her head on the Admiral's arm and remembered her father's smiling face and kindly ways. Who would have thought what he really did for a living?

'Tell me about your friend. Marianne, isn't it?'

'Marianne is very French. You would hardly know we were cousins, would you?'

'Not at first glance. Your build is similar but not the colouring.'

'No. Marianne has kept the true de Bosvile hair and eyes whereas I have the Blackman family looks.'

'Has the family always live around the south of France.'

'Good Heavens, no. The whole family is thoroughbred English.'

'English?'

'Most certainly. With the exception of a few small gaps, our family has been traced right back to the sixth century.'

'The sixth century? Impossible.'

'Not at all. Marianne still has the original copy of the De Bosvile Chronicles, started by Lady Mary Bosvile, Countess of Ramsden.'

A sly smirk came to his face.

Suzette frowned. 'You don't believe me, do you?'

'It does stretch the imagination. Why, most families cannot even trace their ancestry back to the middle ages.'

'I have a friend in London who has access to all the computerised information. I simply linked my own computer to hers and identified all the links. It took almost two years, even for the computer to sift through it all, but I did it. Cousin Marianne is a direct descendant of King Arthur of Camelot.'

'You jest, surely.'

'Not at all. The King's son was Ædred of York. That was on Lady Mary's side. Lord Andrew was the son of Sir John Bosvile who's ancestry has been traced back to Marchant de Bosvile who accompanied Duke William in 1066 and was granted land in Yorkshire.'

'Sounds like quite an important family you share with your cousin.'

'Not really.' She leant closer. 'In truth, we are a family of rebels.'

'Rebels?'

'I'm afraid so. That's why you don't read much about us in history. King Ædred and his twin sister, Princess Ædra of Camelot, fought against some of the more unscrupulous members of the early Church and tended to be left out of the historical records which were generally kept by the Church people themselves. The twins hated the pomp and corruption which were beginning to creep into Christianity at that time and tried their best to halt the rot. They failed, of course. Despite all their hard work, William eventually invaded and Britain became a kind of satellite of the Holy Roman Empire.'

'Britain became Norman.'

'Not all of it. It was a long time before the influence became felt in the north and that is where Marchant de Bosvile was sent, to guard the northern boundary with the Anglisc. Unfortunately, he was one of the many knights who fell out with William over his attitudes towards the slavery of the native population and was banished to the wilds of Northumbria for his sins. The complete history was recorded in the little church at Yarm in Cleveland.'

'So this Marchant de Bosvile was another rebel, then?'

'Definitely. He caused the de Brus family considerable aggravation in the years following the conquest. It was his grand-daughter, another Marianne de Bosvile, who married Robin Hood.'

'So, Robin Hood was a real person?'

'Robin? Oh Yes. That wasn't his real name, naturally, and many of the stories about him have been grossly exaggerated. But he was real, all right. It's all in the Chronicles.'

'They should make interesting reading.'

'I doubt it.'

The Admiral looked puzzled.

Suzette laughed. 'If you can read Medieval French, you will understand them. If not, don't bother to try.'

'Why French?'

'Because Lord Andrew and Lady Mary Bosville spent most of their lives in France.' She leant closer and whispered. 'They were spies, you see.'

'Spies?'

'Oh, yes. Spies for King Charles the Second. Unfortunately, they fell out with the King and had to stay in France, or so the story goes. I suspect there was something funny going on, myself. Though they were friends of Louis XIV, he never knew if he could really trust them or not.'

'More rebels?'

She nodded. 'And now there is Marianne, Roger and I.'

'All with blue blood.'

'Not me. My blood is one-hundred-percent red. It is Marianne who has all the blue blood.'

Admiral Davison looked across at the slim girl dressed in black. 'Mademoiselle de Bosville does not look like a rebel to me.'

'You wait till you get to know her better. She can be quite a wildcat when she wants to be.'

'And what gets her worked up? Religion? Politics?'

'Not our Marianne. Like her ancestors, she would fight tooth and nail for peace and avoid any conflict.'

They stopped dancing as the music ended and walked across to the bar for drinks.

'And what about you, Miss Blackman. What turns you on?'

'Not a lot,' she smiled as she sipped a Dubonnet heavily diluted with lemonade. 'I'm the quiet, sober type.'

'There must be something.'

'Something I would fight for, you mean? Yes. I would fight to retain my honour.'

The Admiral looked surprised. 'That's an old-fashioned term. And an old fashioned ideal, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'I'm an old fashioned girl, or so Gill keeps telling me. She says I ought to enjoy myself more, come out of my shell a bit.'

'I would hardly have described you as inhibited. Not in that get-up.'

Suzette glanced down briefly to the dress which hid nothing and then smiled to herself. 'When I find the right man, he will get me all - whole and complete. But woe betide any man who tries to jump the gun.'

'When you first arrived on board, I got the distinct impression that Monsieur Dubois was the centre of your attention.'

'Impressions can be misleading. I like him very much but there are some important questions that need to be answered first.'

'Such as..?'

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of an ensign who took the Admiral aside and whispered in his ear for several minutes. Glancing at Suzette the Admiral nodded and the ensign left to speak with Commander Jakes.

'It seems, Miss Blackman, that our visitors have arrived. I think you deserve to be in on the meeting as you seem to know so much about it.' He turned and spoke to the Captain. 'Mr Whittaker, prepare for action. We don't know what they are up to.'

'No,' interrupted Suzette, her hand on the Admiral's arm. 'Don't do anything that might provoke them. There has been enough trouble already. Let's not add to it.'

Her eyes seemed to plead with him as he stood, undecided, though realising the logic of what she was saying.

'Trust me,' she said.

It was a long time before any of them spoke. It was the Admiral who broke the silence. 'Stand down, Captain. Let's play it cool.'

'With respect, Admiral,' said the Captain quietly. 'I hope you know what you are doing.'

'So do I, Henry. So do I.'

The Admiral spoke again to the Captain who then escorted Suzette towards the



boardroom whilst the senior officer took a Lieutenant aside.

'Benson, meet me in the boardroom in five minutes and bring your handgun.'

'My handgun? Do you think our visitors are about to attack us?'

'Not at all, Lieutenant. If they were, they would have already done so and we would no longer be here to talk about it. Sonar have just reported a sounding off the port beam. It appears we are about to have the pleasure of the company of the Russian Navy.'

The Lieutenant looked taken-aback. 'The Russian fleet?'

'No. Just one submarine. Sonar say the signature is a little blurred but, nevertheless, clearly that of a Malinov class nuclear submarine.'

'That's their new one, isn't it?'

'Precisely. Capable of silent running, never resurfacing and enough plutonium to wipe out half of the United States. Its Captain must have a very good reason for making himself known to us now.'

'Then they come in peace.'

'It would seem so.'

'Then why the gun?'

'For the girl.'

'Miss Blackman?'

'Precisely. She knew of this in advance and I suspect she knows one hell of a lot more than she is letting on.'

'But she is not armed.'

'Of course not. Anything inside that dress would stick out a mile.'

Benson sneered. 'They do, sir.'

'Don't be vulgar, Lieutenant,' snapped the Admiral. 'She is not the flighty type so she can only be wearing a dress like that for one reason and one reason only, to make it absolutely clear to us all that there is nothing whatsoever hidden beneath it. That, in my book, makes her an extremely dangerous person indeed.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Nothing, unless she attempts to convey anything to the Russians. If she does, then shoot her.'

'Shoot her?'

'Certainly. And, Lieutenant.'

The younger man waited in expectation.

'Shoot to kill!'

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WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST - 2030 hrs.

Water cascaded from the glistening hull of Malinov One as it rose majestically from the sea just two hundred metres from SS Columbia. Unlike earlier submarines of the World War Two variety, there were no guns, no visible aerials nor periscopes, just a dome on the foredeck where the reactor was located, and a squat conning tower with a small rotating radar dish rising from the top. Its death-dealing power was located deep inside its almost quarter-mile length and massive girth. Columbia launched a boat which narrowed the gap between the huge warships of very different kinds and, ten minutes later, two officers were shown into the boardroom of the UN flagship.

'Good Evening, Admiral,' greeted the Russian Leader with a bow. 'I am Colonel Andrei Narovic of the Russian Navy and this is my colleague, Major Gobonev.'

The Admiral returned his bow. 'Welcome aboard Columbia, Colonel. You, too, Major. May I introduce Captain Henry Whittaker, United States Navy, and

Commander John Jakes, head of the United Nations Air and Ground personnel.'

The Russian Colonel shook hands all round and paused at the sight of Suzette.

'And the lady in white?'

'Miss Suzette Blackman, a civilian from England.'

Lieutenant Benson eased the .45 automatic from his belt and held it, at the ready, behind his back while the Russian took her hand and kissed it briefly.

'I am deeply honoured, Miss Blackman. This is indeed a pleasure for which I was quite unprepared.'

'Zdravstvuyet, Comrade,' said Suzette with a quick nod and the Russian

hesitated and then smiled as he let go of her hand and stood back. The Lieutenant breathed again.

'It seems,' announced Colonel Narovic to all present. 'That we are all in, (how you say it?) the same ship.'

'Boat.'

'Boat?'

'In the same boat,' clarified the Admiral with a smile.

'As you say, Admiral Davison.' He paused. 'What does your government say you must do now?'

'I have to clarify that I am not here as a representative of the United States government but of the United Nations of which your great country is also a member. We have come only in the capacity of peace bringers. I am led to understand that the nuclear exchange which has taken place was the fault of neither of our nations.'

'How do you know this is true?'

'Because Miss Blackman here monitored the whole affair. Both your people and mine were tricked into attacking each others' forces with the effect that the population of almost the whole of Europe has been annihilated.'

The Colonel turned to Suzette. 'How were you able to monitor this?'

'By satellite,' she replied confidently.

'NATO spy satellite?' Major Gobonev snided.

'Not at all,' she replied without offence. 'I am an Anglo-French civilian and use non-military equipment. Initially, the satellite, Princess, was put into geostationary orbit by the French and Britain was given permission to use the data to monitor the weather patterns by means of heat probes. Unfortunately, Princess was taken over by the Consortium which instigated the war and used it to misdirect the data so that each side believed itself to be under nuclear attack from the other. Both retaliated as instructed and Boom! No Europe.'

The Russian Major sneered. 'It cannot be that simple.'

'Why not? Often it is the simple things that work most effectively. NATO bombers were given false information and incorrect codes were fed to your submarines. Within an hour of the data corruption, nuclear exchanges had taken place with the loss of millions of lives.'

'This Consortium. What did it hope to gain?'

She placed a long index finger on his chest. 'Power, comrade. When the dust settled, they would come up out of their fallout shelters and make Europe one big empire and control the finances of the world.'

The Russian Colonel turned to the Admiral. 'And now they are all destroyed?'

'We believe so. Miss Blackman's brother was able to break into their headquarters building at Mandagout and locate the other control centres. UN aircraft from Columbia then destroyed those centres.'

'So. In the whole area, there is just your small fleet and my submarine.'

Suzette suddenly frowned.

'It would seem so,' said the Admiral. 'With the exception of a few thousand survivors who had the good sense or luck to stay underground.'

'Colonel,' interrupted Suzette, stepping slowly in his direction. 'Do you still play chess?'

The Russian looked taken aback for a moment before he smiled. 'Of course. Your memory must be very good, Miss Blackman. It is some years since I played in championships.'

'Pawn to King's Knight Three,' she suddenly challenged.

There was a stunned silence which lasted for several minutes as Suzette moved until she stood a foot from the Colonel, facing him with her hands loosely clasped behind her back, her shoulders pulled back, her head raised to look him straight in the eyes, her chest and slightly-rounded belly thrust towards him as she rocked on the side of her shoes like a young child.

Colonel Narovic smiled and responded 'Pawn to Queen Four.'

'King's Bishop to King's Rook Three,' retaliated Suzette without a second's hesitation and the smile dropped from the Russian's face.

'What the hell is she up to?' whispered Captain Whittaker.

'It's called playing him at his own game, I suspect,' replied the Admiral quietly.

'But how can they play chess? They have no board, no pieces.'

The Admiral smiled. 'A good Commander knows how to find out where all his troops are at any one time. A great Commander knows, instinctively, where they all are without even looking. The very best kind of Commander also knows, with a dead certainty, exactly what his opponent will do under any given set of circumstances.'

'But she has started all wrong and this man is a world-class champion. I am by no means an expert at the game but I do know enough about it to be sure she cannot hope to win by starting like this.'

The Admiral pondered for a moment. 'I'll bet my next month's wages she beats him.'

'What? After she's begun with a Weather-Girl's Gambit?'

'Watch closely, Henry. I think that you and I and the Russians are about to receive a lesson in human nature. I don't yet know what she's up to but I intend to let her have her head. You can call her a simple Weather-Girl if you like but, whatever else she might be, that kid is one very smart cookie.'

'Queen to King's Rook Five,' the Russian pronounced, the smile firmly back on his face.

He had "taken" five of Suzette's pieces in just seven quick moves and was very pleased with himself. The UN officers stood in silence and Suzette's eyes never left the Colonel's for a second, their bodies only inches apart.

Lieutenant Benson took the safety catch off his automatic and tensed himself.

'Queen's Knight to Queen's Rook Six,' Suzette said without blinking.

The former chess champion paused. It was too easy. He had played hundreds of games in his life and this was going to be the quickest victory ever.

'Queen's Rook to King Five,' he said after considerable thought. Any minute now.

'Queen's Knight to Queen's Bishop Seven,' she instinctively returned.

The Russian Colonel hesitated, his smile slowly dissipating. The Lieutenant's arm hung by his side, the gun at the ready.

'Check!' Suzette tossed into the ensuing silence.

The atmosphere could have been cut with a knife as the Russian glared down at the slip of a girl who stood before him, her innocent brown eyes big and wide. The fingers of his right hand behind his back touched something solid up the sleeve of his left arm. A sideways glance told him what he had hoped he would not see but knew he would. The Major was watching him closely so he dare not lose now. The pride of the whole Russian Navy depended on his winning this exchange.

Unfortunately, he had made the worst possible mistake. He had become over-confident, missing a vital move, one that could now cost him the game. There was only one possible way he could get out of it.

'King to Queen One,' he gambled.

Suzette was silent. The handle of the switch-blade knife was now in the Colonel's right hand, his thumb on the tiny button that would release the razor-sharp, five-inch blade with the notched end, designed to rip its way through flesh and cause the maximum damage in the process. If she twigged him, if she won, he had only one course of action to take for the pride of Mother Russia. For that reason, he had to beat her.

He was deceiving himself. By getting this far, she had proved that she knew the game she was playing and there was no way she would miss this chance to humiliate him. Slowly, he looked down the front of Suzette's dress at the material stretched tightly over her most precious assets, the shape of her navel clearly seen below them. In his imagination, he drew himself onto tiptoe and stepped back onto his left foot, his right arm scything upwards. The knife would enter her body just above the navel, plunging to the hilt and then, curving upwards, the blade would sever the right ventricle of her heart as the first of the Lieutenant's bullets hit him. Together, they would fall in an embrace of death, as their bodies twitched their last in front of this

prestigious audience. He would be dead but would be posthumously hailed as a great hero at home.

He opened his mouth to speak.

'Where is Malinov Two?' asked Suzette quietly.

It would have taken a chain saw to cut the atmosphere at that moment as the pretty, twenty-three-year-old computer data analyst from Cambridge faced the veteran naval officer from Moskva; she relaxed, he poised ready to slice her wide open. The quiet snick of the automatic broke the silence and Colonel Narovic glanced sideways, the hole at the end of the Lieutenant's barrel looking like the mouth of a cannon at such close range. He did not answer as he fought with himself over what he should now do. If he didn't act, the Russian Major would kill them both. She would be ripped apart by the soft-nosed bullets loaded into the pistol inside the Major's jacket, he following her to the floor in deep shame and disgrace. As he remained poised, his body beginning to shake as sweat broke out on his brow, Suzette began to speak quietly but confidently.

'At oh-three-hundred hours European Time on Wednesday 28th July, Malinovs One and Two left the Black Sea beneath a Petrovic supertanker. By noon, both vessels had passed through the Dardanelles, Malinov One following the coast of Turkey, Malinov Two heading for the Aegean. Malinov One launched her missiles from position eight-degrees east, forty-two north, while Malinov Two stayed at six-degrees east, forty-three north.' She paused. 'I ask you again, Colonel Narovic. Where is Malinov Two?'

The silence was overbearing. Admiral Davison's mind reeled. What was the girl talking about? There is no Malinov Two, surely. And if there was, why was she so interested in it?

Lieutenant Benson's hand began to sweat as it held the automatic pointed at the Russian's face. He had seen the knife and was ready to fire. He hoped he would be quick enough to save Miss Blackman's life.

So she knew, thought Colonel Narovic. But how could she? Even all the Presidium did not know of the second Malinov series super-sub.

'Shall I tell you?' she offered.

No, he thought, not that. If she revealed the position of Malinov Two, their plan will have failed. The Americans would launch their aircraft and attack. The submarine would likely escape but at what cost? The girl would tell and the secret would be out.

Instead, Suzette spoke the last words he wanted to hear and, in doing so, signed her own death warrant. 'Queen to King's Bishop Six.'

He looked into her eyes for what would be the last time as she stood, seemingly holding out herself towards him to receive the notched sliver of honed steel that would tear the life from her body.

Suzette confirmed the finality. 'Checkmate!'

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## STRATEGY

WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST - 2100 hrs.

The receiver on Malinov Two bleeped twice as Captain Ralentov glanced at his

instrument panel and then nodded to the helmsman. Orders were given and, slowly, the mighty warship rose to the surface, her weapon systems shut down, and then glided silently towards the UN fleet as the evening sun hung poised just above the surface of the Mediterranean Sea.

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MAJOR Gobonev smiled, placed the miniature transmitter on the polished table and stepped alongside his countryman, touching his arm gently and reassuringly.

'From whom did you learn to play such excellent chess, Miss Blackman?' he asked in perfect English.

'I didn't,' Suzette replied, not taking her eyes from the Colonel's face.

'This has been my very first game.'

He looked staggered as his Colonel relaxed and placed the folded switchblade into his pocket. The Lieutenant dropped his gun arm at a nod from the Admiral who was more perplexed than he cared to show.

'Malinov Two will be alongside in fifteen minutes,' confirmed the Major. 'I regret the deception which was necessary until we discovered whether or not our nations were still hostile towards each other.'

'Would you have fired your nuclear torpedoes at us?' asked the Admiral.

'If necessary,' nodded the Major, indicating the transmitter. 'One bleep for disappear, two for surface and reveal, three for fire.'

'We were easy targets, weren't we?' asked Suzette.

'You were.' He smiled again. 'How did you know?'

'I didn't, not for certain. I overheard the ensign say that the sonar signal was slightly distorted which suggested to me that Malinov Two was using the sub-aqua noise from Malinov One to cover its approach to within firing range.'

'And, of course, you already knew there were two of us?'

'Yes, I did. You left Odessa base together under the cover of Petrovic and had launched together so it stood to reason you would approach the UN fleet in unison. However, your victory would have been a short lived one.'

Slowly and carefully, Suzette held up her left hand and the confused Russians stared at it.

On two of her fingers were patterned gold rings and, as the officers peered carefully, they saw that spot-soldered to them were very fine copper wires which ran, almost invisibly, across the palm of her hand to the large digital watch adorning her wrist. The Colonel swallowed and the others stared as she lifted the bottom half of the watch face and pressed six of the tiny buttons.

'As long as I held my fingers together, you were all safe. If, however, I became convinced you were not who you seemed to be and Europe was still under threat, I would have simply opened my hand to break the contacts. Inside my watch is a tiny, short-range transmitter linked to a receiver at the tracking station.' She glanced at the Major. 'You see, Comrade Gobonev, modern technology was not the sole prerogative of the Soviet Union.'

'Go on,' prompted the Admiral.

'The receiver is attached to a thermonuclear device which is part of the self-destruct mechanism at the tracking station on nearby Pic Neulos. If anything was to happen to me, everything within twenty miles of that spot would be totally obliterated, including all these ships.'

'Good God,' said Captain Whittaker, sitting down. 'I think I need a drink.'

'Then I suggest a drink to détente, gentlemen,' proposed the Admiral.

Drinks were served and Suzette was left facing the Russian Colonel.

'I...I...' he started.

'You nearly killed us all, Colonel Narovic.'

'What can I say?'

'Nothing. You would simply have done what you felt you had to do.'

'But the chess? You say you have never played before?'

'I didn't say that. I simply said that no-one had trained me and that you were my first real opponent.'

He was utterly perplexed. 'But the game, the strategy.'

'Computers, Colonel. When I completed my training course at S.I.E.D., my

brother gave me a high-level computer programme which no-one had ever beaten. He bet me that I couldn't master it.'

'Did he now?'

'Yes. And if I won, he promised he would tune my car for me.'

'Your car?'

She smiled. 'It goes very fast now.'

'You beat the computer?'

Suzette nodded. 'Eventually. You see, I have a very useful photographic memory and every time I made a mistake, and at first I made a great many, I watched how the computer reacted to them and remembered each and every move. It was a very complex programme, designed by an expert but, after a hundred or so tries, I learned to beat it. Now, I get bored, because I know the moves better than the software does.'

He laughed to release the tension. 'Then, in a manner of speaking, I was really playing against a computer.'

'Colonel,' she joined in the merriment. 'You didn't stand a chance.'

'But tell me. What if you had not beaten the computer? You would have lost your bet. What would your brother have asked of you in return?'

'Roger didn't ask. But he knew me well enough to know that whatever he asked for, I would have given.'

'Anything?' he queried, his right eyebrow raised.

'If you knew me better, Colonel, you would not need to ask such a question. I love my brother very much and trust him implicitly. He would never do anything to harm me.'

'Beware of trust, Miss Blackman,' said the Russian soberly. 'Someday, you might find it has been misplaced.'

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THURSDAY 12th AUGUST - 0900 hrs.

They were invited to stay the night on Columbia with the two Russian submarines moored alongside the massive aircraft carrier as the water lapped against their hulls. A close watch was kept by both nations upon each other's fleet but without incident. Perhaps a kind of peace had been reached at last. Breakfast was a relatively sober affair due to the fact that a considerable amount of Rye and Vodka had been consumed to celebrate their new-found détente. Suzette seemed the only truly cheerful one, a lover of pure orange juice.

'I now have the pictures that have been developed,' announced the Admiral. 'It seems there is lot of work to be done to put Europe right. Little remains, as far as our experts can tell, of any form of central government in the European countries.'

'And what of Britain?' asked Roger.

'No contact yet with the northern fleet. I hope the news, when it comes, will be better.'

'We must set up some kind of relief organisation,' said Philippe. He looked from the Admiral to the Russian Colonel. 'Will your governments help?'

'I have received a coded communiqué from Washington,' said Admiral Davison.

'The President is sending a representative across in the next day or so to weigh up the situation.'

'And your people?' Suzette asked the Russians.

'They have been less open about their offers,' replied the Major. 'I fear they will wait for a United Nations directive before acting.'

The Admiral pushed his empty plate away from himself. 'I shall send in my full report later in the day. I would be honoured, Colonel Narovic, if you would assist me and confirm my observations.'

'In the furtherance of peace, Admiral, I would gladly do so.'

'Can I help?' asked Suzette cheerfully, probably knowing far more about the true situation than both of the men put together.

The two military leaders looked at each other.

'It is possible you could be useful for something,' said the Russian.

'We will need weather reports,' added the Admiral.

Suzette sat in silence for a long time.

Her brother saved her embarrassment and spoke for them all. 'Well, if you don't need us, gentlemen, we will go and repair our house or clean our car or something. Might I beg us a lift back to land?' He stood up.

'Of course, Mr Blackman,' said the Admiral. 'Our helicopter is at your disposal and Major Slazinski has orders to assist you in any way possible. He will be in radio contact with us here and keep you supplied with food and whatever else you need.'

'You are very kind,' said Philippe, also standing. He turned to the Russians. 'It was nice meeting you, comrades. I'm sure we will meet again sometime, under less stressful circumstances.'

'I hope so,' said Major Gobonev. He turned to Suzette. 'Proschaneye, Miss Blackman - Farewell.'

'Dos vidanya,' she responded with a brief glance at Colonel Narovic. 'Until we meet again.'

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FRIDAY 13th AUGUST - 1500 hrs.

The sound of the labouring engines caused Philippe to look up from his repair work on Suzette's villa and lean out of the broken window. Roger stepped onto the patio and looked down the hill to where the three trucks wound their way through the narrow gorge that cut off their valley from the wide, once-fertile Plain of Rousillon.

'It looks like Carlos,' he announced with a smile.

'He seems to have gathered a few friends along the way,' observed Suzette, modestly tucking a towel around herself as she padded from the pool area.

The sun bore down on them and Marianne tilted back the wide-brimmed hat and opened one eye. 'Qu'est-ce-qu'il-y-a?'

'C'est Carlos et beaucoup des amis,' replied Suzette, waving towards the first of the approaching vehicles which responded with a frantic tooting on the horn.

Philippe slipped his arm around her slim waist. 'So they finally made it,' he said.

'I wonder where they acquired the other two trucks.'

He laughed. 'Pinched them along the way, I expect.'

'That's not funny,' she said seriously.

'But the previous owners will have been killed, Suzette. They won't miss them.'

'That's not the point. Someone may have survived. I told Roger the other day, we can't just go around looting whatever we need.'

'Why not?'

'It just doesn't seem right, that's why not.'

'Suzette, wake up to reality. If we are to survive, we must use whatever is available and at our disposable.'

She shrugged. 'Please yourself. I'm going to get dressed, it's nearly time for me to relieve Jim at the tracking station.'

He patted her bottom playfully. 'You look dressed enough for me.'

'What? In a bikini bottom and hand-towel? Major Slazinski would have a heart attack if I turned up looking like this.'

'Poor Al. He wouldn't know what had hit him.'

'At least he is a gentleman and honest at that.'

Philippe frowned. 'What did you mean by that remark?'

'Nothing,' she said, turning away.

He grabbed for her and ended up with the towel in his hand. He reached out again but Marianne stood between them in her black swimsuit, her hands on her slim hips.

'Non,' she said to Philippe. 'Restez-la.'

Philippe glared at the French teenager who stood defiantly in front of him until she took the heat out of the moment by reaching out and touching his bare chest gently with her long fingers. 'S'il-tu plait.'

With a shrug, he turned away to greet the new arrivals who had assisted with

the defeat of the Consortium. There were four of the original group who had once been Basque separatists but had been found by Roger just a few days ago. En Route, They had been joined by other survivors and had armed themselves and proved worthy colleagues. Roger welcomed them with a typical British handshake and invited them to the villa while Marianne greeted them more warmly. Inside the villa, Suzette pulled on a pair of denim shorts and a white blouse, and tucked her hair into a pony-tail behind her dark glasses. After a brief greeting to the new arrivals, she slipped behind the wheel of her Cosworth and, in a cloud of dust, roared up the narrow track towards the roof of the Anti-Pyrenees. The sound of the engine echoed from the trees on the other side of the valley as she negotiated the tight bends that threaded through the forest on the slopes of Pic Neulos. However, she did not hear this echo as her ears were occupied with the sounds of Fleetwood Mac blaring from her four-way speaker system which seemed just right to suit her mood. Why wasn't Philippe being honest with her? Two days ago, she would gladly have married him. But Now...? Having suffered badly at the hands of French Security in the days leading up to the destruction, she was now wary when things appeared not to fit together perfectly. Was it her imagination? Nagging at her mind were the words of Colonel Narovic. Trust was good but it could be misplaced and, when it was, the results could be tragic.

Turning left at the top of the pass, Suzette paused for a moment and looked down the valley. It looked little different to the last time she had done so, before all this started. The Plain of Rousillon lay stretched out below her into the far distance where the sea shone blue in the afternoon sun. With a sigh, she pushed on until the low concrete building came into sight with the giant helicopter gunship parked beside it, the only level ground for miles around. The soldier sitting beside it jumped to his feet as she approached, parked the car in the shade and then climbed out of the driver's door.

A low whistle greeted her. A month ago and she would have retorted angrily at such a blatant advance. Today, she smiled. 'Hi, Martin. Is Al inside?'

'He is, Miss Blackman. Wow, you look swell, ma'am.'

'Less of the "ma'am", kid. I'm twenty-three, not fifty-three.'

'Yes, Miss Blackman, I mean no, Miss Blackman.'

She stood before the young rookie. 'Where did you sleep last night?'

He looked puzzled. 'On the 'copter, miss. Where else?'

'Come inside,' she said and turned to go.

'But I can't. My orders...'

Suzette returned and grabbed his collar. 'Inside, soldier,' she said cheekily.

'You're doing yourself no good at all out here in this hot sun.'

The air inside the concrete building was considerably cooler as Suzette closed the door and ushered Corporal Fisher into the main control room of the tracking station. Jim Marshal looked up from the console and smiled as Gillian stood up and kissed her friend's cheek. Major Slazinski glowered at his junior who looked as if he would rather be anywhere else than on that spot.

'I brought him in out of the sun,' clarified Suzette. 'He is achieving nothing out there.'

'I ordered him to guard the helicopter,' mumbled the Major, his cigar still in his mouth.

Suzette snatched it out and stuck it in his top pocket.

'You light up that thing in here, Al, and I'll throw you out,' she threatened, pushing her shades onto the top of her head. 'Now why don't you open some of those cool cokes you brought over from Columbia this morning and we'll have a cosy chat.'

'Chat?' he queried, trying desperately to keep his eyes off her long legs and low-buttoned blouse.

'Coke,' she commanded, prodding his chest with her long finger. He nodded and returned in a few minutes with opened bottles for them all.

'Al,' Suzette said as he handed her a cool bottle. 'How often do you have to report in about us?'

The black giant from the ghettos of Brooklyn spluttered on his coke and the

looked very guilty as Suzette faced him, demanding an answer.

'Twice a day,' he eventually admitted. 'How did you know?'

'I am slow sometimes, but not completely stupid. Commander Jakes was much too quick to assign you to us. He could simply have waited for us to call him up the radio but he didn't. He sent you to watch us instead. Does he think we're going to attack his precious Task Force?'

'I don't know,' the Major said with head bowed. 'I just obey orders.'

'Look. We saved the fleet from destruction just a few days ago. Marianne radioed and told you precisely where the rebel headquarters was and my brother found out where all the other bases were and led you to them. Now, we keep a twenty-four hour vigil here to ensure you are informed of any other activities. Why does your Commander not trust us?'

'I wish I knew.'

She sighed. 'I won't object to your being here nor to your reporting in. I'll even give you a copy of the print-out every day if that will make him feel any better. It's just that I resent it when there is so much work to be done and your people just sit there, out in the bay, watching us.'

'I think it is not so much you who is not to be trusted. The Admiral cannot believe your equipment can do all the things you have said it will.'

'Well, you have watched us now for the last thirty-six hours, what conclusions have you reached?'

'I'm not sure.' He looked at the lists of figures on the print-outs. 'It's all mumbo-jumbo to me.'

'Then let me explain.' She turned to her colleague. 'Excuse me, Jim.'

Jim stood up and put his arm around Gillian who had seen it all before.

'Do you mind if we go down to the house?' he asked. 'I'm shattered.'

'Of course. Do you want to take the car?'

'Not likely, I'm alright on a straight road but that forest trail frightens me to death even as a passenger. We'll go down on the ski-lift.'

'Can I make a suggestion?' Suzette asked the Major. 'Send Martin down with them. He can take a portable radio with him to my villa and we will always be in contact with each other.'

The Major thought for a moment then nodded and gave the order. The three of them left, leaving Suzette alone with Al Slazinski and the pilot who was resting in one of the bunks on the upper floor.

'Sit down here,' said Suzette, patting the swivel stool beside her. 'How much do you know about computers?'

'Not a great deal. In my line, I don't come across them much except to control weapons.'

'Okay, I'll explain.' She tucked loose strands of hair into her headband while Al pretended not to look down the front of her blouse.

'On the roof is a scanner dish which receives signals from Princess. These signals come from different kinds of sensors on board. First, there are the air temperature probes on board the satellite. They scan the upper atmosphere and send back data from three areas of Europe designated AX, BX and CX. These signals, which the computer analyses, indicate weather patterns in France, Britain and the surrounding areas. I was trained in Paris to interpret this data. It is in French and so takes someone who is bilingual to sort it out properly.'

'That was your job at Cambridge?'

'Precisely. Unfortunately for the Consortium I discovered, almost by accident, that the satellite is capable of scanning other areas by means of heat-seeking ground probes. They called it section DX.'

'Ground probes? You mean to scan the ground temperature?'

'That's right.'

He looked puzzled. 'What good would that do?'

'Not a lot by itself. However, by breaking into the software, I found out that the main CADE programme filters the data by means of multiple FOR-IF-NEXT loops.'

'What, in tarnation, are they?'

'Simply put, descramblers which could eliminate normal movements of vehicles and personnel and isolate any abnormal activity.'

'But such movements will have been seen by spy satellites as well. Of what use was this data?'

'Simple. Firstly, spy satellites are practically useless when it's cloudy whereas Princess compensates for cloud layers by making comparisons with the ambient temperature. Secondly Princess, being geostationary above the equator, could watch for twenty-four-hours a day.'

'What area does this Princess scan?'

'The whole of Europe.'

'So you knew when the war started?'

'We even saw the lead-up and tried to warn the powers that be but they didn't believe us any more than your people do now.'

'But it doesn't explain how you knew about the Russians. I think this is what has the Commander worried.'

'It's because Princess also has probes that measure heat outputs in EX.'

He looked wary. 'Where is EX?'

'Below sea level. Even though your spy satellites could not see Malinov One and Two below the water, Princess identified them immediately and traced their progress through the Mediterranean. Before we went to the ball, I could see Malinov One approaching from the South-East and Malinov Two slipping in from the South and I wasn't sure what they would do. It was when Colonel Narovic said there was only one submarine left after the exchange that I became suspicious of their motives.'

'And you would really have blown us all up?'

'To prevent any further destruction of Europe? Of course.'

'But you would have died yourself.'

She shrugged. 'So? What does my life amount to compared with the future of Europe?'

'You would have sacrificed yourself and your friends for such a principle?'

'Tell me. Are you married, Major?'

'Yes,' he replied, uncertain as to the implication of the question.

'And you have come half-way across the world, away from your wife and family, to try to bring peace to Europe? Would you have been prepared to die in the attempt to take the Consortium's headquarters at Mandagout if it had been necessary?'

He drew his shoulders back proudly. 'Of course.'

'Then why do you doubt my motives? They are no different to your own. Nor any better.'

'I think I begin to understand. You are not a rebel after all.'

She smiled. 'Oh, yes I am. For once, since the history of mankind, we have the chance of unifying Europe, removing all the old boundaries and starting again in peace.'

'A single Europe?'

'It has been the dream of politicians for years. Why can it not be so now? We have a never-to-be-repeated opportunity we would be stupid to ignore. From the ashes of Europe, a Phoenix must arise and I will live for that event.' She looked him straight in the eye. 'Or die for it.'

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PAWN TO KNIGHT THREE

FRIDAY 13th AUGUST - 2130 hrs.

A faint bleep came from the CX monitor as Suzette sipped her last cup of coffee of the shift. Running her fingers swiftly over the keyboard, she nudged the Major with her knee. He mumbled once, threw his legs from the desk-top and was instantly wide awake.

Suzette grinned. 'Steady, Al. There's no emergency.'

'What is it?' he asked, rubbing his tired eyes.

'There is a plane approaching the west coast of Spain and I thought you might

like to inform the Admiral.'

'What kind of plane?'

'Sub-sonic. Looks like a transporter of some sort.'

'Can you tell?'

'Not with accuracy. It could just as well be a bomber.'

'A bomber?' He reached for the radio.

Suzette laughed. 'Relax. It's come across the Atlantic so it must be this Senator of yours.'

'Could be.' He spoke into the radio. 'Laroque to Columbia, do you read? Over.'

'Columbia receiving, Major. Go ahead. Over.'

'Unidentified aircraft approaching from the west. Over.'

'Thank you, Laroque. Stand by for confirmation. Over.'

The radio was silent for several minutes.

'I hope you're right about this,' said the Major. 'I don't want to look a monkey.'

Suzette said nothing but continued to watch the screens. BX also bleeped.

'Columbia to Laroque. Nothing on radar. Can you confirm exact position? Over.'

Al looked across at Suzette who handed him a piece of paper she had already written upon. He glanced at the words and then back to her face. She shrugged.

He pressed the button. 'Laroque to Columbia. Position is eleven degrees west, thirty-eight north and heading due east. Over.'

'Confirming. Stand by. Over.'

It was Commander Jakes' voice that was heard next as Suzette smiled smugly.

'Al. This is John. Are you sure about this?'

The Major looked at Suzette long and hard before answering. 'Position confirmed, Commander. Probable transporter. Likely source USA. Over.'

'Thank you, Al. Stand by.'

The radio went dead and the silence seemed oppressive as the external closed-circuit cameras showed the approach of darkness. A faint hum in the distance disturbed it.

'What's that?' said the Major.

'Cable car,' replied the dark-haired girl, her face illuminated by the screens. 'Jim and Gill coming to take over from us and have a private cuddle.'

On the closed-circuit screen, she saw the cable-car stop and the couple were greeted by the helicopter pilot. Martin was with them and the four of them walked towards the tracking station building in the semi-darkness.

The radio crackled again. 'Columbia to Laroque. Aircraft now on radar. Thanks for the early-warning. Over and Out.'

Al Slazinski smiled and relaxed. 'You're good, you know that?'

'Of course,' Suzette teased. 'Are you coming down to the house?'

'I ought to stay.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You need a good night's rest and Martin and the pilot can hold the fort here. We'll be in radio contact all the time.'

He hesitated and then picked up the radio. 'Laroque to Columbia. Over.'

'Columbia receiving. Over.'

'Request speak again with Commander Jakes. Over.'

After a brief delay, the familiar voice came over the air once more. 'Go ahead, Al. Over.'

'Request permission to inspect the valley, leaving the pilot and corporal at the station. Over.'

'Permission granted. Good work, Major. Over and Out.'

The arrivals filed in and took their positions. Suzette slipped her arm through the Major's. 'Let's go and eat, Major. Goodnight, folks. See you in the morning.'

'Bright and early, I hope,' muttered Jim. 'It gets boring up here after a while.'

Suzette pointed to the screens. 'Keep your eye on the big fellow who's just arrived. It's probably someone come to stake his claim in Europe.'

Jim sat down as Suzette smiled and dragged off Al into the cool, evening air.

'Do we go down that contraption?' he asked, pointing to the cable-lift.

'Not likely,' said Suzette. 'I like my feet firmly on the ground.'

They stood for a moment beside the Cosworth and looked at the view all around. To the South was Spain, dark and ominous to the far distance. To the east, the coastline could just be seen where the paler sea met the tall cliffs of the Côte-Vermeille. Westwards could be seen the tall peak of Canigou standing dark against the remains of the sunset. Northwards was just darkness.

'It's odd,' said Suzette. 'I used to come up here in the holidays as a teenager and that whole area would be a sea of lights. Perpignan, Carcassonne and, in the far distance, Narbonne and Béziers. Now, it's all gone. All those people, dead.'

The Major slipped his arm around her shoulders as she shivered slightly. 'You did your best to warn them, Missy. You could have done no more.'

She slipped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. 'Hold me.'

He did and it was not dreadfully unpleasant.

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FRIDAY 13th AUGUST - 2200 hrs.

The headlights picked out the trees, looking eerie in the white light, as the Cosworth bounced its way down the narrow road towards the villa. Not a word had been said since leaving the tracking station - Suzette concentrating on holding the car on the road - Al concentrating on Suzette concentrating on holding the car on the road. The lights of the villa came into view below them.

'That's odd,' said the Major suddenly.

Suzette braked to a standstill, all four wheels juddering against the anti brake-lock system. 'What is?'

He raised his thumb. 'That notice back there.'

Suzette glanced at him in the light from the dashboard and then reversed slowly up the trail.

'NE-JETTEZ-PAS PIERRE,' proudly displayed the sign.

'Now why in tarnation would anyone want to throw Peter off this mountain?'

Suzette roared with laughter. 'Pierre is not just the equivalent of Peter, it also means rocks or stones. It warns people not to throw stones as there are houses below.'

Al Slazinski joined in her laughter and it was a hysterical pair who staggered, arm-in-arm, onto the patio.

'I heard you coming,' muttered the voice beside the pool. 'It's a good job we haven't any neighbours.'

'Bon soir, Philippe. I brought the Major down for the night.'

'So I hear,' he sarcastically replied as he rose to his feet in front of them.

'I hope you enjoy your night of passion together.'

The slap sounded like a gunshot in the night-time stillness as the girl stood glaring at the Frenchman. She raised her hand again but Philippe caught her wrist and held it until the Major shuffled a little to remind them of his presence. Philippe opened his hand and smiled.

'My apologies, Major. The mind plays tricks in the darkness.'

'I think it is to Miss Blackman that you owe an apology, boy.'

Philippe glanced briefly and, without comment, turned his back on them and went into the villa.

'I'm sorry,' said Suzette, ashamed of the confrontation.

'Don't you go apologising, Miss. You go in and sleep. I'll stay out here where it's cooler.'

'Will you be okay?' she said quietly, turning to face him.

'After a week on Columbia? Anywhere on terra firma is paradise after that.'

She stood very close and had to stand on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. 'Mrs Slazinski is one very lucky lady,' she said almost sadly.

Al watched as the young woman, who reminded him very much of his Bettina of ten years ago, disappeared into the darkness that was her villa. Laying his automatic rifle against the side wall, he lay back against the low parapet, deep in the thoughts which bombarded his brain from all directions. There was

a slight discolouration in the eastern sky before he finally got to sleep.

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SATURDAY 14th AUGUST - 0900 hrs.

When the Major awoke, he found himself surrounded by men in combat dress. He reached out and found that his rifle was still where he had left it. One of the men smiled.

'Good morning, Major,' greeted Roger. 'You remember Carlos and Manuel who helped us at Mandagout?'

Al clambered to his feet and his heart rate began to return to normal. For a minute, he had thought...

'Hi, Fellahs,' he greeted. 'You just got here?'

'Last night, Señor. With men from Perpignan.'

'How many are you?'

'Twenty-five,' said Manuel proudly. 'We are the Army of Free Europe.'

'Now wait a minute. You can't go around forming armies of your own.'

'Why not?' said Roger. 'There is no other kind any more. Someone has to see that any people who are left are helped and regrouped.'

'But that is why the UN Task Force is here.'

'Then we will welcome its help, Major. I'm sure we will be able to work together. After all, we are no longer at war.'

'Est-ce-que vous-prenez le petit déjeuner?' asked Marianne as she stepped onto the patio, dressed in denims and tee-shirt, a tray in her hands.

The Major looked confused, due to his limited French, until he saw the contents of the tray she had brought and then smiled and nodded. Marianne put down it down and then held Roger's hand as Al tucked in to coffee and croissants.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' greeted the cheerful Suzette as she approached, looking radiant in the sunshine.

Major Al Slazinski, veteran of Vietnam and Iraq, who thought he had seen everything, did a double-take to make sure his imagination had not gotten the better of him. He compared dress, shape and stature in the way an expert would and had to admit that, except for the hair and eyes, Suzette and Marianne were like identical twins. All they needed to complement their denims and tee-shirts were sun-glasses to cover their eyes and kiss-me-quick hats to hide their hair colouring and he would have been hard-pressed to tell them apart despite the four-year age difference.

'C'est bon?' asked the younger one.

'Are you enjoying your breakfast?' clarified the other.

'Yes,' he said slowly and deliberately. 'Thanks.'

'You'll be glad to know that your Senator arrived safely. They couldn't land at Perpignan because of the short runway and so diverted to Narbonne where a helicopter has just picked him up with his entourage.'

'Has Columbia radioed in?'

'No, Martin just called me from the station. Jim tracked them in with Princess.'

The Major rolled to his feet, passing the empty tray back to Marianne with a nod. 'He will want to meet you, I expect.'

'Why?'

'Well...I don't know. The survivors, I guess.'

'There may be others, you know. If the UN really wants to help, it must set up relief points to assist the wounded and bury the dead. There will be a great number of them, I'm afraid.'

'I reckon so. I'd better get back to the 'copter in case they call.'

'Okay. Marianne and I will take you up.' She turned to her brother. 'Have you seen Philippe?'

'He's about somewhere, looking miserable for some reason.'

'He'll snap out of it. Will you be all right here while we go up?'

'Of course. We'll wait to hear from you before we do anything.' Roger kissed her cheek and whispered; 'Be careful, little sister.'

'Aren't I always?' She winked cheekily.

Marianne also kissed him briefly and Al climbed in behind his "twins" as Suzette started the sixteen-valve Cosworth engine and locked her full-harness seat belt. With a wave, Suzette rolled out of the driveway, between the now-stationary trucks and onto the narrow track leading to Pic Neulos. Yet again, the sun was warm and the relative coolness at three-thousand feet was refreshing as Suzette sat, her arm on the edge of the open window, her dark hair streaming out behind her. Gillian came out to meet them as they arrived and smiled at the Major.

'Commander Jakes has just been on the radio, Al. He asks that you get back to him immediately.'

'Thanks.' He smiled to the shorter, but better-developed girl and stepped inside and reached for the radio, nodding a greeting to Jim and his own men.

'Laroque to Columbia,' he said into the microphone. 'Do you read? Over.'

'Columbia receiving, Major. Hold on, I have the Commander for you. Over.'

They all waited in silence for some moments while Suzette looked at the print-outs with Jim before he left with Gillian towards the ski-lift which would take them down the mountain.

'Al, this is John Jakes,' spoke the radio after some delay. 'Are you alone? Over.'

The Major looked around the room at the faces, all suddenly turned towards him. 'Negative. Over.'

'Then you must follow plan C. Do you understand? Over.'

Major Slazinski looked almost ill as he felt an icy hand crawl up his spine.

The other soldiers recognised the look on his face and stood expectantly.

He looked at Suzette. 'Would you repeat the order, sir? Over.'

'I repeat. We have received orders direct from the Pentagon and you must action plan C immediately. Do you read? Over.'

'Affirmative, Commander. Plan C. Laroque Out.' He put down the handset and stood for several moments without speaking.

Suzette walked over and touched his arm gently. 'Al, what is it? What is plan C?'

'My instructions are to take you back to Columbia.'

'What? All of us?'

'There is a force on its way over to collect the others. I regret I must detain you here until they arrive.' He looked down. 'I'm sorry.'

Suzette held her head up high and stepped over to the walkie-talkie set. The click as Corporal Fisher removed the safety-catch from his automatic rifle was unnaturally loud in the confined space of the control room.

Suzette hesitated and the slowly turned to face the soldier. 'Are you going to shoot me, Martin?'

He lowered the gun. 'No, Miss Blackman.'

'Come in, Roger,' she said into the mouthpiece.

'I'm here, Suzette. Go ahead.'

'It's time to go. Do it quickly.'

'Where shall we wait for you?'

'Go to...' Suzette looked at the Major. 'Go to the hideout.'

'The hideout?'

'Yes, you know, the French one. Go quickly, my brother.' She switched off the walkie-talkie. 'Thank you,' she said to the Major. 'Why are they doing this?'

'I don't know. I honestly don't know.'

'What if we were to walk out, now?'

'I would have to stop you. I have no choice.'

'Yes, you have. Come with us.'

'And desert from my duty? You know I can't do that.'

'Then it seems I have no choice either,' she said, walking over to the console and repeatedly pressing several keys. The disc drive whirred and the screen began to flash. The red light by the door duplicated the action as did the high-pitched horn in the entrance-way.

'What have you done?' Al whispered.

'Started the self-destruct sequence.'

'What? You fool. You crazy little fool.'

'Do you really think so? If you think I'm going to allow Princess to fall into the hands of NATO so they can use it against the Russians or anyone else, think again. The Russians were crafty but at least they were only after peace.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing. In a few minutes, there will be nothing left to do. The thermonuclear device in the console will detonate and we will all... disappear, along with most of this mountain and the whole of your fleet. By then, my brother and his men will be in the clear.'

The Major and his two men stared at the screen and watched the numbers running steadily down towards zero. They turned at the sound of the car which roared into life as Suzette applied power to the wheels, sending up a huge cloud of dust as the car spun on its own axis. Suzette fought with the controls as all four wheels began to grip and they felt the surge forward as the turbo dropped in. They were doing ninety before they reached the tarmac road which led through the trees just as a helicopter from USS Omaha hovered overhead between the trees. Another blocked the track down to the villa while a third buzzed around like a giant spider, greedy for an insect caught in its web.

'Hold tight,' Suzette shouted above the noise of the engine and threw the Cosworth into a sideways skid which took them very close to the edge of the mountain. Stones clattered down into the valley far below as the wheels caught again and she turned the car into the trees. Marianne instinctively threw her arms in front of her face as branches thudded against the windscreen while they plunged headlong down the steep slope, missing tall firs by inches, flattening bushes and shrubs in their path.

The car brought up with a bang at the bottom which blasted the wind out of both of them as the dust settled around them.

'Are you all right?' Suzette asked.

'Oui,' Marianne nodded, her eyes still closed as she held her trembling hands on the dashboard.

'Listen,' said Suzette, holding her head up and carefully opening the window to hear better.

The thwack-thwack of the rotors sounded almost overhead as they sat in the car on the edge of the ridge, straining to tell the exact direction.

'Get out of the car,' came the amplified voice from above. 'Step away from it with your hands in the air.'

'Can they see us?' asked Marianne.

'I doubt it,' replied Suzette. 'Not in this part of the forest. They're bluffing.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Sit it out for a minute. How much time is left?'

She looked at her watch. 'Two minutes.'

Suzette thought for a moment as a pair of the helicopters hovered around, searching for them, issuing threats for non-compliance. Suddenly, there was the sound of rapid gunfire and bees buzzed and pinged through the trees not far away. Marianne grabbed Suzette's arm.

Suzette smiled. 'Don't worry. They're just trying to frighten us.'

'They're succeeding,' said Marianne with a slight tremor in her voice.

'Give me the cylinder,' said Suzette whereupon Marianne took the six-inch long detonator and timer mechanism her cousin had removed from the console and handed it across. Suzette held it carefully in her left hand while she turned the knurled knob on the end. She looked at Marianne before looking upwards.

'Be careful. And wait till I sound the horn.'

Marianne nodded and opened the car door quietly and stepped out onto the soft pine needles. Very carefully, she sidestepped towards the cliff alongside which the helicopter hovered, carrying her precious cargo as if it was made of glass. Suzette stared at the face of her digital watch as the numbers counted down. At five, she touched the horn and started the engine. Marianne bent her arm low and the ex High-School Lacrosse-Team Captain tossed the live detonator

high into the air and threw herself onto the ground as Suzette slewed the car around to give the young girl some protection.

There was a noise like a thunderclap and the helicopter accelerated frantically as the pilot fought to control his machine and the men inside reeled from the unexpected percussive of the exploding detonator. Around and around it spun until the tail rotor caught on a tree and the gunship was brought down to earth with a crash which seemed to shake the whole forest.

'Let's go!' shouted Suzette as Marianne threw herself back into the car which was already rolling onto the road.

The Cosworth took the Col de L'Ouillat broadside on and plunged down the winding track towards the tiny hamlet of St Jean. Once through the narrow farmyard, Suzette hauled the wheel to the right and headed down the near-vertical sheep trail towards the Chapelle St Christophe. She hoped the explosion would give them the vital seconds they needed to escape. It would have done no-one any real harm, she knew, but it proved that the Army for Free Europe had teeth and, when provoked, could bite back.

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SATURDAY 14th AUGUST - 1100 hrs.

The two girls lay on the grass in the shade of the trees until the sounds finally deteriorated and then were gone.

'How did you know?' asked Marianne.

'A lot of little things. The Admiral's secrecy, the Lieutenant with his gun, the warning from Colonel Narovic. It all makes sense now.'

'How long do we wait here?' asked Marianne.

'Until dark. With luck, they might think we went straight on down into Le Perthus. No-one in their right mind would attempt to drive down this road.'

'You can say that again,' said Marianne with a nervous giggle. 'We must be crazy, Suzette.'

'Not if it gives the others time to make a break for it. I bet Al is hopping mad right now.'

'Better than being spread all over the hillside like he thought he was going to be.'

'Poor Al. And just when I was beginning to like him.'

'Do you think the Americans will go through with their plan?'

'Of course they will. They are so greedy, some of them. They will never be able to miss an opportunity like this to gain control of Europe.'

'What can we do?'

'Stop them, of course.'

'You mean take on the whole of the United States of America?'

'If necessary, yes.'

'Good grief, Suzette. Do you know what you are suggesting?'

'Of course. But remember. We have someone on our side that they don't.'

'And who's that?'

'Princess.'

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BISHOP TO ROOK THREE

SATURDAY 14th AUGUST - 2300 hrs.

There was no moon as the car rolled slowly down the hillside, the only sound that of the tyres on the narrow, gravel track. Clear of the trees, the dark shapes along the way looked ominous and eerie as they entered the narrow gorge below Roc del Grèvol. The sides of the valley seemed to press in on them, only the absence of stars to indicate where sky ended and cliffs started. A brief glitter showed them where the stream was that crossed the track and the car slowed as it rolled up the far bank. Just before it stopped, Suzette selected third gear and turned on the ignition. The engine sprang to life and hummed silently in that sheltered defile. Slowly, the car inched forwards up the far gradient until the track turned east again above Montesquieu. Suzette turned



off the engine and let the car roll down the slope until they crossed the stream again and repeated the performance with the bump-start.

'Why are we going so carefully?' asked Marianne.

'Because they'll be listening for us and they have some pretty sophisticated devices nowadays. I'm hoping the tickover will not be picked up, whereas the sound of a Ford starter motor can be heard from miles away.'

The car climbed over the col and the Tech valley below them looked oppressively dark and ominous, like a bottomless black pit devoid of lights from houses and streets. Suzette turned off the engine and rolled silently down into the outskirts of Villeongue-dels-Monts. Carefully negotiating around the abandoned cars and trucks, they arrived in the market square and turned right onto the road which proudly displayed the number D11. After five kilometres, they stopped outside a wayside restaurant. Marianne climbed out of the car, closing the door softly behind her, and carefully tiptoed to the house. Opening the front door and creeping upstairs, she then went into the front bedroom and approached the bed where, cupping her hand over the man's face, she gently shook him awake.

'Papa. C'est moi,' she whispered and the wide-awake eyes watched her.

'Qu'est-ce-qu'il-y-a?' he whispered.

'We must leave,' she replied in French. 'We are in very great danger.'

'Where is Roger?'

'He has gone ahead. We will meet him later.'

'Suzette?'

'Waiting in the car. Please get dressed as quickly as you can.'

'Can I turn the light on?'

'No. They are watching. I am going to get some food from the kitchen. Just bring a few things with you. I don't know how long we will be away.'

'Can't I stay here?'

'No. They will find you and use you against us.'

'Who is they? I thought the rebels had been caught.'

'We are the rebels now, father. The ones chasing us are the kind of people the Consortium hated. Perhaps we have taken the wrong side, after all.'

'We were not wrong in the war, ma cherie. When we fought the Bosch.'

'It is not the Germans this time. It is the Americans.'

'The Americans? But they are our allies.'

'Until they saw profit and power. Alors, at that point, their eyes turned to cash registers.'

'Where are we going?'

'I don't know yet. We must get as far from here as possible before daylight.'

'Very well. Go and get what food we need. I will be down in a few moments.'

Marianne tiptoed back downstairs and filled a couple of bags with as much high-protein food as she could carry and put them in the boot of the car. Suzette sat hunched over her Carte Topographique with a tiny, well-shielded pen-torch in her hand. She smiled at her uncle as he got in the back and kissed his cheek without comment. Marianne climbed in and they took their last look at Laroque des Albères before setting off towards La Catalane and freedom.

THEY came unstuck at Le Boulou. Whether they had been heard or the helicopter had simply been assigned to block that particular escape route, they never knew. Suddenly, as they approached toll-booths on the approach to the Autoroute slip road, they were bathed in brilliant white light and totally blinded.

'Get out of the car,' said the loud hailer.

'What shall we do?' asked Marianne.

Suzette sat, staring out of the windscreen, her hands white on the padded leather steering wheel. Deftly, she slammed the car into reverse and shot backwards, away from the lights. A hundred yards back, the car stopped and Suzette fumbled with the dashboard which sprung open.

'Can you use this?' she asked, holding up a revolver.

'I don't know,' said Marianne, scared to touch it. 'Where did you get it?'

'Philippe took it from Louis at Rouen and put it in the dashboard out of the way. It's been there ever since.'

'But I've never used one.'

'Nor have I.'

'I have,' said the voice from the back seat and the gnarled hand grasped the revolver and checked the chamber.

'Papa!' said Marianne.

'The war, my child. One does not forget some things.' He looked at Suzette's reflection in the mirror. 'Which ones shall I kill?'

'None of them. We don't want to start another war. Can you just hit the light?'

'Not from here, ma nièce. From closer, perhaps. My aim is not what it was.' Suzette pushed a button above her head and the sunroof rolled open. Raoul de Bosville smiled and poked head and gun arm through as Suzette put the car into gear.

'Ready?'

'Allez, m'enfant,' said the older man.

Suzette's left index finger touched a switch and eight hundred watts of Cibié lit up the night as her foot hit the pedal and fuel was forced under high pressure into the injectors.

'Stop!' commanded the loud hailer.

'Roaoaoaoar!' yelled the engine.

'Screech!' screamed the tyres.

'Vive La France!' shouted Marianne.

'Bang!' spoke the gun.

'Smash!' went the floodlight.

'Look-out!' warned the pilot.

'Sonofabitch!' swore the Sergeant.

'Yippee!' exclaimed Suzette.

'Vrooom!' added the turbo-charger.

'After them!' ordered the Captain.

Suzette hauled the wheel over and they were on the slip road.

The Autoroute was littered with vehicles. Some were just parked, others up against barriers and arnco. Instead of driving a real car along a real road, Suzette felt as though she was operating one of those sophisticated computer games where a car is "driven" at ultra high speed along a race track littered with obstacles. Flat out, the car swerved violently from side to side as Suzette struggled to avoid the vehicles that had been crashed or abandoned when the missiles had struck. Raoul lay on the floor, the only way to avoid being pummelled to pieces against the sides of the car. Marianne, unable to join him because of the restricting seat belt, hung on for dear life as her cousin flew through narrow gaps and around vehicles at a hundred and eighty kilometres per hour.

'They're with us,' came the voice from the back seat and Suzette looked in the mirror to where the dark shape and navigation lights of the helicopter gunship showed clearly against the starry background.

'Can we hold them off?' asked Marianne.

'Not a chance,' said Suzette grimly. 'They can cut corners.'

'What are we going to do?'

'Confuse them,' she said, standing on the brake pedal and switching off the lights. Narrowly missing a smashed-up Citroen, Suzette hurled the skidding Cosworth between two tall lorries, almost burying the bonnet of her car under the side of one of them. There was sudden quiet as the sound of the rotors receded and then faltered as the helicopter began to turn to come back to look for them - a small spotlight weaving about, searching.

'If they find us, you may have to shoot,' said Suzette sadly. 'Try to hit the engine or something vital which will force them to land.'

'I'll try,' said Raoul, standing up and leaning his elbows on the car roof.

The helicopter seemed to circle endlessly as it searched among the cars littering the Autoroute. Handicapped without its big spotlight, it took a long

time to reach them and hover overhead. She started the engine quietly. 'Now!' whispered Suzette and the report seemed deafening as her uncle fired. The tyres screamed as Suzette shot the car backwards out of the gap and then roared along the hard shoulder without lights. Marianne closed her eyes. 'They're still with us,' said Raoul, peering out of the sun roof. 'I must have missed.'

'Never mind, you tried and I'll bet it scared the pants off them.' Marianne suddenly grabbed Suzette's arm.

'Suzette,' she screamed. 'The power cables.'

The car swerved sideways between a car and the barrier and then plunged off the road as the cables which hung from the tilted pylon scraped the roof and side of the car. Just missing a lonesome tree, Suzette fought to prevent the car turning over and, eventually, it came to a standstill with the front wheels in a small stream. Dazed, Suzette opened the car door and rolled out onto the damp grass.

'The helicopter,' Marianne called.

Suzette jumped to her feet and waved her arms madly.

'Look out! The Pylons!' she cried, forgetting that the men inside could not hear a word above the noise of the rotors and neither could they see her in the darkness. A rotor snagged the tall pylon and the engine hesitated as the pilot tried to regain control. Sparks sprayed along the side of the fuselage as pieces of the broken cables thrashed around, trapped by the central boss about which they had become entangled. It looked, for a moment, as if the pilot would manage to land on the road but, suddenly, there was a whoosh and the helicopter, pylon, road and abandoned vehicles burst into flames.

'I must have hit the fuel tank,' muttered Raoul as the wreckage dropped, almost gently, onto the top of a van and then exploded like a bomb. Pieces of metal landed around them as they lay on the ground, their hands over their heads.

'Good grief,' said Marianne as she sat up.

Suzette was crying. 'I didn't want this to happen. I really didn't. Those poor men.'

'Suzette,' scolded Marianne. 'They were trying to kill us. Remember?.'

'But they were only doing their duty. Why did all this have to happen?'

'None of this is your fault,' soothed the younger girl, her arms around her cousin. 'It was the greed of others that killed them.'

'Marianne is right,' added her father. 'You cannot hold yourself responsible for their deaths.'

'But if I had stopped, they would still be alive.'

'But we might not have been. Then what good would we be to Europe?'

'We must leave,' said Raoul decisively. 'They will have been in radio contact with the aircraft carrier. Others will come searching and daylight will be here soon.'

'I guess you're right,' Suzette murmured. 'But I must see if anyone is alive.'

'A waste of time, Suzette. We must go.'

'Not until I've checked.'

'Stop!' said Marianne, grabbing her arm. 'You get the car back onto the road. Father and I will take a look.'

Suzette nodded and got into the car as the father and daughter scrambled up the grassy slope onto the road. The fire was almost out and pieces of wreckage lay smouldering everywhere. They heard Suzette start the car and slowly reverse up the bank. They also heard a groan.

'Papa!' called Marianne, crouching beside a still form. 'He's hurt bad.'

The soldier looked no more than a youth as he lay where he had been thrown from the helicopter before it exploded, his arm at a strange angle and a pool of blood beneath his head.

'We daren't move him,' warned Raoul.

'But we can't leave him here,' countered his daughter, going to fetch a blanket from the car. 'It might be hours before he is found and he needs medical attention immediately.'

'Then leave him for the others when they come. They will look after him better than we can.'

The soldier groaned and opened his eyes.

'Where am I?' he said as Suzette stepped from the car.

'In France,' she clarified softly. 'Lay still, you've been hurt.'

'Am I in heaven?' he asked, gazing into the young girl's eyes that reflected the light from the moon which now hung low over the Mediterranean.

'No,' she smiled. 'You're not dead yet.'

'We were chasing terrorists,' he suddenly remembered as he tried to sit up.

'They mustn't get away, they have the bomb.'

Suzette and her uncle looked at each other.

'They plan to destroy the fleet and we must stop them.' He looked from face to face. 'Will you help me?'

The soft footfall made his head turn as Marianne re-approached, her white tee-shirt appearing to glow in the soft moonlight.

'Now I know that I am in heaven,' he said, his eyes wide open.

'You tried to kill us,' Suzette said matter-of-factly.

'Kill you?' He shook his head. 'No, not you. The terrorists.'

She knelt beside him and placed her rolled up coat under his neck.

'We are the terrorists,' she said softly.

'No, you can't be. You're...' He looked from Marianne to Suzette.

'Yes?'

'Beautiful.'

Suzette laughed. 'You must have brain damage. Let's get you somewhere safe.'

'We can't move him,' said Raoul. 'It could kill him.'

'What can we do? We can't leave him here.'

'That's what I said,' added Marianne.

'The radio,' said Suzette and rushed to the car and returned carrying Al Slazinski's walkie-talkie. She pushed the button. 'Calling Columbia. Do you read? Over.'

There was brief silence before the voice came. 'Columbia receiving. Who is this, please? Over.'

Suzette looked at Marianne. 'This is Suzette Blackman of the Free European Army. We have a wounded prisoner. Over.'

'Would you repeat? Over.'

'Quit stalling, Columbia. Get me Admiral Davison. Over.'

'But he cannot be disturbed. Over.'

'Then he is not the man I thought he was. Over.'

A second later, a familiar voice came over the air. 'Michael Davison here, Miss Blackman. Go ahead. Over.'

'I am on the Autoroute west of Perpignan, Admiral. One of your helicopters came down when it hit a pylon. There is one survivor who needs urgent medical attention. Over.'

'Why are you telling me this? Over.'

'Because I wish for no-one else to die. We came in peace to help you and believed your people also came with a similar motive. It appears we were wrong and I hope all who are listening in...'

A loud hiss came from the receiver and Suzette looked puzzled.

'They're jamming you,' clarified the soldier simply. 'They don't want the others to hear. You'd better go.'

'And leave you?'

'You must. When we got the order, our Captain said there was something fishy going on and it looks like he was right. Go quickly, before they catch you.'

Suzette touched his face gently, covered him with the blanket and kissed his cheek. 'Good luck, soldier.'

'Good luck to you,' he said. 'And thanks.'

Raoul stepped from the car, the gun in his hand and, approaching the wounded man, he knelt beside him.

'Take this,' he said. 'When your friends come, you will be able to attract their attention with it.'

The soldier held the pistol in his hand. 'You are very trusting.'  
'We are not terrorists,' said Suzette. 'We are normal people like you who only want to live in peace. Tell Al Slazinski I'm sorry.'  
'Al? You know Al?'  
'Al was... is a friend. Give him a message. Tell him "ne-jettez-pas pierre."  
He'll understand.'  
'Ne-jettez-pas pierre,' he repeated as the trio climbed into the car and drove off into the night.  
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WHITE QUEEN MOVES

SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 0500 hrs.

The sky began to brighten over Marseilles as the helicopter landed on the level deck of USS Columbia. The burly statesman descended and, without a word, stepped into the forecandle hatch.

'Take me to the Admiral immediately,' he said, staring down the look the Military Policeman gave his associates.

'This way, Senator Pritchard.'

The boardroom was already fairly full and now seemed overcrowded as the five newcomers filed into the room. The Senator ignored the greetings and went straight to the Admiral.

'Well?' he asked without preamble.

'They got away,' replied Admiral Davison.

'What? How could they do that? What kind of an outfit are you running here, Admiral?'

'A peaceful one, Senator. At least, that's how it started out.'

'Well, things have changed.'

'So I see.'

'Where is this Free European Army or whatever it is they're calling themselves?'

'Most of them seem to be in several trucks, moving North-East. The others, we lost close to Perpignan.'

'I thought you were supposed to be watching them closely.'

'We were, but they brought down two of the helicopters that were sent out to pick them up and by the time we had regrouped, they went to earth.' He pointed at the map of Southern France. 'Somewhere here.'

'That's one hell of a big area.'

'But there are only a handful of them. What's this all about, Mr Pritchard?'

'Can't you guess? We must ensure that the reds don't crowd into Europe now the way is open for them. The only way to do that is to secure the place ourselves.'

'What does the Security Council of the United Nations say about this?'

'The Security Council doesn't know about it yet. By the time they find out, it'll be too late.'

'But surely the Russians will tell them. They, too, have legitimate interests in the matter.'

'Not yet, they won't. Communications are not good enough. What happened to the two Russian submarines that were here?'

'They slipped away during the night. I think they guessed what was going

down.'

'You fool. You should have stopped them. Where are they now?'

'I don't know. They went out of Sonar range very quickly. Those Malinov series subs sure can move.'

'Then we must find them, at all costs.'

'How do we do that?'

'We use this tracking station I've heard so much about.'

'At Laroque? But the system's all computerised and linked to a geostationary satellite.'

'Why do you think I've brought along my own experts? We'll soon find them, wherever they are - the Rebels, too.'

'Why are we after those people?' asked Commander Jakes.

'You just stick to your orders, Commander. I hear it was one of your men who let some of the rebels get away.'

'It was hardly like that, Senator. It is two young women we're talking about, not Ché Guevara.'

The Senator smirked. 'Don't tell me you've been taken in by all this female innocence, Commander.'

'Not at all. However, Miss Blackman did radio in when she didn't have to. She could have killed the wounded soldier or simply left him to die. Instead, she risked capture by contacting us and giving away her position. That carries a lot of weight with me.'

'Did you catch them?'

'No. By the time we got there, she had vanished.'

'Vanished? How far can you go on a freeway with few turnouts?' He slammed his fist down onto the polished table. 'I want them caught and I want them caught now.'

The room fell silent for a long time.

'It will soon be daylight,' said the Admiral eventually. 'We are bound to catch them then.'

'Then make sure you do. The President cannot afford to have a bunch of do-gooders jumping about all over Europe. There is too much at stake.'

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SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 0600 hrs.

The White Cosworth climbed the steep hill through St Etienne de Gourgas as the first light from the sun cleared the top of the Montagne de la Séranne.

Relatively safe on the narrow road through the forest, Suzette kept the pressure on as they headed north-east towards the rendezvous with her brother.

'We are not going to make it before sunrise,' she said sadly as she looked at the lightening sky. 'We still have over twenty kilometres to go.'

'Then we must find somewhere to hide until tonight,' said Raoul.

'But where? At the top of this valley, we run out of the forest. After that, we will be in the open right across the top of the Causse and are bound to be seen. There will be nowhere to hide.'

'Let's take a look when we get to the top,' said Marianne. 'Maybe it will be clear.'

As they reached the edge of the treeline, Suzette pulled her car in under the trees and turned off the engine. The silence was almost eerie after the continuous roar since leaving Perpignan. The ground was cold as the two girls climbed among the rocks beside the road, eager for a view of what lay ahead. The light was grey due to the thin, low cloud layer which covered the sky. In patches, snow was evident. One of the results of the massive energy infusion was a total disruption of normal weather patterns. Even though it was summer time, many parts of the continent were deep in a Nuclear winter. Here, on the dividing line between summer and winter, they shivered as they studied the sky and the route ahead.

'Well, do we rest it out here or attempt to cross the plateau?'

'I'm for pressing on, Suzette. Let's get as far as we can.'

Suzette nodded her agreement and they slithered back to the car. She started the engine. 'All right, Monsieur Cosworth. Let's see just how fast your car

can go.'

With a last look at the sky, she dropped the sunglasses over her eyes and put her foot to the floor. The road was almost dead straight as it ran, totally empty, across the frozen wastes of the Causse du Larzac. Through Mas de Bedos they thundered and on between wind-blown shrubs leaning from the searing winds that regularly howled over that lunar-type landscape. Under the low cloud, the shapes looked even more eerie with a coating of snow to soften their shapes. Two black tracks seemed to follow the car as it flashed across a land bare of tall trees or cover of any sort. In places, drifting snow had filled in the dips and the car smashed its way through it and up onto the next part of that obscene switchback road. It was as they approached St Maurice that they heard the sound.

'Aircraft,' shouted Marianne, leaning out of the window to try to get a better notion as to the direction of the sound.

'Hold on,' called Suzette and slewed the car round into a deep drift, throwing a great cloud of soft snow into the air as it hit.

Inside the car, it seemed dark as snow covered the windows, cold powder bursting over Marianne's head and shoulders through the open window. She squealed and closed it a little to prevent more blowing in. The ground shuddered as the two sleek aircraft thundered overhead, the vibration coming up through the wheels of the car.

'It's times like these,' said Suzette with a grin. 'That I'm glad I didn't buy a red car.'

'Do you think they saw us?'

'I don't know. Listen, and see if they come back.'

Marianne opened the window as far as she dare and tried to peer out against the drifting snow. Minutes later, two black shadows passed overhead, airbrakes fully extended to reduce forward momentum to close to stall-speed, followed by the roar of their twin F404 jetfan engines.

'They've found us,' said Marianne.

'But they can't land, not here.'

'What do we do?' asked Raoul.

'Watch,' said Suzette with a sly grin.

She slowly backed out of the drift, all four wheels alternately gripping and slipping as she toyed with the limited slip differential. Clear of the snow, she rocketed forward sending up a cloud of snow behind them. An explosion rocked the car as one of the F-18s seemed to come right at them, dropping a bright orange flare right in the path of the car. Suzette closed her eyes and drove right over it, spinning it into the snowdrift.

'That was close,' sweated Marianne.

As fast as she dare, Suzette ploughed into St Maurice and swung the car into the narrow market place, safe from all but a total bombardment of the village.

'We can't stay here. They are bound to radio our position to Columbia who will send out helicopters.'

'Where can we go?'

'I don't know. It's only a kilometre or so to the Gorge de la Vis but, once in there, we would be trapped as we would either have to go right down to Ganges or back up onto the plateau. We have to lose them somewhere.'

'What about the Cirque?' offered Raoul.

'Again, we could be trapped.'

'On the other hand, it's the ideal place to get lost. Many of our friends hid there during the war and were never found by the Germans. Also, a hole in the ground is the last place they would expect us to go.'

'I think you have a point. Marianne, nip out and see if you can see the planes.'

The younger girl jumped from the car and peered around the edge of the farmhouse and then returned. 'I can hear them but not see them. The cloud has come down too low.'

'Well. If we can't see them, they can't see us.'

With her heart in her mouth, she turned the car between two houses and out

onto the treacherous plateau of Dolmen. It was almost impossible to see the course of the road, especially when it started to snow a few moments later. Occasionally, the sound of aircraft was heard overhead and, once, Marianne was certain she heard the unmistakable sound of rotors. Several times, the Cosworth nearly left the road and gradually, the deep black rent in the landscape that was the Gorge de la Vis crept up on their left hand side. Then, as if on tiptoe, the car slithered around the U-bend below la Baume-Auriol and plunged down the road towards the bottomless ravine.

Repeatedly, the wind tried to rip the car from the narrow ledge, hardly noticeable along the sheer canyon side. Suzette dare not look beyond the low stone wall, smashed through in places, the only thing that marked the edge of the track and the only barrier between the car and a vertical fall of a thousand feet. One mistake, one misjudgment on the sheet ice covered with several inches of snow, and they would be falling. They would, however, fall but for a few seconds until the car burst apart, scattering small pieces of their bodies all over the valley floor.

'Helicopters,' whispered Raoul, his ear to the open window.

'I daren't stop now, the gradient is too steep and, if I touch the brakes, we'll go over the edge. We must hope they cannot get below the cloud layer.' The sound of rotors seemed to be all around them as they slithered down the precipitous slope, hardly daring to breathe. Occasionally, they saw dark shapes in the clouds but, as the river came into sight below them, the snow began to fall heavily and they were invisible once more. Eventually, they reached the bottom and felt hemmed-in by the cliffs of Jurassic Limestone surrounding them, imprisoning them in a cold, white dungeon deep in the ground. Suzette parked under the trees beside the river and they watched the waters of the Vis pouring over the waterfall beneath the stone houses built into the very surface of the overhanging cliff.

'I'm cold,' said Marianne.

'We must get inside,' said Raoul decisively. 'Follow me.'

The older man opened the door and skated over to the now-disused café and pushed open the glass door. It was cold and dank but he soon had a fire going in the grate as the girls huddled around it for warmth. They ate a meal of goat's cheese and breadsticks before exploring the house, returning with warmer clothing.

'Where is everyone?' Marianne asked.

'Why, dead of course,' assured her father.

'But the bodies. Why are there no bodies?'

Suzette frowned. 'Marianne has a point. I saw no bodies, either. Where is everyone?'

'We are here,' said the voice from the doorway.

Through from the kitchen had walked a tall, suntanned frenchman with a neat moustache and dressed in outdoor clothes and rubber boots. What caught their attention was neither the face nor the clothing but the loosely-held, double-barrelled shotgun he held in his strong hands. Two other men came in. One was a smaller man carrying a service revolver, the other with a wicked-looking machete which looked capable of splitting them down the middle. 'Who are you, pretty lady?' the youth said, holding the blade close to Marianne's face.

'We are from Laroque des Albères, father and I,' she replied with a tremor in her voice. 'My cousin is from England.'

'Angleterre?' said the tall one, crossing to Suzette. 'Why did you come here?'

'Do you mean here, to Navacelles, or here, to France?'

'Don't play coy with me, girl,' he threatened. 'What do you know of all this?'

'If you put the weapons down, we will explain. We are not armed and are loyal to France.'

'Very well,' he gestured. 'Sit where we can keep an eye on you and tell us what you know.'

Between them, they explained all. Suzette started with the first attempts on her life in Cambridge and Paris, with Marianne continuing with the takeover of



the tracking station. Raoul completed the last few hours.

'So, the Americans finally showed their true colours,' he said. 'You should know that we are members of the French Communist Party and we are very interested to hear of your meeting with the Russians. Perhaps they will help us to set up real government in France, one which understands the needs of the people.'

'What France needs, first of all, is a way of caring for the wounded, setting up communications again, providing for the homeless.'

'No. Those things can come when we have re-established government, when the power is in the hands of the people.'

'Monsieur,' said Suzette kindly. 'I understand your feelings. However, for the time being, we must all work together if we are to survive at all. For the sake of Europe, we would gladly work with anyone to put things back on their feet. We can debate over leadership at a later date.'

'Where will your brother be now?'

'Not far from here. We have arranged to meet in a place only we know of. I would be happy to take you there, too. Together, we would make a good team.'

'I don't know,' he said, pacing the floor while the other two men watched the trio closely.

'What do you have to lose?' ventured Raoul. 'We worked together to fight the Bosch. Can we not do it again?'

'I agree on one condition,' he eventually offered. 'You stay here where Marcel can keep an eye on you and Ramon and I will attend to the girls.' He looked straight at Suzette. 'Be warned, Ramon is a killer. If there is any funny business, he will not hesitate to cut you to pieces.'

Ramon smiled through broken teeth and Marianne looked from the cruel eyes to the already-bloodstained machete and knew in her heart that the man meant precisely what he said.

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ENTER THE BLACK KNIGHT

SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1200 hrs.

Senator William Pritchard paced the floor of the tracking station at Laroque des Albères, impatient at the delay.

'What's the problem?' he eventually asked, venting his frustration on the leading data analyst.

'It's not easy. When the self-destruct sequence is initiated, it dumps all the data. Naturally, it doesn't expect to be used again.'

'But you've been at it for hours,' he yelled, totally frustrated.

'I know. All the data needs to be fed in again before the CADE programme can analyse it.'

'But you've hardly typed any information in.'

'We don't need to. The satellite is set to scan each section in sequence and then move on to the next. It takes approximately two minutes to scan each part so that's almost ten minutes to gather all the initial information.'

'Then why the delay?'

'Because that raw data is useless for the computer. It needs more to go on. For instance, within the first twenty minutes, I knew the sun was shining.' The politician put his hand to his forehead. 'I could have told you that by looking out of the doorway.'

The analyst ignored his cynicism. 'I also knew that it was snowing in the Massif Central.'

'So did I. Blue squadron radioed that information in when they lost the car.'

'Once that initial data is placed in the databank, the computer compares that data with the incoming information from DX.'

'DX?'

'The ground probes. The ground will be at a different temperature here than in the Cévennes. The computer needs a reference point to work around, to make comparisons with. By comparing the heat outputs with the ambient temperature in each area, the computer then comes up with a fix for any unusual variations. Even using all this,' he said, indicating the vast array of hardware; 'It takes time. The first results are just coming in now.'

They looked at the DX screen which flashed and then the printer started to click away.

The computer man smiled and indicated. 'We have a group of heat emissions here.'

'Where's here?'

'Between Nîmes and Alès.'

The Senator looked puzzled. 'What are they doing there? Blue leader reported seeing them to the north-east of Lodève.'

'Then they must have split up.' He looked at the screens. 'There is no heat emission near Lodève.'

'Then where are they?'

'I don't know. Until they move, we can only wait.'

'Then this equipment is useless.'

'Not entirely. We know where the others are.'

'So we do,' he smiled and picked up the microphone. 'Laroque to Columbia. Do you read? Over.'

'Columbia receiving. Go ahead. Over.'

'Put me through to Commander Jakes. Over.'

There was a slight delay.

'John Jakes here, Mr Pritchard. Go ahead. Over.'

'I have the position of the trucks that got away. Over.'

'Very well. Go ahead. Over.'

Senator Pritchard relayed the information from the analyst and the Commander thanked him.

'What is the weather doing at that point?' he then asked.

The Senator raised his eyebrow and the computer operator consulted the data.

'Slight cloud. Otherwise fine. Over.'

'Very well, Laroque. Red squadron will leave immediately. Over and Out.'

'Commander,' continued the Senator. 'Make sure you stop them this time. By powers invested in me by the President, I instruct you to destroy those trucks.'

'But that will mean killing French Nationals.'

'So be it, Commander. They started this.'

'With respect, Mr Pritchard. As UN representative, I must protest in the strongest possible terms.'

'Protest noted, Commander. Now just go and do your job. I have my orders, you have yours. Over and out.'

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SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1220 hrs.

Red squadron crossed the coastline close to Aigues-Mortes where, eight centuries earlier, the Crusaders had sailed to rescue Jerusalem from the Scaracens with such gigantic loss of fanatical blood. Now, it seemed, history was repeating itself.

'Red Leader to Columbia. Approaching Nîmes. Over.'

'Very well, Red Leader. You know what to do. Over.'

'Aye aye, Commander. Over and out.' He switched channels. 'Red leader to Red squadron. Prepare to attack. There must be no survivors. Understood? Over.'

'Red One to Red Leader. Target radar on, dropping to attack speed. No survivors, aye. Over.'

'Red Two to Red Leader. Target radar on, river in sight. No survivors, aye. Over and Out.'

North of Nîmes, the three strike aircraft dropped into the wide Gard Valley north of the gorges, their instructions quite clear.

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SUZETTE looked out of the café window at the swirling snow and thought of what they had to do. Somewhere to the east, Roger and Philippe would be endeavouring to force their way through the snow to reach their secret rendezvous.

'I think we should leave soon,' she suggested.

'Leave? In this weather?' asked the Communist leader. 'It is impossible to climb the slope.'

'Not in my car.'

'Imbecile girl! Have you no sense at all? There are but two roads out of this cursed hole in the ground. You came in one and the other goes up there.' He pointed at the towering cliffs which encircled them, hemming them in on all sides. Suzette knew that the road by which they had entered this natural abyss was too steep to attempt in those conditions. Once, the River Vis had started on the slopes of Montagne du Lingas and run southwards and then eastwards to its confluence with the Hérault at Ganges. However, over the millennia of time, the icy waters had channelled themselves deeper and deeper into the soft limestone and had, eventually, gone underground at Vissec, only to re-emerge less than a mile from where Suzette sat. Then, nature had continued her sculpturing of the landscape by causing the river to deepen the gorge to such an extent that virtually nothing but the waters filled the narrow, winding canyon as far as Madières. At this point the road from Lodève descended, by multiple hairpin bends, to the valley floor to follow the Vis to Ganges. Here, in the Cirque, where the waters erupted from under a great overhang of rock, the tiny village of Navacelles had been built. In winter, the gorge was often flooded and no traffic moved in that part of the country so, to be sure of escape, Suzette had to get her car up onto the plateau again to run the gauntlet to the old market town of Le Vigan.

'I will make it,' she said firmly. 'I must make it.'

'Then I will come with you. Where a girl can go, so can a man.'

Marianne didn't know whether to admire his confidence or mock his stupidity. Instead, she slipped on a borrowed coat and followed her cousin out into the snow. Suzette opened the boot and produced four sacks. Stooping at each wheel, she fastened on each tyre a strange device which resembled the clamps used by traffic wardens in Paris.

'Ready?' she asked and Marianne climbed in followed by a less-enthusiastic Georges, as they found he was called.

Ramon climbed into the other back seat as Marianne waved goodbye to her father and the Cosworth slithered a little, gripped the ice and then rolled forward along the narrow road which led in zig-zags straight up the cliff face.

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SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1230 hrs.

'I have a movement,' spoke the operator at Laroque.

'Where?' asked the Senator with sudden interest and excitement.

He pointed at the screen. 'There. One vehicle. Moving west.'

'West?'

The operator shrugged. 'I only read the data.'

Senator Pritchard relayed the information to Columbia and the peaceful day was disturbed by the sound of more screaming jet engines as the units of Green Squadron were launched out over the still waters of the Mediterranean, their orders also clear.

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SUZETTE kept in second gear. At slow speed, the wheels didn't spin and the snowgrips dug into the hard ice, forcing the car upward, out of that chasm of black and white contrast. Round and round the bends they went. At each corner, death threatened as the edge of the cliff loomed so dangerously close. This was a road to avoid, even in summer.

Unfortunately, the higher they went, the tighter the bends were, the more precipitous became the drop by their side. At fifteen-hundred feet, they went

into cloud and, inching forward, they skidded and slithered over the top of the ridge and breathed again.

SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1240 hrs.

Commander Jakes sat in the control room aboard Columbia and monitored the progress of his forces. The radio crackled. 'Red leader to Columbia. Over.'

'Go ahead, Red Leader.'

'We are now north of Alès. No sign of the trucks.'

'What?' He stood up. 'Are you sure?'

'Certain, sir. No visual sighting, nothing on radar.'

'Nothing at all?'

'Not a thing. Permission to retrace to Nîmes?'

'Permission granted. Over and Out.'

Commander Jakes slowly sat down again as the Admiral walked in with Senator Pritchard who had returned to the UN Flagship. 'Progress, John?'

'No, sir. Red Squadron just reported in. There is no sign of the trucks where they were sent to look.'

'What?' said the Senator. 'Are you sure?'

The Commander looked tired. He was also not happy. 'Squadron Leader Alexander is the best, Senator. If he says they are not there, they are not there.'

The radio spoke again. 'Green Leader to Columbia. Approaching Ganges now. Over.'

'Very well, Green Leader. You know what to do?'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Before the Commander could respond, the radio spoke again. 'Entering the gorge now, Commander. Hello, that's odd. There's a lot of snow and low cloud here and...' The radio went dead.

SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1250 hrs.

Colonel Andrei Narovic smiled as he was handed a copy of the last transmissions received.

'Blagodarnos,' he said and gave instructions as Malinov One slipped below the blue waters once more.

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THE three F-18s banked as they once more passed over the deserted city of Nîmes, their wings glinting as they reflected the light from the blazing sun. Forty kilometres to the West, the sun was not shining as Suzette drove her Cosworth over the Col des Mourezes and dropped out of the low cloud, down towards the Chateau at Mandagout. Along the side of the road were signs of recent destruction. Burnt-out armoured personnel carriers, overturned trucks and jeeps, blistered trees and buildings. The old chateau that once stood proudly upon its lofty pinnacle now looked as though it had received a direct hit from a very big bomb.

'Mon Dieu! What has happened here?' asked Georges.

'This is where the Consortium had their French headquarters. The UN task force attacked by air and my brother came in by road and captured the village. It's abandoned now, of course.'

'There's not much left, is there?' observed Marianne.

'Not here. Which way is the hideout from here?'

'Past the Hôtel de Ville, through the village and left at the road junction,' Marianne instructed.

'Okay,' said Suzette, easing her car around the hairpin bend and across the narrow stone bridge.

The valley was deep and the chestnut trees seemed to cover every slope that was presently thick with snow. After a while, the Village Hall-cum-School-cum-Library came into sight, now blackened by fire. A half-mile further, the road turned right and then left past the now-ruined church and down the slope towards the river. They sat in silence as Suzette slithered her car round the bend alongside the place where children had once played their happy, cheerful games and, a kilometre further, the hideout came into sight. Clinging to the wall of the valley, they turned and crossed the narrow bridge and into the courtyard of the apparently undamaged place of

rendezvous.

'Welcome to La Planque,' said Marianne. 'The original hideout of the de Bosviles.'

The snow had now stopped falling but the clouds were heavy and low as they got out of the car and sank, knee deep, into the virgin blanket which covered all. Struggling against the wind, they all filed through the arch and into the big, wooden door that was to be their haven until Roger arrived and plans could be made. It all seemed so peaceful as Marianne led the way up the stone steps and into the living room where she pushed open the door.

The hackles went up on the back of Suzette's neck as she stood by the door, watching the others taking off their outdoor clothes. Words would not come as a fear came over her she could not explain. Wildly, she looked around but everything seemed normal until the far door creaked open and two people came into the room. The men who had accompanied her stood as if petrified, their weapons already discarded. Georges made to reach for the shotgun but was halted by the click of the automatic revolver. Ramon looked wary. Marianne looked puzzled. It was Suzette who spoke first.

'Hullo Louis,' she said.

The middle-aged man nodded without smiling whereas the woman with him stepped purposefully over to Suzette, a look of pure hatred on her face. The revolver in her hand was held steady, pointed straight at her heart, as Suzette backed until she was up against the wall. The hate seemed to fill the room as the older woman faced Suzette until, with a great show of strength, she viciously lashed out with the pistol, catching Suzette across the side of her face. Marianne screamed as Suzette's blood splattered on the wall and she slowly slid down it and fell blissfully into a deep, black well of unconsciousness.

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THE MIDDLE GAME

SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1330 hrs.

There was panic at Laroque. Senator Pritchard, just back from the Carrier, loosened his necktie as he watched the screens, trying to make head or tail of the data coming through.

'It doesn't make sense,' said the operator.

'But the aircraft went where you sent them.'

'But they didn't, they couldn't have done.'

'Look,' argued the Senator. 'The pilot even reported sighting the Pont du Gard and there aren't two of those in France. They went to Nîmes, as instructed, and the cupboard was bare.'

'But they didn't, I tell you. I plotted them myself and the data can't lie. They went up the Vis valley and then north towards Valleraugue. They were in the wrong place.'

'And what about Green Squadron? What happened to them?'

'I don't know. They were crossing the Causse du Larzac when the simply... blew up.'

'How could they? The last words that were said was that they were entering the gorge south of Ganges. According to your data, there was little cloud and good visibility. Just before he crashed, Green Leader reported running straight into a snow storm.'

'But there is no snow there, I keep telling you. The snow is to the west and north...' He sat down.

Senator Pritchard stared at the man as he went as white as a sheet. 'She's tricked us. That bitch has tricked us.'

'What do you mean?'

'She's found some way to alter the data. We've been looking in the wrong places.'

'What?'

'It must be. It's the only answer.' He turned to one of his colleagues. 'Give

me a hard copy of the autoboot programme.'
The screens flashed, the printer clicked and the analyst was handed a sheet of paper.

'Good Grief!'

'What is it?'

'She's altered it. The co-ordinates are wrong.'

'The co-ordinates for what?'

'Princess. That satellite isn't where it's supposed to be.'

'Then where is it?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know? Then how in hell do we find it?'

'We don't. Without details of the deviation angle, we haven't a hope of finding her and, until we do, the data is all wrong.'

'How wrong?'

'I don't know that either. However, we can try to guess from the mistakes we've already made and adjust to compensate. Don't worry, we'll soon have them.'

SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1400 hrs.

The sound of approaching trucks disturbed the silence as Marianne crouched over the fallen Suzette and attempted to stem the flow of blood from the side of her head. She looked up but the gun threatened so she kept still.

'Who are they?' asked Corrine as Louis peered through the binoculars towards the far side of the valley.

'Friends of these people, I expect,' he replied thoughtfully. 'We must find a way to stop them.'

Corrine looked over to where Georges and Ramon sat, bound hand and foot and looking thoroughly miserable and then at Suzette.

'Get her outside,' she snapped at Marianne. The young girl hesitated and the hammer was pulled back as the barrel approached her face. She nodded and attempted to pull on Suzette's parka as she lifted her to a sitting position.

'No, not the coat. Drag her out onto the balcony just as she is.'

'But she'll freeze,' pleaded Marianne.

Corrine sneered. 'Yes. Won't that be nice.' The gun was millimetres from Marianne's face. 'Just do as you're told or I'll kill you both.'

With a supreme effort, Marianne dragged the still unconscious Suzette out through the french windows and onto the high balcony above the courtyard as the first of the trucks stopped below them.

'Throw down your arms,' shouted Louis as the engines were cut. 'Throw them down or we shoot the girls. Do it now.'

'Who is he?' asked Roger, sitting in the first truck.

'Louis, the Consortium rebel from Rouen,' said Philippe.

'Well. It looks as if, for now, we had better do as we're told. That looks like Suzette lying on the balcony.'

'If he's hurt her, I'll...'

'No you don't. Me first. You can have what's left.'

In the meantime, they threw their guns into the snow and climbed down from the truck.

'Stand in the yard where I can see you all,' yelled Louis.

They did, huddling together for warmth in that cruel, icy wind.

Suzette stirred. Corrine saw her. 'Get to your feet, slut.'

Suzette didn't move so the older woman drew back her leg and drove it, hard, into the younger woman's chest. Suzette moaned and sat up, clutching her bruised ribs.

'Up,' said Corrine, grabbing her by the hair and half lifting her by it until she rested against the wooden handrail which ran along the edge of the balcony.

She turned to Louis. 'Give me the shotgun.'

Louis obeyed. 'What are you going to do?'

'What do you think? I'm going to spread her guts all over the valley.'

Marianne screamed and started forward but Louis caught her neatly around the

waist and fell back onto the sofa with her, the gun under her chin. 'Now you just keep out of this, pretty girl, or I'll have to do things to you that will really hurt you.'

His strength was greater than Marianne's and, combined with his weight, he had no difficulty in holding her down and prevent her struggling. Suzette raised her head and looked into Corrine's black eyes. She felt a shiver run through her body that had nothing to do with the temperature.

'What do you fear most, Suzette?' asked the sadistic Corrine.

Suzette didn't answer.

'Not death, I know. Nor pain. No, I think I know. You fear what all women fear, what I feared before I lost it.'

Suzette wasn't entirely sure what she meant but, one thing was certain, this mad woman would not stop until she had caused her considerable pain and finally, death.

'Take off your clothes,' spat Corrine with inspiration.

'What?' queried Suzette, her back up against the rail.

'Strip,' Corrine said, jabbing the end of the shotgun barrel hard into her stomach.

Suzette fought for breath as she swayed, doubled over, the whole valley seeming to spin around the hideout. The barrel drew back to strike again.

'Okay,' she said and forced herself upright again.

Watching the malicious woman's face, she painfully drew the sweater over her head and dropped it to the veranda. Corrine kicked it off the edge.

'Now the denims.'

Suzette's fingers were stiffening with the cold as she fumbled with the brass buckle. She managed the belt but the zip would only go down an inch or two.

'Why?' asked Suzette weakly.

'Why? You ask me why? I'll tell you why, bitch. When you sent us out of the tracking station at Rouen, the radiation was still high. Not lethal, but high nevertheless. After a week, I got sick and our doctor at Genève told me that I would bear no more children. He said that, in a few weeks or months, my body will have rotted inside and no man would want me then. He also assured me that, by the end of the year, I would be dead and that for my last few weeks I would be a cripple in great pain.' She paused. 'You ask me why, I tell you. I want you to feel that same pain.'

'You're going to kill me?'

The laugh was horrible. 'Kill you? Oh no, my dear. At least, not yet.'

Slowly, the barrel descended from Suzette's heart, across her stomach and came to rest at the point where her denims hung open at the top. 'First, I want you to feel great pain and humiliation, Suzette. Lots and lots of it. What a woman fears most is the thought that she might lose her childbearing capability, her beauty, her man - all the things I am losing. I want to hear you screaming with pain. Any minute now, I am going to pull this trigger and blow your pert little belly all over this veranda. I'm going to perforate your womb, turn you into a cripple by splitting your spine. I'm going to turn you into a freak that no man will ever want to look at again.'

Suzette looked into her eyes and saw that she meant every word. She shuddered violently with cold and fear.

'And when I do, I want all your friends to see it all.' She pushed the shotgun hard into her abdomen.

Through the red mist of pain, Suzette heard, 'Take off the rest of the clothes.'

Suzette shook her head but another searing jab in the gut hurried her along as she tried not to vomit from the pain.

'Strip!' screamed Corrine, her eyes no longer human. 'I want you standing stark naked in front of all your friends so they can see every detail as I rip your pert little belly open with one barrel and then, when I am convinced that you have begged to me enough for death, I will let you have the other one in the face. I want to see you totally humiliated just as you humiliated me.'

'No!' defied Suzette and the barrel swung back and then viciously jabbed

again, tearing through her skin and crushing her abdomen against her spine. There was a sound like an explosion and Suzette was falling - falling down into an eternal sea of blazing fire which engulfed the whole of her body before gradually turning to an icy coldness and deep darkness.

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SUNDAY 15th AUGUST - 1700 hrs.

The tiny periscope barely made a ripple as it moved across the surface of the water, its host appendage moving silently southwards against the current. Six metres below, bathed in infra-red light, Major Petro Gobonev was unhappy. 'I say we take them now, Comrade. Just one order from you and the whole of the American fleet will be at the bottom of the sea.'

'I know that, Major,' replied Colonel Andrei Narovic, his eye to the glass.

'But we have nothing to lose by waiting a little longer.'

'But they must know we are here, they have the satellite.'

'Then why aren't they using it? They picked up our emissions so easily when we approached last time, why can they not do the same again?'

'Perhaps they are not able. I told you at first they are not simply a United Nations Task Force. If they were, why are they not providing relief? And why have those other men come from the United States? I say destroy them all now, before they establish bases close to the borders with our Nation.'

'All in good time, Major. At the moment, I am more interested in why some of their aircraft have not returned. The officer of the watch reported four helicopters out from Omaha and eight strike aircraft from Columbia. So far, two helicopters and three aircraft have not returned. I smell a rat.'

'Then sink them while we have the chance. I insist.'

The Colonel turned away from the periscope. 'Major Gobonev. I am in charge here and there will be no attack unless I give the order.'

The Major drew himself erect. 'Then, under the powers invested in me by the Presidium, I remove you from your command.'

There was a moment's silence and tension before the Colonel smiled.

'Comrade Markoff,' he said to his aide without looking at him. 'Lock the Major in his cabin. If he tries to escape or talk to any of the men, see that he meets with a serious accident.'

'Da, Comrade Colonel.'

The Major continued to glare, ignoring the grip on his arm and the fact that his pistol was being taken from its holster. 'You will regret this action, Colonel Narovic. I will write a full report of your actions this day.'

The Colonel turned away from him. 'Comrade Markoff, if you see a pen near his hand, break his fingers.'

The sailor looked at the Major and smiled. 'With great pleasure, Comrade Colonel.'

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MONDAY 16th AUGUST - 0900 hrs.

The Admiral looked up as his Captain entered his stateroom. 'Are they still with us, Henry?'

'I think so, sir. Sonar gets an occasional echo but finds it difficult to get an exact fix.'

'Then we must sit it out for a while longer.'

'Are you not worried, sir?'

'By Narovic? No, Henry. He and I are of the old school. The Colonel will not attack unless he is provoked and I have no intention of provoking him, certainly not while we are in his sights. Half an ounce of plutonium stripped of its electrons beneath our keel would play havoc with Columbia's paintwork.' The Captain sighed. 'I wish I had your confidence Admiral.'

'It comes with old age, boy.'

'So we just ignore them?'

'Right first time,' he said, pouring another coffee. 'Whatever you do, though, Henry, don't tell the Senator. He wouldn't sleep so well at night.'

The Captain took the offered cup. 'Doesn't he know?'

'Not a thing. He is back at the tracking station now and keeps insisting that

the Russians are miles away. I think he and his precious computer specialists are just a little lost.'

'You can say that again. According to their figures, we are on land right now.'

'So I hear.' He looked out of the porthole. 'Shame about all this water around us.'

'Are we doing the right thing, Admiral?'

'Probably not,' he said and then smiled. 'But don't you dare tell the Senator that I said so.'

~~~~~

MONDAY 16th AUGUST - 1100 hrs.

The computer analyst sat back, exhausted. 'It's no good,' he said. 'It's just guesswork and the computer doesn't like it. It will only accept facts, not maybes.'

'Can't you just alter the figures to make them right? Surely, if they were so many miles out, it must be possible to allow for that discrepancy.'

'It's not that easy, Mr Pritchard. It's not the data. The satellite just can't be where the manual says it is.'

'Then we are wasting our time? All this has been for nothing?'

'Not entirely, sir. We have this tracking station and, as long as we are here, they can't use it, can they?'

Senator Pritchard thought for a moment and then smiled. 'You are right, my friend. But don't tell the Admiral. He believes we have complete control of things.'

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MONDAY 16th AUGUST - 1200 hrs.

Major Al Slazinski stepped through the bulkhead and walked along the passageway, the carefully-wrapped package under his arm, until he came to the familiar cabin. He knocked and was admitted.

'Come in, Al. Have you brought it?'

'Yes, sir.' He opened the parcel and placed the contents in his Commander's hands.

Commander Jakes, who was not easily shaken, stared at it without speaking for a long time.

'How many?' he finally asked.

The Major shrugged. 'Forty, fifty perhaps.'

'Bloody Hell!'

'I couldn't have put it better myself, sir.'

'Who else knows?'

'No-one, Commander. I thought it best not to spread the bad news around.'

'You did right, Al. Keep it under your hat for the time being, eh?'

'Of course, sir. I understand.'

The Major left and Commander Jakes sat down slowly and stared at the piece of wood for some time before picking up the phone.

GAME REVIEW

MONDAY 16th AUGUST - 1230 hrs.

The Admiral closed the door softly and bade the Captain be seated. 'I've brought you here, Henry, because I think you deserve to know what John has found. I must stress, though, that this information must, I repeat, must, remain between the three of us for the time being. I hate to think what the Senator would do if he found out. Can I trust you to do that?'

Captain Whittaker's left eyebrow lifted a little before he smiled. 'An unnecessary question, Admiral. If you can't trust me by now, who can you trust?'

'Forgive me, Henry, but I had to ask. The matter I am about to disclose should, by all rights, be immediately reported to the Chief of Staff. As we are unable to contact him by radio due to atmospherics, I really ought to inform the President's representative but, under the present set of circumstances, I do not think it would be the wisest thing to do. If, after

our discussion, the majority decision amongst we three senior officers is to reveal the information, then so be it. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly, sir.'

'Very well.' He turned to Commander Jakes. 'Tell him, John.'

'I received a coded message from Major Slazinski this morning which caused me to be puzzled, but not alarmed. If I had know then what I know now, I would probably have shot myself before lunch.'

The Captain laughed. 'Nothing could be that serious.'

The Commander did not laugh. 'Wait till you find what it is.'

Carefully, he unwrapped the piece of wood and handed it to Captain Whittaker.

'At lunchtime, Al brought me this. It was found near the tracking station.

Apparently, there could be fifty more where that came from.'

'Bloody Hell!' said the Captain.

The Commander grinned. 'That's what I said.'

Captain Whittaker looked down at the short length of packing case which was of no special value. The grain was rough, the nails which had held it to mother box were bent where they had been wrenched out. The shape was ordinary and so was the colour. In fact, the only thing remarkable about it was the single word boldly stencilled upon it in blood-red paint - DIABLOS.

'And there are another fifty of these lying around somewhere?'

'According to Al there could well be. After the Consortium had been defeated, he saw a stack of these in the back of the truck being driven by Mr Blackman. At the time, Al didn't realise the significance of course. It was only when he got back to Laroque and found the empty crate and the lid lying nearby, that he realised what it was he had seen in the lorry.'

'Do you think they know what they've got?'

'I think so,' interrupted the Admiral. 'For two reasons. Firstly, there was a wrecked helicopter near the tracking station. I remember Al reporting in when he first landed about the fact that the wreckage looked as if it had been totally pulverized.'

'Could just one small missile do that amount of damage?'

'Oh yes,' said the Commander. 'Diablos is very special. It can be launched from a standard bazooka, a modified mortar tube, fired from a tank, almost anything. It has a range of about five miles and the warheads are interchangeable from standard ballistic to lightweight thermonuclear. One medium sized ballistic could blow up a tank, totally destroy a helicopter gunship or bring down an F-18 in flight. With a nuke tip, this entire fleet could be wiped out before we saw it coming. Guided right to the target, it couldn't miss.'

'Hell's teeth,' quoted the Captain.

'Precisely. Diablos, the Devil. Appropriately named, eh? And stolen from the nation that brought us Exocet.'

'What was the second reason for being so sure they know what they've got their hands on?' asked the Commander.

Admiral Davison sat down and faced his two officers. 'When I was just a mere lieutenant at the end of the last war, I was based on a carrier in the Atlantic and assigned to contact a British officer by the name of John Blackman. During the invasion, he and I met often and, after the war, he was seconded from one special unit to another until, finally, he wound up in the SAS. It was in the capacity of senior SAS instructor that he was sent on HMS Sheffield to the Falklands.'

'So where is he now?'

'Unlucky for him, an Argentine Exocet put an end to that ship's part in the conflict and, unfortunately, John Blackman was killed. I didn't realise, until a few days ago, that he had a daughter.'

'Suzette Blackman?'

'Right in one. However, I did know that John had a son so, over the weekend, I've been doing some digging in the computer records. What I came up with was an officer on HMS Penzance, one of our escort ships, who once served with John Blackman. I had him over this morning and had quite a chat with him.'

Lieutenant Blackman was, apparently, very proud of his one and only son who had, with his influence, landed a cosy little job just outside London. It was with a firm called Technics. You may have heard of them.'

'Don't they make radar components or something similar?'

'All sorts of thing like that. This son, Roger, worked there for ten years from leaving school and studied one particular subject at which he became an expert. An expert to such an extent that he began to design and modify their existing models.'

'And what was this specialist field in which he became so proficient?'

The words came like a bucket of ice-cold water. 'Missile guidance systems.' There was a shocked silence while they took it in. The Captain was the first to speak. 'I can see why you would not want to inform the Senator. Heaven knows what he would make of it.'

'But that's only the half of it.'

'What?' said both the Captain and Commander.

'As you already know, the computer experts have not only lost the "rebels" but seem, also, to have lost the satellite itself. In trying to alter the existing programme, they seem to have dumped some of the data somewhere and are madly scratching their heads to try to find brains inside them.'

The Commander smiled. 'I thought the radio had gone quiet.'

'What it means is that, at the moment, we seem to have no control whatsoever of the satellite nor information.'

'Is that important?' asked the Captain.

'By itself, simply an inconvenience. However, what must never happen is for Miss Blackman ever to get her hands on that computer. If she ever gets control of her precious Princess, we could all be finished.'

'Why? I don't follow.'

'Tell me. What was the last threat the Consortium made before we attacked?'

'To destroy the United States if we didn't conform to their demands.'

'And how, do you think, did they intend to carry out their threat?'

'With missiles or nuclear weapons, I guess.'

'Wrong!' He turned to the Commander. 'John, how many missiles were found in the silos at Aix when we attacked?'

'None. The last one had been fired at the fleet.'

'Yes. Short-range, low trajectory, medium capacity. Scarcely enough to scratch Forty-second Street, even if they had gotten that far. No, the Consortium had to have had something else up their sleeves.'

'But there was nothing else. Except for a few armoured personnel carriers and a couple of helicopters, they had nothing.'

'Ah, but they did. They had something they had spent two years developing, something they had spent billions of dollars perfecting, something which had already been used to identify targets and corrupt attack instructions on both sides. Something we had and now appear to have mislaid.'

'Princess?'

'Precisely.'

'But surely not. What could one Satellite do to harm the States? It doesn't have the range, for one thing.'

'Doesn't it? Not if it is where it's supposed to be, it hasn't. Geostationary satellites are usually at around forty thousand kilometres above the equator and this one, according to the book, is supposed to be over Gambia.

Unfortunately for our dear experts up there on the mountain, Princess is at neither.'

'Perhaps she has fallen back to earth or spun out of orbit.'

'No. The data is still coming in thick and fast. She is still there all right, watching and waiting.'

'Waiting for what?'

'A certain signal.'

'What kind of a signal?'

'Listen. What do we know already?' He counted on his fingers. 'The Consortium threatened the whole continent of America with destruction. For all we know,

they may well have threatened Russia in a similar manner. They had no missiles yet they never bluffed about anything else.'

'That's true,' said Captain Whittaker.

'They said they would start a war and they did. They said they would survive and they did that. They threatened to destroy our fleet and they would have done it, too, had not Miss Blackman taken over control of the satellite just in the nick of time.'

'You mean to say that the two greatest nations in the world were just part of a great game?'

'Just pawns, John, to be sacrificed at will so that the Black King and Queen could reign supreme.'

'But now they have been defeated.'

'But what about the girl? She is still on the board, somewhere. The trouble is, where is she? And what the hell is she up to?'

'Is it important?'

The Admiral looked at them both with pity. 'Don't you realise? It's what the game is all about. No longer is it a case of who Checks the King but who gets the Princess.'

'What do you mean?' asked the puzzled Captain.

'I mean that we must, at all costs, prevent Miss Blackman ever gaining control of that satellite. After the way we and the Russians have treated that young lady and her friends, she has every right to take her anger out on the both of us.'

'You mean that whoever controls Princess really controls Europe?'

'No, not exactly. What I really mean is that it is eminently possible that whoever finds Princess first, gains control over the whole world.'

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#### CASTLING

TUESDAY 17th AUGUST - 1100 hrs.

The quiet hum of machinery was all that disturbed the silence in the control room of Malinov One. Colonel Narovic sat, deep in thought, while his officers held the submarine motionless in the water.

The radio operator removed his headphones. 'They've gone, Comrade Colonel.'

'Very well. Thank you.' He turned to his aide. 'By tonight, Malinov Two should be through the Marmara Denizi and well on way.'

'Let us hope, sir, that they can get a message through to Moskva.'

'They must, Comrade. The President must act immediately, without delay. They must send people into Europe quickly, before the Americans can do so.'

'It all depends on Malinov Two then?'

'The future of Europe does, my friend. It certainly does.'

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TUESDAY 17th AUGUST - 1200 hrs.

The weather pattern was changing over the Massif Central. It had stopped snowing at Mandagout and the billowing white clouds which had covered the sky gently dissipated as the day wore on. Gillian Green smiled and opened the stone-mullioned window overlooking the small stream, Rousseau des Vieilles.

Where the snow had melted, small flowers were already pushing their heads through the dark, damp soil and, occasionally, there could be heard the song of a bird. Things were gradually returning to normal in France. Now and then, the sound of a chain saw could be heard across the valley where her Jim was cutting wood for the fire. A slight sound behind her made her turn. Two brown eyes were watching her.

'Hullo, Gill,' said the girl lying on the bed.

'Hullo, you, too,' Gillian said as she walked across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. 'I was beginning to think you were never coming round.'

'Have I been out long?'

'Two days.' Gillian smiled. 'I was getting worried about you.'

'Am I badly hurt?'

'Suzette, you are an utter mess. You have at least two cracked ribs, terrible bruising all over your stomach and abdomen, I had to put three stitches in the side of your head and you've got the biggest and best black eye I've ever seen in my life. I just hope there are no internal injuries. Corrine was pretty ruthless with that gun barrel.'

'I know.' Suzette winced at the memory. 'I felt it.'

'Don't worry. You now have your very own veterinary surgeon to look after you.'

'Vet?'

'What did you expect out here in the sticks? Doctors and hospitals?'

'I can't feel my legs,' Suzette suddenly said.

Gillian stood up and turned away. 'It's a side-effect of the medication I gave you. Don't worry. You've still got the best-looking legs in Europe.' She sighed. 'You always did have.'

Suzette tried to laugh but it hurt too much and she relaxed again. 'My back hurts.'

'You did that when you fell off the balcony. Don't you remember?'

'I remember being rammed in the gut with the barrel of the shotgun, then a loud bang, a great pain in my stomach and back and then I was falling. I thought I had been shot.'

'It was the balcony handrail that saved your life. It was rotten and broke when you were shoved against it and you fell twenty feet to the ground.'

Suzette groaned. 'No wonder my back hurts.'

'You were lucky, you fell close to the house where the snow had dropped from the roof. It broke your fall quite a bit.'

'Corrine?'

'Fell further out. There was a vine cultivator standing in the yard. Its blades had been sharpened for the harvest.'

'Ugh!'

'Ugh, indeed. Unfortunately for Corrine, she also fell on her shotgun and it went off in her face. There was little left of it after it had been blown all over the yard.'

'Poor Corrine.'

Gillian looked amazed. 'Suzette. The woman was a loony. She tried to kill you at best, cripple and maim you at least. Don't feel sorry for her. We don't.'

'Where are the others?'

'Roger and Philippe have taken the trucks to Le Vigan and Ganges to try to find food and see if there are survivors. Roger took Marianne as interpreter.'

'Roger can speak French as well as I can,' Suzette said with a wry smile.

'I guess they are in love.'

'Like you and Jim.'

'Just like. The man of my life is out there, cutting logs to keep you warm.'

Gillian hesitated. 'What happened between you and Philippe?'

'I'm not sure. I just don't think he's telling me the truth.'

'About what?'

'About what he's doing. When we were on Columbia, he let slip that he had a helicopter.'

'He has, hasn't he?'

'He did have. It was left at the tracking station at Rouen but the Consortium planted a thermonuclear device for us.'

'How did you survive?'

'Philippe knew how to disarm it.'

'Then that's how his helicopter survived.'

'No. He had to reset the bomb when we left or they would know we were still alive and come looking for us.'

'Yes, the Directeur said he knew it had gone off. How would he know?'

Suzette shrugged. 'By using Princess, I guess. They would see the heat output

of the explosion.'

'Then Philippe must be lying for some other reason.'

'Yes, that's what I think. But Why?'

'Beats me. Are you hungry?'

'Famished.'

'Beans on toast do? I've only got tinned stuff and bread that Marianne and I baked ourselves.'

'Sounds great. Where is Louis?'

'Locked in his room. He hasn't said a word since Corrine died.'

'I'd like to see him.'

'You are not going anywhere. Vet's orders.'

'He can come in here.'

'You want me to let him out? Roger and Philippe will have a fit.'

'Tough. I need to talk to him.'

Gillian shrugged and then grinned. 'Be it upon your own head.'

She left and, a few moments later, Suzette heard the murmur of voices in the next room and then Louis appeared in the doorway. He was unshaven, unwashed and his suit was irreparably creased. In fact, quite a different-looking person to the man Suzette had originally met at Rouen.

'Come in and sit down,' offered Suzette.

'I'd rather stand,' he said gruffly.

'That's what all the tough guys say in movies and it doesn't impress me at all. So just swallow your pride and take a seat. You'll get awfully tired standing up.'

Reluctantly, Louis took a chair and swung his leg over it, leaning his arms along the back and resting his head on his hands.

'I'm sorry about Corrine,' said Suzette kindly.

Louis looked stunned. 'You are?'

'Of course. I don't like to see anyone hurt.'

'She was going to kill you.'

'I know that. And you were going to let her, weren't you?'

He didn't speak for several moments. 'What are you going to do with me?'

'That might not be up to me, Louis. But you and I could do worse than join forces.'

He laughed nervously. 'Join forces? What do we have in common?'

'Quite a lot. We worked together at Rouen, didn't we?'

'After a fashion,' he admitted.

'How many are left at Genève?' she suddenly asked.

It was some time before he spoke. 'How did you know?'

'Genève was on a list of your centres found in the Chateau down the road but the Americans went there but couldn't find anyone. How many?'

He shrugged. 'There's no reason why you shouldn't know. About two hundred, mostly bankers, financiers and other professional people.'

'Soldiers?'

He shook his head. 'A few security guards, maybe.'

'A bit pathetic, isn't it?'

'It wouldn't have been if you had kept your nose out of it.'

'Yes it would. I met the Directeur, remember? It wouldn't have been long before he would have pushed the rest of you out.'

'He needed us.'

'Only at the beginning. After you had played your part with Princess, what good would you have been to him?'

'Not a lot,' he admitted. 'And what good would I be to you now?'

'You know the people in Switzerland. Genève was to be the Capital, wasn't it?'

'All of a sudden, you know one hell of a lot.'

She smiled. 'It's from working with computers. In the end, you begin to think like one. It was logical, really. To be frank, it still is.'

'What else do you want me to do?'

'You could help us.'

'What?'

'If we are to bring peace to Europe, we must find a way to satisfy all the camps. The man you tied up when we arrived is the local Communist Party leader. In the interim, I believe we could form a three-way coalition government to satisfy everyone.'

'Who would be the third delegate?' he asked with a sneer. 'You?'

'Good Heavens, no. I'm no politician. I was thinking of Marianne.'

'Marianne? Marianne who?'

'The girl you threatened on Sunday. She is Marianne de Bosville, descendant of the Comte and Comtesse de Ramsden. Prior to that she is related, fairly loosely I'll admit, to most of the Royal families of Europe.'

'Is she now? And what part would you play in all this scheme of things?'

'Me? What good would I be?'

'None at all,' interrupted Gillian, 'If you don't eat some breakfast.'

The sound of a tractor in the courtyard made her smile.

'The man of my life returns. It might be your breakfast time, young Suzette, but it's my Jim's lunch time.'

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TUESDAY 17th AUGUST - 2100 hrs.

The sun was setting as the waters north of Tavsan Ada swirled and then slowly parted to allow the squat conning tower to rise majestically from the depths of the Northern Aegean. Water cascaded from the foredeck and glistened red in the glow from the sun as the bows turned eastwards and began to enter the narrow straits separating Europe from Asia. The Turks called the six-kilometres-wide chasm Canakkale Bogazi while the Europeans once used the name given to them by the ancient Greeks - Hellespont. Now, the location was almost universally known by the name used by the French soldiers based at Gallipoli during the war - Dardanelles.

'When shall we attempt contact, Comrade Captain?' asked the radio operator.

'We will try when we are through the Canakkale and into the Cernoje More. If that does not work, we must try to get to Odessa or Nikolayev and see what damage has been caused in Russia. If either port has survived, I must speak by telephone to Moskva.'

'Will we ever see home again, Captain?'

'I hope so, Comrade. I certainly hope so.'

~~~~~

ROGER eased the truck around the hairpin bends above Costabague as darkness began to fall. Stones rattled down the slope and the engine of the vehicle began to labour as the gradient increased with the height. Above the great outcrop that was the Rock of Courbière, he cut the engine and they peered down into the valley.

'C'est magnifique,' observed Marianne as she observed the red-tinted clouds ahead of them, overshadowing Serre de Roulon.

'I'll go along with that,' agreed Roger, slipping his arm around her shoulders.

'We wait here all night, Señor Roger?' asked the grinning face from the rear.

'No, Carlos,' laughed Roger. 'We're just admiring the view. Don't you find it romantic?'

'Romantic, Señor?'

'Typical Spaniard,' joked Marianne. 'If it's not Spain, it's no good.'

'Precisely, Senorita.' He dropped the flap back into place. 'Wake me when we are there.'

'Dormez-bien,' said Marianne and turned her attention back to her man. 'I'm glad we found them.'

'Who? Carlos and his men?'

'No, imbecile. Those people at Ganges. They seemed to have no idea what had happened.'

'I don't suppose they did. No bombs dropped near to here. All they knew was that communication suddenly stopped and, a day or two later, those who went outside began to get sick. The clever ones soon learned to stay inside, away

from the fallout.'

'I wonder how Philippe and Manuel got on in Le Vigan.'

'We'll soon find out.' He started the engine. 'We'll be home in ten minutes.'

'It sounds funny to call this place home,' Marianne mused.

'It's all we've got at the moment and there are plenty of worse places to be. Just think, we could be in Paris or Clermont-Ferrand, amongst all the rubble.'

'Will anyone have survived there, do you think?'

'I doubt it. Suzette and Philippe drove all the way from Rouen to well south of Toulouse before they got out of the area of complete devastation. Northern France must be a total mess. The Consortium knew the Russians would have their missiles targeted on the industrial and commercial centres. I guess places like Berlin and Dresden are similarly flattened.'

'What a waste.'

'And all for nothing.'

'I wonder if Suzette has regained consciousness yet.'

'We'll soon see,' he said, turning the truck around the bends at Beaulieu.

'If she has, will Gill have told her?'

'About her legs, you mean? I don't know. She might not until she is a little stronger and able to take the news.'

'Poor Suzette, after all she's been through. To come all the way here, be attacked by a nutcase and wind up never being able to walk again.'

TUESDAY 17th AUGUST - 2145 hrs.

The communicator buzzed on the bridge of Columbia. 'Message from Laroque, Commander. Senator Pritchard says he's found them.'

The Commander looked at the Admiral. 'He has, has he? Tell him that we'll talk to him in a few minutes.'

'With respect, Commander. I think the Senator is eager to have immediate action.'

'Sparks, do as you're told,' barked the Admiral and switched off the intercom, nodding towards his cabin. The two officers walked there in silence, carefully locking the door before speaking.

'Well, sir. Do we speak to the Senator or let him stew?'

'I think we must speak with him, John. We have no choice.' He picked up the phone. 'Put me through to Senator Pritchard at Laroque.'

'Pritchard here, Admiral Davison. The time has come for you to get off your butt. By manipulating the data, we have managed to get a response from CX zone which is the area where the rebels disappeared.'

'Have you now? And where might that be?'

'The place where you should have looked in the first place. I told you they were up to no good and have now been proved right.'

'Spare me the sarcasm, Senator. Where are they?'

'Where I knew they would be. They have returned to the old rebel headquarters. Launch your Hornets, Admiral, and finish them off. The target is La Planque village at Mandagout.'

EN PASSANT

WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 0900 hrs.

Malinov Two finally cleared the Bosphorus and entered the big, empty Cernoje More, the Black Sea. No signs of life had been seen as they passed the city of Istanbul that, for centuries, had guarded the straits between the two great seas.

'Extend the main aerial,' commanded the Captain.

Buttons were pressed and, after a short pause, the radio operator began to speak. 'Malinov Two to Odessa Control. Do you read? Over.'

Static was the only reply.

'Keep trying,' said the Captain.

'Very well, Comrade Captain.' He pressed the button. 'Malinov Two to Odessa Control. Do you read? Over.'

Captain Ralentov turned to his engineer. 'Emergency full speed, Comrade.

Unless you see a need to submerge, stay on the surface, we will make better time that way.'

'I understand the urgency, Captain.'

'Radar,' added the Captain as he was leaving the main deck. 'Keep a good lookout. Wake me if anything changes. I need some sleep.'

He walked down the gangway to the repeating, fading sounds of, 'Malinov Two to Odessa Control. Come in, please. Over,' and, 'Malinov Two to Odessa Control. Do you read? Over.'

THE Senator's face was as black as thunder as he stormed into the Admiral's stateroom to confront Admiral Davison.

'Why have I been brought here?' he demanded, pushing past Lieutenant Benson who stood, impassive, his hands behind his back.

The Admiral did not reply at once but continued to reshuffle the papers in front of him.

'I insist on an explanation,' added the statesman, thumping the polished table.

Admiral Michael Davison stopped and looked at the Senator over the top of his gold-rimmed glasses before slowly putting down his papers, standing and removing his spectacles. 'These are my headquarters, Senator. I would be grateful if you would respect that fact.'

'How dare you, sir?' blurted Senator Pritchard, his face red with anger. 'And why haven't you sent out your aircraft to destroy the rebels?'

'Ask the Commander,' said the Admiral quietly.

The Senator turned on the tall, grey-headed man beside him. 'Well, Commander Jakes. What do you have to say for yourself?'

'I have not sent out my attack squadron because I have not been given the order.'

'I gave the order, sailor. Why haven't you obeyed?'

'I give the orders on this ship,' interrupted the Admiral.

'But I am the special representative of the President,' he spat through his clenched teeth. 'I have his full authority to act as I see fit.'

'Not on my ship, Senator.'

'But you are an officer of the United States Navy. You have no alternative, Admiral.'

'Rear-Admiral, retired,' corrected the senior officer. 'Specially seconded by the Security Council of the United Nations to bring about peace in Europe and under their direct orders. What you are proposing will not bring peace but further conflict.'

'But we must destroy them, they cannot be allowed to gain the upper hand.'

'They already have that,' interrupted the Commander.

'What do you mean?' asked the politician, facing him.

'If I were to give the order to launch a large number of strike aircraft, we would all be dead within a minute.'

Senator Pritchard looked bewildered. 'How?'

'Several reasons,' said the Admiral, slowly walking around the table towards him. 'Firstly, Malinov One is just over a mile from us, waiting for us to make any move that might be construed as an attack.'

'One submarine? Against our whole fleet?'

'You obviously are not acquainted with the fire power of a Malinov Series Super-sub, Senator. If you were, you would not pose such a ridiculous question.'

'You mean we must simply sit here, waiting?'

'Unless it becomes imperative to act. I am certain that, if an attack does take place, this carrier will be the first to go to the bottom of the Med.'

'And that's not the only reason for our hesitation,' added Commander Jakes.

'The rebels have two weapons which could defeat everything but an all-out invasion. One is a guided-missile system so sophisticated that our aircraft might never get close enough to launch an attack.'

'And the other weapon?'

'One that could destroy the United States.'

The Senator stood, scowling, for a long time before he suddenly burst out laughing. 'You are not serious.'

'Perfectly serious,' said Captain Whittaker. 'It's no longer a question of how many of them are killed but, possibly, how many more millions of innocent people are to be sacrificed so that you can play the hero.'

'How dare you, Captain? I have the full authority of the President of the United States.'

The Admiral confronted him. 'Then why did he ask me how the plans for peace were coming along?'

The politician swallowed. 'When did you speak with him?'

'An hour ago. Atmospherics have improved considerably during the morning. He asked what further aid we could give to the French Nationals and how you were dealing with the distribution of what aid we already have in the holds of Perigrine and Weymouth.'

'But he must now realise that there are some things which are more important...'

The room fell silent until the Admiral, though older, grabbed the Senator by the lapels and almost lifted him from the deck. The Senator's bodyguard reached into his coat but was halted by a click close to his face as Lieutenant Benson rested the end of the barrel of his automatic against the man's neck. The naval officer reached in and retrieved the revolver, tossing it onto the table.

'On your knees, sir,' he ordered, deliberately over-stressing the title, and the miserable man sank to the floor, his hands upon his head.

'The President doesn't know, does he?' accused the Admiral. 'My God, this is another Irangate, isn't it? Because of your greed and power-lust, I have lost two helicopters and three planes as well as a score of personnel. I ought to have you thrown overboard right now.'

The Senator's mouth fell open but no words came.

'Get Al in here, John,' seethed the Admiral. 'I want this slob and his baby-sitter off my boat right now. Have them taken direct to the airport and then flown home. I don't ever want to see their faces again.'

'And the engineers?' asked the Captain.

'They can stay, we might need them. That cursed satellite might now be our only means of getting out of this mess in one piece.'

WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1300 hrs.

'Odessa Control to Malinov Two, go ahead,' came the eventual, faint reply as the super-sub raced northward across the surface of the Black Sea.

A cheer went up on the vessel and the Captain was woken. He staggered to the control room, rubbing sleep from his eyes, and then sat down to give a full report to the Russian Naval Commander at Odessa Submarine base.

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SUZETTE was restless as she tossed in her bunk despite the efforts of Gillian to hold her still.

'She's running a fever,' observed Gillian. 'We must find a way to restrain her. If she keeps rolling about like this, she could do irreparable damage to herself.'

'Can we do nothing to help her?' asked Roger.

'Very little. She's fairly well sedated with pain-killers at the moment. I guess the fever is some kind of a reaction.'

'After what she's been through, it's hardly surprising,' said Philippe.

'She needs proper medical help, I've done all I can for her.'

'We have found a couple of local doctors but they have their hands full treating the survivors of fallout.'

'What Suzette needs is a specialist of some sort. I really can't tell just how badly her spine is damaged.'

'Where will we find such a specialist?'

'On Columbia?'

'Suzette would not agree to that. It would mean throwing away all she has achieved.'

'Then don't tell her. Just radio them and call for help. It's her life that is at stake.'

Philippe and Roger looked at each other. 'It's worth a try,' they agreed. Roger found the walkie-talkie in Suzette's car and took it back upstairs. He pressed the button. 'Mandagout to Columbia. Do you receive? Over.' No reply. He tried again. Same result.

'We must be out of range.'

'Perhaps we should try to get higher,' suggested Jim. 'We are in the valley here. If we could get up there...' He pointed to the lofty peak of Serre de la Tourelle dominating the North-Western skyline. 'It must be almost four-thousand feet high and should improve transmission.'

'Are we doing the right thing?' cautioned Marianne.

'Right now, nothing is more important than Suzette's welfare. Surely you must see that.'

'I see it, Philippe. It's just I don't think that Suzette will see it that way.'

'What else do you suggest?'

Her head dropped and then shook, sadly.

'We'll not find it easy to make it up there in the truck,' observed Roger, following the line of the road with his eyes, shielded from the bright sunshine which now bore down upon the valley.

'Suzette's car?' offered Philippe.

'If I wrecked that, she'd kill me,' smiled her brother. 'Legs or no legs.'

'How about Louis' Fourtrack?' broke in Gillian. 'It's in the old barn by the bridge.'

'Perfect,' said Roger with a smile. 'Let's go and get the keys from him.'

Roger and Philippe unlocked the bedroom door and asked for the keys to the Fourtrack. Louis handed them over without objection but simply asked why. They told him.

As they turned to leave, he placed his hand on Philippe's shoulder.

'Philippe. There is a neuro-surgeon at Genève. If her spinal column is damaged, he may be able to help.'

Gillian interrupted. 'We don't know what it is. I was trained at Cambridge as a veterinary surgeon but horses are not quite the same as humans.'

'What do we know about her condition?' asked Louis.

'Only that she cannot feel her legs and her back gives her considerable pain.'

Gillian lifted the girl's tee-shirt a little. 'Look at that bruising. She sure took a hammering when she hit that handrail.'

'And then fell,' added Marianne.

'Is her back actually broken?' asked Louis, surprisingly very concerned.

'I don't think so,' said Gillian. 'At least, not laterally. There seems to be no actual displacement of the vertebrae at any point. But that means nothing, in itself.'

'Then we must get her to Karl Mitzen. He will know precisely what to do.'

'You're not moving her anywhere. Heaven knows what damage we might do to her spine bumping her half way across France and then through winding mountain passes.'

'Then he must come here,' said Louis.

'Why would he help us?' asked Marianne.

'He is a doctor. He would help anyone, especially if I asked him.'

'How can we trust you?' asked Roger after a pause.

'One of you can come with me. Several of you, if you insist.'

'I'll go,' said Philippe to Roger. 'My command of the language is better than yours.'

Roger smiled. 'You're probably right.'

They told the others and relief showed all round except on the face of Gillian who suddenly remembered Suzette's suspicions.

'Roger,' she said, trying not to let her trepidation show. 'You had better go, too.'

'I can't,' he said. 'No-one else can operate Diablos.'

'Don't let them go alone,' she whispered frantically.

Roger laughed. 'Okay. Marianne can go with them.'

'I'll go, too,' said Jim, remembering what Gillian had told him though not altogether sure he believed it.

'I don't mind going along for the ride,' said Marianne, puzzled at the unspoken tension. 'I'll be with Philippe, so what danger could there possibly be?'

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WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1500 hrs.

The three naval officers were uncertain as to what to do next.

'Do you think that they really have returned to Mandagout?' asked the Captain.

'It would seem an unusual thing to do if they are as innocent as they first seemed,' observed Commander Jakes.

'Perhaps, gentlemen,' mused the Admiral. 'That is precisely what the whole point is. Under normal circumstances, it would be the last place we would expect them to go and, if they are really rebels, they would be stupid to return there. However, if they really are as innocent as I believe them to be, it is just the sort of clever move I would have expected from the daughter of John Blackman.'

'But that's ridiculous, if you don't mind me saying so, sir. It's too obtuse.'

'That's what you said about her chess, wasn't it, John? A weather-Girl's Gambit, I think you called it. While you're busy discounting her unorthodox moves, just remember who it was won that game with Colonel Narovic.'

The Commander fell silent.

'What do you suggest we do?' asked Captain Whittaker.

'I suggest we do what we came here to do and ignore them. I would think there are plenty of places around that could do with the food and supplies we brought across the Atlantic. Now that our White-House friend has taken off, we can get the operators at Laroque to do something useful, like finding people for us, instead of chasing the White Queen all over the chess board.'

Captain Whittaker looked startled. 'What did you call her?'

'The White Queen. That's how she beat Narovic, don't you remember? White Queen to King's Bishop Six.'

'You've got a good memory.'

'It's what has kept me alive so long. At last I'm beginning to see a pattern to all this.'

'A pattern?' said the Captain. 'But it was just a game.'

'Chess is never a game, Henry. It is war and we are the pieces.'

'Then where is King's Bishop Six?'

'If I knew that, John. I would not be sitting here, wondering whether she views me as the Black King or not.'

'Do you think she does? View you as her enemy, I mean.'

'If she does,' the Admiral said seriously. 'Then it's high time I started getting worried.'

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ROOK TO KING FIVE

WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1600 hrs.

Marianne lay back in the comfortable back seat of the Fourtrack as it raced along the straight, narrow road to St Hippolyte du Fort. On the left towered the great limestone gash in the landscape that was Pic du Midi; an unmistakable landmark on the edge of the Southern Cévennes. Philippe sat in front of her, his arm resting on the edge of the open window, cradling the steering wheel confidently in his hands. Beside her, Louis was deep in thought. The last passenger, Jim, toyed with the radio in the hope of finding a station still transmitting.

'We should be in Nîmes by five,' calculated Philippe. 'And I guess we will be in Lyon by nightfall.'

'Assuming the bridges are intact,' commented Jim. 'If they are not, we may have to go a long way north before we can cross the Saône to get to Geneva.' 'We'll follow the Rhône where possible. If we see a bridge that looks safe, we'll risk it and cross.'

'Where did you cross, Louis?' asked Marianne in French.

'Me?'

'Yes,' she replied, a little puzzled at his lack of involvement. 'You came from Genève, didn't you?'

'We crossed close to Lyon. I can't remember precisely where.'

'What was Lyon like?' asked Jim.

'Lyon?'

'The city. When you came through. Were there any signs of life?'

'We didn't see any,' Louis said quickly. 'We came through at night.'

'I see,' pondered Jim thoughtfully.

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WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1620 hrs.

The intercom crackled. 'Señor Roger. Are you receiving? Over.'

Roger picked up the instrument, watching Gillian as she gently wiped Suzette's forehead.

'Go ahead, Carlos.'

'I am in position. The road is clear right to the top of the hill and I have parked the truck under the trees close to the refuge and walked the short distance to the top. Over.'

'Excellent. I can hear you very clearly. Can you see anything? Over.'

'The cloud is almost gone now. I can see right to St Hippolyte and across to Mont Aigoual. Over.'

'Southwards? Over.'

'Across the plateaux into the distance. There is nothing to report. Over.'

'Very good, Carlos. Keep in touch. I will send Manuel to relieve you just before sunset. Over.'

'Gracias, Señor Roger. Adios.'

Roger placed the intercom on the table and sat down beside Gillian and looked at his sister. 'How is she?'

'No better. But at least she is holding her own. I suppose that while she is not conscious, she feels no pain.'

'Will she survive?'

'That depends how long it takes for Louis and Philippe to return with this famous surgeon.'

'They should get as far as Lyon tonight. Then it's a fairly short hop to Geneva. If they find the doctor quickly, they should get back to Lyon by tomorrow night. All being well, we will know by this time on Friday.'

'I'm worried.'

'What about?'

'About Jim and Marianne.'

'Why? They are in good hands. I don't think Louis will try to fight all of them, even if he is so inclined. He seems quite helpful at the moment. We have to trust him anyway. He is Suzette's only chance of survival.'

'I don't know why I'm worried. I suppose it is just that Suzette thinks Philippe may not be all he seems.'

Roger shrugged. 'He seems all right to me.'

'And me. It was Suzette who was suspicious. It's probably nothing to worry about.'

'I'm sure it's not.' He stood up. 'Hold on here, will you, Gill? I'm going to check on a little devil.'

'Carlos?'

'No,' he laughed. 'Diablos.'

His footsteps gradually faded as he went down the stairs, passing a greeting with the ever-vigilant Georges on the way. Gillian looked down at Suzette who stirred restlessly, her tee-shirt soaked with perspiration.

'Hold on, Suzette,' Gillian whispered. 'Just a little while longer. Don't go and die on me now.'

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WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1700 hrs.

Major Slazinski zipped up his jacket as he stood beside his helicopter, facing the Commander.

'Are you sure you want to do this, Al?' shouted the senior officer above the noise of the rotors.

'Of course, sir. There is no-one else whom she will trust. Not now.'

'You do realise that as soon as they see you approaching you could easily be blown out of the sky.'

'Yes, sir. I understand. At least I shall know nothing about it.'

'It's not funny, Al. You and I have served together for... How many years is it?'

'Twelve, sir.'

'Twelve years. You are one of my best officers and I'd hate to lose you.'

'So would my lady, Commander. But I have no intention of getting killed yet. I think I can get through to Miss Blackman. She and I talk the same language.'

'What's that?'

'Common sense, Commander. I'm not sure about the others, though, I don't know them well enough. I just know that, if I can talk to the girl, it will be all right.'

'Are you sure you won't let me send others to cover your back?'

'Quite sure, sir. Just Martin and I. We'll get through. We have to.'

'I hope so, Major. A lot of lives are depending on you.'

The two officers shook hands before the black Major shoved the cigar back into his mouth and waved at the pilot. 'Take her up, Frank. Let's go put our heads into the lion's mouth.'

Commander Jakes held onto his hat as the helicopter rose slowly and then slipped sideways and slowly and disappeared towards the land.

'Goodbye, Al,' murmured the Commander. 'God go with you.'

He turned to find the Admiral standing beside him on the wide flight deck.

'Well, John?'

'He's gone, Admiral. I only hope we haven't sacrificed a very brave pawn.'

'Time will tell, John. We should know in less than thirty minutes.'

'We are held in check, sir. It is the only move we can make.'

The Admiral looked eastwards across the calm Mediterranean. 'Let's hope Comrade Narovic sees it that way.'

'If he doesn't?'

'Then, in about...' he looked at his watch, 'twenty-four minutes, you and I will no longer be worrying about who is winning the game.'

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WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1720 hrs.

Carlos sat up straight and pricked up his ears. Getting to his feet, he peered across the distant plateau to where a tiny dot showed clearly against the pale sky. He reached for his radio. 'Señor Roger. Come in. Over.'

'Go ahead, Carlos.'

'Unidentified aircraft approaching from the south.'

'Okay. Get under cover. I'll deal with it.'

'Si, Señor Roger.' He peered through his binoculars. 'It looks like a helicopter.'

Roger dragged the case from the back of the truck and prised open the lid. With help from Georges and Manuel, he was soon ready. In the distance, the faint sound of rotors could be heard.

'It approaches slowly, Monsieur Blackman,' observed Georges.

'Trying to sneak up on us, no doubt.'

'Rather a noisy way to do it,' commented Gillian, coming out of the doorway.

'Could it be a distraction, do you think?'

'Gillian, you are not just a pretty face.' He kissed her cheek and reached for the radio. 'Carlos, are you still with me?'

'Si, Señor Roger.'

'Take a quick look around. Are you sure there is no-one else approaching, from another direction, perhaps.'

There was a delay of several minutes while the sound of rotors gradually increased, almost filling the narrow valley with the sound. Tension increased as they looked around for signs of other approach.

'All clear,' spoke the communicator, and then another voice broke in. 'Major Slazinski to Mandagout. Do you read? Over.'

Gillian jumped at the interruption. 'That's Al's voice.'

'They are not fooling me, Gill,' said Roger. 'This is some kind of trick.'

Gillian picked up the communicator. 'Gillian Green here, Al. What do you want?'

'To talk,' came the reply.

'He's stalling,' observed Roger.

'Wait,' she said. 'Al?'

'Go ahead, Miss Gillian.'

'I'd advise you not to come any closer. We've got you on screen now and you know what that means.'

'I swear I come in peace. Don't shoot until I've spoken to Miss Suzette.'

Gillian looked at Roger, poised to fire Diablos into the air on a one-way trip with a big bang at the end of short journey. Roger nodded.

'Come in slowly, Al. If this is some kind of a trick, Roger's finger will bring an end to our brief friendship.'

'No tricks, Missy. I promise.'

The watchers waited as the gunship came around the bend in the valley, trailing a large white sheet, wheels down and doors wide open. Slowly, it approached and hovered above the old village before settling down amid the stumps of vines beside the stream. Slowly, Al Slazinski lit his cigar and casually clambered out onto the grassy slope. The sight of Diablos sent a shudder through him before he started walking into the jaws of death.

'Thanks for hearing me out,' he eventually said.

'I hope this is good, Major,' said Roger.

'I would prefer to speak with Miss Suzette.'

'I'm afraid that is not possible,' said Gillian. 'Suzette has met with an accident.'

Al was noticeably shaken. 'H...how did it happen?' he stammered, clutching Gillian by the upperarms.

She looked at Roger who nodded and sat down. Gillian held out her hand to the Major. 'Come with me.'

Together, they walked up the narrow, stone, spiral staircase until Gillian pushed open a wooden door to admit them. Ramon rose to his feet, suitably armed with his machete, but Gillian indicated that all was well. The Major stood by the bed and looked down at the girl who lay, delirious with fever, on the small cot.

'What happened to her?' he eventually asked.

'She was attacked by one of the survivors of the Consortium.'

'There are survivors?'

'Not many and, fortunately, hardly any like Corrine LaFleche.'

'How did it happen?'

Gillian sat on the bed and explained in detail what had happened while Al paced the room, getting more and more agitated as the details became clear.

'Do you believe them?' asked the Major.

'About Genève? I don't know but we had to take the chance, we have no alternative.'

'Yes you do. I will fly her to this specialist.'

'Fly her?'

'In the 'copter. It might be days before your people get back. If we leave now, we will be there before they even arrive.'

'But how will we find this doctor?'

'It shouldn't be that difficult. Geneva is not a big place. Hold on a moment.'

He picked up the communicator. 'Martin. Get Commander Jakes on the horn. I'm coming down.'

Al pummelled the stairs with his boots as he descended and then ran over to the Gunship. Corporal Fisher handed him the microphone.

'Commander? Al Slazinski here.'

'Go ahead, Al.'

'Could you get out the aerial photos Red Squadron took of Geneva.'

'Geneva? Okay. Hold on.'

After a short delay, the communicator spoke again. 'I've got them, Al. What am I looking for?'

'There are around two hundred people there, survivors of the Consortium.'

'Well done, Al. I'll launch Blue Squadron to finish them off.'

'Not yet sir. I just need to know if there is any indication as to where they might be.'

'Why?'

'I don't have time to explain, Commander. I'm leaving for there now. Could you get your experts onto it and come up with possible locations.'

'Leaving? For Geneva? I can't let you do that, Al. Not without further information.'

Al tossed the mic to the embarrassed corporal and gave rapid instructions. A few moments later, Suzette was carried carefully downstairs, zipped up in her sleeping bag. Gillian brought a case containing some hurriedly-packed clothes and sat in the open bay next to Suzette. Martin Fisher strapped the stretcher down and offered the safety harness to Gillian. Roger and Al carried a couple of the crates to the gunship and climbed aboard.

Roger tossed the communicator to Georges. 'Can you hold the fort here?'

Georges nodded. 'Take Ramon. He is useful in a scrap if you should meet trouble.'

'Hope we don't. But thanks. We'll be back.'

'Au-revoir, Monsieur Blackman.'

'Au-revoir,' replied Roger as the noise increased and the helicopter rose, wobbled a little, and then dipped its nose, roaring off towards the South-East, following the line of the valley. Just skimming the tops of the lofty chestnut trees, they accelerated quickly and La Planque soon disappeared behind them.

'I want to keep low,' clarified the pilot. 'In case they have radar.'

'Columbia to Major Slazinski. Come in. Over,' boomed the radio.

'Al here, Commander. Sorry to break off just then. This is a matter of life or death.'

'Do you have the Blackman girl with you?'

Al looked at Suzette then Roger and said 'Affirmative, Commander.'

'Then your instructions are to bring her to Columbia, do you read? Over.'

The pilot looked over his shoulder at Al. Roger's finger curled around the trigger of his Uzi machine-pistol.

'I'm sorry, Commander,' Al replied. 'Reception is bad. Could you repeat? Over.'

'I said. Return to Columbia immediately. Do you read? Over.'

'Message not understood. Will try to contact you later. Over and out.'

Al looked at the pilot. 'Well. What are you waiting for? Let's get the hell to Geneva before all the nice girls go to bed.'

'It will take some time, Major, following these valleys.'

'Forget the secrecy, we don't have time now. Take to the hills, boy, before our revered leader realises he's been had.'

Instinctively, the helicopter rose like an eagle on a thermal and veered to port. Small, green valleys criss-crossed the landscape below them as they roared North-Eastwards crossing the Gardon after a few minutes and then, later, descending into the upper Ardèche valley. Within an hour, they had reached the Rhône and the valley echoed with the sounds of the whirring rotors and whining turbo-drive.

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KNIGHT TO BISHOP SEVEN

WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1840 hrs.

In the Rhône Valley, just north of Valence, the Fourtrack pulled in under the trees as the helicopter roared overhead, seemingly intent on reaching its destination quickly.

'Phew, that was close,' said Jim, watching the dark shape quickly disappearing up the wide valley.

'Do you think they saw us?' asked Marianne nervously.

'I don't think so,' murmured Philippe, clambering out and peering from under the low branch. 'I wonder where he is going in such a hurry.'

'Looking for us?' ventured Jim.

'Not at that speed. If we were being hunted, there would be several of them, flying slowly in a search pattern.'

They waited for several minutes but no more came.

'Good job we weren't on the Autoroute. We'd have been spotted for sure.'

They had attempted to cross the Rhône south of the town of Orange but the river bridge was down and they had been forced to keep on the west bank through Banyols and up to Pont St Esprit. There, they found that, although the modern bridges all seemed to have suffered, the old stone bridge across the river, built centuries ago by friars, still remained intact. Unfortunately, modern architecture had again suffered and, six kilometres to the east, the canal bridge lay in ruins. From there, they had been forced to drive northward over Isle Margeries and then back across the rubber-matted Rhône suspension bridge near the Defile de Donzère.

'You look tired, Philippe,' offered Louis. 'Do you want me to drive for a while?'

'D'accord,' said the younger man. 'We'll keep going for another hour or so and then we must find somewhere to spend the night. I don't fancy driving on these unlit roads at in the dark, not while they are so littered with abandoned vehicles.'

'We'll head straight for Lyon,' said Louis, climbing into the driver's seat.

'There will be somewhere there we can stay. Also, there is bound to be a place to cross the river.'

'It is narrowest there,' remarked Marianne. 'After the Rhône and Saône split, we can at least take the river in two bites.'

'Of course, you are right,' said Louis with a knowing glance at Philippe who nodded.

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WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 1900 hrs.

The helicopter banked to the right as it passed over the ruined city of Lyon, great office blocks flattened by the blast which had clearly originated in the province of Villebanne, totally devastating an area of many square miles. It was also clear that fire and radiation had obliterated all signs of life for a long way further out. Lyon was a ghost town.

'At least the bridges in Perrache and Guillotièrè survived,' noted Ramon.

'You know the city well?' asked Gillian, surprised by the sudden attempt at conversation from the youth who had barely spoken a word since they had met.

'My family are from Lyon.'

'I'm sorry,' said Gillian, her hand on his arm.

'Not all parts have been obliterated,' pointed Roger. 'The parts in the gorge along the river were obviously protected from the main blast. Wow! That was some bomb that did that.'

They passed over the initial crater which looked around four kilometres across and very deep.

'A ground burst,' clarified Roger. 'Probably caused a lot of fallout around the area, depending on which way the wind was blowing.'

'Too early for Mistral,' pondered Ramon. 'So the wind will have likely been towards the north. The vineyards will have perished.'

He looked sad and Gillian suddenly had a terrible notion. Perhaps the destruction of the grape-laden vines meant more to him than the deaths of many millions of people. She shuddered at the thought.

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WEDNESDAY 18th AUGUST - 2000 hrs.

The Fourtrack stopped at the airport to the east of the city and pulled in beside an intact building that looked as if it had once been a hotel. No-one greeted them as they arrived outside and nothing disturbed the deathly silence as they stepped down and Jim pushed open the front door. Marianne canoned into him as he turned.

'Don't go inside,' he said, blocking the doorway. 'Let's try over there.'

'Bodies?' she asked, her hand on her chest.

Jim nodded and looked very ill indeed. 'A young couple, it looked like. On honeymoon by the look of their luggage.'

'Oh, no,' said Marianne sadly and Jim put his arm around her shoulders while she shook.

'Let's try to find empty rooms,' suggested Philippe.

'You may have to go in there for keys,' warned Jim. 'Be careful, it's not pretty.'

'Fairly instant though,' mused Louis, as if that made it all right.

After trying several rooms, they finally found two without occupation.

Marianne lay down on her back on the big double bed, exhausted, while Jim brought in the bags.

'I'd like someone to stay with me,' begged Marianne quietly.

'Are you sure?' asked Philippe.

She nodded. 'You've been driving so you can have the bed if you like. I don't mind sleeping on the settee.'

'It's a double bed,' joked Louis, rolling onto the bed beside her while Philippe went to look for water.

Marianne looked puzzled and then wary as Louis' hand first rested on her flat stomach and then began to toy with the buckle of her belt.

Marianne turned her head and looked straight into his eyes. 'Roger would kill you.'

'Only if he caught me,' he said, trying to tug the tee-shirt out of her denims.

The door opened. 'No, Louis,' said Philippe, pointing his revolver at Louis' face. 'This is not the time. Get in the other room.'

Louis let go of her and she re-covered herself as Jim walked in and dropped the bags. Begrudgingly, Louis stood and then went through the doorway, followed by Philippe.

Jim sat on the bed. 'Want me to stay?'

She nodded. 'Please,' she said, patting the bed beside her.

'I'll use the armchair. And before you say anything, it's not Roger I'm worried about, it's Gill.'

They laughed together as a frantic row broke out in the other room.

'Thieves falling out,' Jim murmured.

'Why do you say that?'

'Oh, nothing. Just remembering something Gill said before we left.'

Marianne looked startled. 'Do you think they're up to something?'

'Probably. But we'll worry about it when we've been to Geneva, collected this doctor fellow and made sure Suzette is all right.'

'I suppose you're right. It's the most important thing to us all right now.'

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THE helicopter continued to race up the Rhône valley and, gradually, the trees and villages began to look more normal as they got further from the blast zone.

The Major tried the radio. 'Al Slazinski to Columbia. Do you read? Over.'

'Columbia receiving, loud and clear. Where are you, Al?'

'Approaching Geneva now, Commander.'

'What the hell are you doing at Geneva, Al? I told you to return to base.'

'No time to explain, sir. Just believe me when I say it's for the best.'

'We'll discuss that when you return, Major. What is it that you want?'

'The information from the photographs of Geneva.'

Commander Jakes reluctantly agreed and gave him the information he required.

The Major thanked his Commanding Officer and gave the pilot instructions.

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THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 0100 hrs.

Marianne stirred restlessly as the moonlight shone in through the open curtains. Somewhere, she heard snoring; the only sound to disturb the stark silence. Suddenly, she was wide awake and, gently, she lifted the duvet to one side and got softly to her feet. Pulling the bottom of her long tee-shirt down, she tiptoed, barefoot, to the window, and looked out. Near to the Fourtrack, a darker shape moved, clearly outlined in the moonlight. Without thinking of any danger, she reached for the knob of the door but, as the handle began to turn, a powerful arm wrapped itself around her waist from behind. She opened her mouth to scream but another hand closed firmly over her mouth, stifling the sound.

As she struggled, she realised there was something in the hand, something which smelt sweet, something which made her mind swim and drift in and out of consciousness. Gradually, her knees sagged. She fought bravely but sluggishly and, inevitably, lost the battle as a deep darkness came over her.

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THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 0500 hrs.

The lights in the room were bright as Dr Karl Mitzen gently ran his fingers over Suzette's back while she lay on the table in front of him. The walls of the room were clean and bright, the curtains pulled back to reveal the sun rising over Lac Leeman and glistening off the snow on the far slopes which ran down to it.

'Try again,' he said to his colleague who carefully lifted her arms and pulled them above her head, gripping her firmly under the arms while another doctor held onto her ankles. Together, under Karl Mitzen's directions, they carefully stretched and massaged, eased and probed, pushed and pulled, until the Doctor was thoroughly satisfied.

'Turn her over,' he said, delicately draping a towel across her lower abdomen.

'What a mess,' he commented as the assistants made her comfortable while Karl Mitzen examined her belly carefully. 'You did right in bringing her to me.'

Her brother nodded. 'We had no choice.'

'And the LaFleche woman did this?'

Roger nodded again. 'With the barrel of a shotgun.'

'That woman is mad,' he said without looking up from Suzette's stomach which he was probing gently with his long fingers.

'That woman is dead,' contradicted Roger.

The specialist smiled. 'Then perhaps now we shall all get some peace. That woman thought of no-one but herself.' He looked at Suzette, looking so young and innocent before him. 'Is this young lady important to you?'

'She is my sister.' Roger looked down at the polished floor. 'I love her very much.'

'Well, Monsieur, as far as I can tell, your sister will probably live. My best estimate of her condition is that three of the vertebrae are damaged, but not

irreparably. With complete rest for a week or two, the cracks in the bones will heal and she will be able to get about fairly normally.'

'She will walk?'

'She is able to walk now, but I wouldn't recommend it for a couple of days. Any undue lateral strain or exercise could do considerable damage to her spinal column - permanent damage.'

'And her stomach?'

The doctor glanced up from his ministrations. 'I can tell you are not familiar with the human anatomy, Monsieur Blackman. The stomach is very high, close to the rib cage. The bruising is on her abdomen, the part of her body which contains the parts to do with digestion and reproduction. If this amount of damage had been inflicted higher up her body, she would not be still alive.'

'Corrine LaFleche said she didn't want to kill Suzette outright, she wanted to hurt her as much as possible first, to damage her insides without actually causing death.'

'She certainly achieved that.'

'Then she...'

'There will, inevitably, be some internal damage, possibly haemorrhaging. It is far too early to ascertain the precise extent of the damage to the internal organs and I don't want to have to go inside unless I have to. I would rather keep her under constant observation for a while and then act as necessary.'

'You feel there is reason for concern?'

'I'd rather not commit myself until I am more sure. On the basis of my initial examination, the most likely damage will have been either to her ovaries or kidneys.'

'How soon will we know for sure?'

'With the kidneys, we'll have a fair idea in a few days. As far as her ovaries are concerned, ask me again nine months after she is married.'

'You have been very honest, doctor. I appreciate it.'

'Don't mention it.' He pulled the sheet up to cover Suzette's limp form, nodding to the others that they were dismissed. 'Tell me, Monsieur. Do you have a girl of your own?'

'Yes, I do. She is on her way here with Louis and Philippe. She is quite safe.'

'Do you think so?'

A sudden, stark fear ran through Roger's whole being. 'What do you mean?'

'It may be nothing. However, Louis gave us the impression that he would never return here. He is certainly not welcome.'

'Not welcome?'

The Doctor looked up from his work. 'After what has happened? Without our consent?'

'Without your consent? But I thought...'

'That's what you were meant to think, Monsieur. However, we were tricked just as much as you were. I understand the leader was killed at Mandagout.'

'Yes. I killed Monsieur le Directeur myself.'

He turned sharply. 'Monsieur le Directeur? But he was not the leader.'

Roger's heart dropped through his boots and was halfway to Australia. 'Not the leader? Then who...?'

'I don't know. I met him only once and do not know his name.'

'Would you describe him?'

The doctor pondered for a moment.

'Thirty-ish. Tall. Dark-hair,' he said as he removed his rubber gloves.

'Moustache. Otherwise fairly normal.'

'That description would fit a dozen frenchmen we've met. What do you know about his life? His work?'

'I remember him once saying that he had dreamed up the whole idea after his wife had been killed by terrorists. He was very bitter about it.'

'Where was this?'

'In Beirut, he told us. He was assigned to the French Embassy there. He was very young and his wife was just nineteen when she died. Ever since then, he

has had this kind of irrepressible mania about girls who are of that age.' He pushed open the door and they walked in to the lounge where the others waited for news. Gillian poured them coffee.

'It all seems so unbelievable,' she said after Roger had brought them up-to-date with what the doctor had told him. 'To start a war, cause the death of millions of innocent people and destroy so much just for some sort of revenge. Louis gave Suzette the impression that the motives of the Consortium were to do with business and ridding Europe of corrupt government.'

'He would, wouldn't he? Hitler tried that. Kill millions in war, murder Jews and children in concentration camps and for what? To make the world a better place for people to live in, or so he said.'

'And this leader is like that, you think?'

'Certainly. During the brief period he was here in Genève, he used to sicken us by boasting about some of the terrible atrocities he has inflicted upon young women.'

'He sounds quite a nut case.'

'Précisement. None are safe as he sees them as a kind of replacement, a ransom, for his dead wife. He is a sick man who, I believe, rapes and mutilates these girls in an attempt to bring back his own wife. Your English Jack the Ripper was an angel of mercy alongside that evil man.'

'It certainly sounds like it.'

The doctor smiled. 'Let's change the subject. Tell me, Monsieur Blackman. How old is this girl of yours?'

'Marianne?' Roger calculated. 'She is...,' his smile faded, '...nineteen.' Then it is a good thing she has this... Philippe... to protect her.'

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#### BLACK KING TO QUEEN ONE

THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 0700 hrs.

Marianne woke slowly, feeling dreadful. Gingerly, she opened one eye and instantly wished she hadn't. For some reason, the room was being spun around at a thousand revolutions per minute and she was in grave fear of being thrown off her bed. After a few minutes, she tried again with the same result although the spinning did seem a little steadier. Gradually, as her senses got better, the room slowed down and finally stabilized. She felt awful.

Carefully, she looked around the room and saw that she was alone, tucked up in her duvet as if nothing had happened. The bathroom door stood open and so, bit by bit, she inched out of the bed, swinging her bare legs to the floor.

It was a mistake. She fell to the floor to prevent herself being spun off the revolving room and laid her head on the edge of the bed until it stopped again. Eventually, on hands and knees, she made her way to the bathroom where she was violently sick. Groaning, she lay propped up against the bathroom wall, her face over the toilet bowl, until the entire contents of her stomach were on way to the sewers. Did it really happen, she thought to herself?

Tentatively, she ran a hand all over her body and it felt as if she was still in one piece. It must have been some kind of a bad dream, she thought. It was then that she realised that one item of her clothing was missing. It had not been a dream, not even a nightmare. What had happened? Her heart beat frantically as she tried to sit up but groaned at the dizziness and sat down again. There was a soft knocking at the door and her hands instinctively went around her body.

'Marianne,' came the quiet voice. 'It's me, Jim. Are you all right?'

A flood of relief washed over her as she moved her legs to allow the door to open.

Jim looked down in horror. 'Good grief, Marianne. You look terrible. What have you done?'

What should she say? That she felt as if she had been raped? 'I've been ill. It must have been something I ate.'

He reached out his hands to her. 'Let's get you back to bed. You'll feel better there.'

Gently, he helped her to her feet and half carried her into the bedroom and tucked her into bed.

'Drink?'

She nodded. 'S'il tu plait.'

Marianne watched Jim carefully as he plugged in the kettle, got the ingredients from a carrier bag they had brought with them and set about making coffee.

'I don't suppose that coffee is the best thing for an upset stomach. But it will take away the taste.'

He picked up her denims from the floor and laid them across the bed. 'I'd get dressed if I were you before the others return.'

'Have they gone out?'

'Just gone to reconnoitre. They'll be back soon. I managed to get a look into the Fourtrack last night but I could see no signs of anything suspicious. Maybe we're imagining all the intrigue.'

'Jim,' she said carefully, her hands on his arms. 'Whatever happens, promise me you'll stay with me. Don't leave me.'

He sat on the bed beside her. 'Of course I won't. How could I?'

'Thanks. I don't expect you to understand.'

He kissed her forehead. 'I might just be a mere man but I'm not completely insensitive.'

She sat up and put her hand on his. 'Jim. You're a good friend.'

The sounds of a vehicle approaching made Jim look up and he went over to the window.

'They're back,' he observed but Marianne was not listening. Instead, she was rummaging in her bag beside the bed. Eventually, she found what she was looking for and was smiling a welcome as Philippe walked in the door, a cheerful look on his face. Louis followed him inside but could not look her in the eyes. So now she knew. She would wait until Louis had served his purpose by getting the doctor for Suzette and, when that purpose had been fulfilled, that horrible little man was going to die. She was certain she would be doing the whole world a very great favour.

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THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 0800 hrs.

The Fourtrack drove steadily northwards along the Autoroute du Soleil, descending from the foothills of the Mont d'Or. Jim looked relaxed but Marianne was puzzled. 'Aren't we going a long way north?'

Louis, beside Philippe in the front, smiled. 'Nowhere to cross the river, ma chérie. That's why Philippe and I went out this morning, to check on the bridges. It looks as if we might have to go right up to Macon or even Tournas before we can cross the Saône.'

Marianne offered no more comments as they roared along the motorway, the city of Lyon now far behind them. Ruined vineyards stretched along the sides of the valley. Just a short time ago, Côtes du Rhône was a byword among connoisseurs of good wines. Now, as withered vine stalks poked their heads through the barren soil, it would be a long time before that would again be true. The river came into sight on their right as they neared Villefranche-sur-Saône.

'A bridge!' called Marianne, pointing excitedly. 'We can get across.'

The Fourtrack slowed as it neared the turning to the bridge but then accelerated again.

'Doesn't look safe to me,' judged Louis. 'What do you think, Philippe?'

'Definitely not. Cracks all over it.'

Marianne looked to Jim for support. 'I didn't see any cracks. Did you, Jim?' Before Jim could answer, Louis turned in his seat and faced her. 'Believe me, Marianne. I know what's best for us.'

Suddenly, she saw it all. 'You're not going to Genève, are you? You have no intention of getting help for Suzette.'

'She's a clever girl, isn't she, Philippe?'

'Too bad, Louis,' remarked Philippe, his eyes never leaving the road ahead.

'What's going on?' asked Jim. 'Where are we going?'

'Can't you guess?'

'But...but Suzette,' cried Marianne, desperately trying to get through to Philippe. 'What are you going to do about Suzette? You can't let her die. Not now. You love her, don't you?'

She looked into the rear view mirror and his blue-grey eyes met hers. A cold finger touched the base of her spine and crawled slowly upwards as he smiled.

'Suzette? Suzette who?'

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THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 1200 hrs.

The atmosphere was relaxed in the house overlooking the lake at Geneva. Al, Martin and Roger sat ready for lunch while Gillian finished cooking the meal and Ramon honed the edge of his machete. Karl Mitzen walked in the door and pulled up a chair. 'That smells good.'

'Spaghetti Bolognese a la Newmarket,' announced Gillian with a flourish. 'I hope you like pseudo-Italian food.'

'With the border just a few kilometres away? I have little choice.'

'How's Suzette?'

'Much better. Her colour seems to have returned a little and her face seems much better already. The cut on her head is healing nicely.'

'I wonder where Philippe and Louis have got to,' observed Roger. 'They are long overdue.'

'Perhaps the passes are blocked,' said Karl.

'The ones we came over looked okay,' said Gillian. 'There were a few abandoned vehicles but nothing too serious.'

'Then where are they?'

'They're not coming,' said the voice from the doorway.

'Suzette,' called Gillian almost dropping the bowl of Spaghetti. She rushed to her friend's side, guiding her to a chair, pulling the sheet she was wearing more tightly around her body to keep her warm. 'You shouldn't be up.'

'I agree, Mademoiselle Blackman,' scolded the doctor. 'I am glad to see you are better but you must rest. It is very dangerous for you to be on your feet right now.'

'I've been so stupid,' was all Suzette would say as if in a daze.

'Stupid? What do you mean?' asked her brother.

'I trusted Louis. I should have known better.' She looked around her. 'Where are we?' she asked and Roger explained about the journey to Geneva, the examination results, the missing Fourtrack.

Suzette started to cry. 'Oh, no. Not Marianne. Poor Marianne.'

'What do you mean?' asked the alarmed Roger. 'You must tell us.'

'They are not coming here. They never were. I see it all so clearly now.'

'See what?' asked Gillian.

'What this is all about. Why couldn't I have seen it earlier?'

'May I make a suggestion?' interrupted Doctor Mitzen. 'Give her something to eat, Miss Green. When we have all eaten, we can discuss this in detail.'

'No,' cried Suzette frantically, trying to stand. 'There is no time. I must leave.'

'Leave?' queried Roger, holding his sister down in her chair. 'To where?'

'To find them.'

'But why? Where can they go?'

'To get control of Princess.'

Major Slazinski jumped at the mention of the name and leant forward in his seat. 'Princess? What do you know about Princess?'

Suzette looked confused. 'You know about Princess, Al. I explained at Laroque.'

'I know about Princess. What I don't know is how you expect this Louis feller to be able to get control of her.'

'Why, the tracking station, of course.'

'But it is guarded,' he said, slowly coming to the conclusion that he must have missed something important along the line. 'No-one can get access to Princess now.'

'But he can. Don't you see? There is another tracking station.'

The silence lasted a long time.

'Where?' Roger finally asked.

'I should have known at once but I didn't want to believe the evidence that was staring me in the face.'

'Suzette, stop talking in riddles and tell us what this is all about. Where has Louis gone?'

'He has gone to Rouen.'

'Rouen?' exclaimed Gillian. 'But the tracking station at Rouen was destroyed.'

'Who said so?'

'The Directeur.'

'He saw what he was supposed to see, an explosion in Northern France.'

'And what about Philippe? He arranged the detonation.'

'He arranged the detonation all right, but not at the tracking station. I should have known when he mentioned the helicopter. If the bomb had gone off at Rouen, it would have been destroyed.'

'But he couldn't have been mistaken, surely. Not that mistaken.'

'Mistaken? No, he wasn't mistaken. He arranged it.'

They were now all thoroughly confused.

'I feel such an idiot. All along, while I've been looking for rebels, he's been laughing at me.'

'Louis, you mean?'

'Louis? No, not Louis.'

'Then who?' asked Roger.

'Philippe. Don't you see? He's one of them.'

'But that's not possible,' said Gillian. 'He helped to defeat them.'

'After they had served their purpose and no longer essential to him.'

'And he saved your life,' observed Roger.

'Because he needed me. I was the only one who could operate the equipment until he could find one of his own people to take over.'

'Then he can't operate the computer? What good is Princess without you?'

'He doesn't need me any more.'

'Then how..?'

'He's got Jim now.'

'Jim's not one of them, surely,' said Gillian incredulously.

'No. Jim's not one of them. Poor Jim, caught up in all this.'

'Jim won't help them. Not if they offered him the whole world.'

'They won't do that,' said Karl.

'No, doctor,' agreed Suzette. 'He wouldn't fall for that one and that's why I have to go. I got Jim into this in the first place, I must get him out of it.'

'But how? If he won't help them what will they do?'

'But don't you see? Jim will help them. He has no choice.'

'Why?'

'They have Marianne. Somehow, I can't see Jim sitting back, impassively, while the two of them take it in turns to cut pieces off her.'

'They wouldn't do that,' said Roger, barely controlling himself.

Suzette stood up and put her arms around his neck. 'Brother, dear brother. You may be very clever at technical things but you have a lot to learn about human nature. All of a sudden, our Marianne has become a toy, something for them to play with at will and to use as a mere pawn.'

'Pawn?'

'Bait, for me, if it were to become known that I have survived.'



'And if you hadn't?'

'To put pressure on Jim.'

'Excuse me,' interrupted Karl Mitzen. 'What does this Philippe look like?'

'I have a photo,' said Suzette. 'Where are my things?'

'Here,' said Gillian, holding up a bag containing a few clothes and personal belongings.

Suzette rummaged and finally produced a folder. Extracting a single photograph, she held it out to the doctor who sat down, his head in his hands.

'What is it?' Suzette asked.

'It's him.'

A knife seemed to stab deep into Roger's heart and began to twist.

'H..h..him?'

'The man who came here. The leader.'

'Then...'

'Then it will already be too late.'

'Too late?' asked Suzette.

'For your Marianne. She will probably be far beyond our help by now.'

'But how?'

Between them, Roger and Karl told her what they knew and tears dribbled down Suzette's cheeks.

'Then we must leave immediately.'

'Now?' said the doctor.

'Before he starts on her. He will not damage her too severely until he has used her to persuade Jim to set up the computer.'

'You are right, Mademoiselle. They may use her, abuse her, torture her even, but they will not put her out of her misery until they have complete control of Princess.'

'And then?'

'Checkmate! Her life will not be worth one centime.'

'Nor Jim's,' observed Gillian.

'No,' said Al Slazinski, getting slowly to his feet, remembering the extent of the power Princess controlled. 'Nor will anyone else's.'

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QUEEN TO BLACK KING

THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 1500 hrs.

The Fourtrack drew up in front of the double garage doors of the tracking station and Louis pulled out an infra-red, remote-control device. Punching the button, he watched the big, steel shutters roll up and into the roof to admit them. After driving forward into the garage, Philippe turned off the engine and stretched.

'You can get out now,' he told his passengers. 'However, if you try to do anything silly, Louis will shoot you in the leg. For a short time, we need you alive, so behave yourselves.'

Jim and Marianne said nothing as they clambered out, stiff after the long journey.

'This way,' indicated Louis, waving the revolver towards the far doorway. Jim glanced at the big door closing behind them, at the movement sensors that warned of approach, at the big door leading to the main control room. In other circumstances, Marianne might have been impressed by the amount of

hardware in that room. However, under the present circumstances, she was more concerned with seeking a way to escape.

'Put her in there,' Philippe ordered and Louis grabbed Marianne's arm.

Jim made to move towards her but was halted by Philippe's pistol.

'Don't be a hero, my friend. It is not Louis that you should be worrying about. He won't hurt her. He wants her for himself. If you are a good boy, I'll give her to him as a replacement for Corrine.'

'And if I don't co-operate?'

'She can be yet another replacement for my wife.'

'For your wife? The one who was killed by terrorists?'

'Precisely. I see you remember our little conversation well.'

'I believed you.'

'But I told you the truth. I said I had not made love to any woman since she died. I did not lie. In fact, it is still true.'

'Then...?'

'When I married my Liselle, she was pure, a vierge. You understand the word?'

Jim nodded, wondering where the conversation was leading.

'We were still on honeymoon and I had been busy. She died before I touched her. Since then, I cannot bear to find a girl of that age without feeling anger. Have you never wanted to use a woman? To abuse and hurt her? To slowly take her to pieces so that no-one can use her again?'

'You're mad,' observed the shocked Jim.

'Mad? Do you know the meaning of the word? It is the others who are mad, the ones who killed my Liselle.'

'The terrorists?'

'Oh no. They were the ones who laid the bomb. But the ones who are to blame are the others; the Americans who knew of the terrorists but did nothing to stop them from killing; the Russians who supplied them with arms.'

'But you are French. It is the French nation which has suffered the most.'

'It is they who are most to blame. They ran the military hospital in Beirut and Liselle was taken there, dying. They refused to help her, saying the hospital was full and was for service personnel only. They sent us to the Israeli garrison to the south but she died before we reached it. The Americans and Russians were guilty but the main blame lay with the French. They killed my wife. She was just nineteen and I loved her.'

'I'm sorry,' said Jim.

'Sorry? I don't want your pity. Your British troops were with the UN peace force there and they held us up at the frontier, unnecessarily questioning me about where I was going and the like while Liselle was dying in the back of the car. You are finished, all of you.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I am going to completely wipe out America, Russia and Britain like I have already destroyed France and neither you nor anyone else is going to stop me. Do you hear?'

The face was not that of a sane person and Jim had little alternative but to nod. Philippe smiled. 'So you understand. I knew you would.' He put an arm around Jim's shoulders. 'Now you must come and help me.'

Jim hesitated but the look in Philippe's eyes warned him against protest.

Perhaps later, though he had no idea how.

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LOUIS finished tying Marianne firmly to the bunk bed and then smiled.

'Struggling will only bring you pain, dearest Marianne. I would lay still if I were you. If Jim does as he is told, you will be well-treated, I promise. If he doesn't...' He shrugged and left, locking the airtight door.

Marianne looked around at the stark room. The bed had been stripped of sheets and she had been tied, spread-eagle, across the bed with no slack. She observed her bag close by. Close but too far away. Raising her eyes, she noticed the closed-circuit TV camera in the corner of the room, pointing straight at her. There was a faint hum of fans and a slight draught from the air-conditioning unit. She was stuck and now realised, for the first time,

that it was not Louis who had grabbed her during the early hours. It was not his hands which had removed her most intimate item of clothing and then examined and molested her. It had been Philippe.

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THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 1600 hrs.

It was a waste of time talking to Suzette. They had ordered, pleaded, reasoned but she ignored them all and walked around the table, now fully dressed, discussing the plan of attack.

'We could just destroy the tracking station,' offered Ramon.

'With Jim and Marianne inside?' said Gillian. 'Don't be crazy.'

'But if what Major Slazinski told us is true about the potential destructive power of Princess, would it not be worth the sacrifice?'

'Only as a last resort,' said Suzette. 'If all else fails, we may have to consider that. But not yet.'

'What if we use the element of surprise to attack them?' offered Roger.

'No good,' said Suzette. 'Princess will see us coming by our heat output unless we walked there. There would be no surprise.'

'Describe this place,' said Al.

'It's on three floors,' said Gillian. 'The top level is, in fact, at ground level. Outwardly, it looks like any other office building. It contains stores, garage and reception.'

'Above that?'

'Nothing, just a flat roof with the tracking dish on top, surrounded by a low parapet.'

'And what is below?'

'On the middle floor is the security room. Closed-circuit TV monitors from the cameras on posts around the perimeter.'

'So it's not possible to sneak up on them?'

'Out of the question as there are infra-red sensors around the grounds. If anyone approaches, lights come on automatically and a warning sounds inside.'

'Can't we cut off their power?'

'Internal generator.'

'Smoke them out?'

'Self-cleansing air conditioning plant. The place was designed to survive an all-out nuclear attack. In fact, it did, didn't it?'

'The bottom floor?'

'The main control centre. Computer, CADE terminals, printers, screens. Just equipment.'

'Access routes?'

'Pardon?'

'Ways in an out.'

'Oh, yes. Front door into reception. Garage door at the back.'

'Aha!'

'Remote-controlled, pre-stressed steel roller-shutter.'

'Oh.'

'And roof access,' pondered Suzette.

'Roof access?'

'Yes, don't you remember, Gill? Philippe and I used it to check on the dish mechanism. Just a small hatch at the back of the garage for maintenance.'

'How would we get to it?'

'We'd have to get onto the roof first and that won't be easy, not with all those cameras about.'

'And they'll see us on the roof, I expect,' said Roger.

'No,' said Gillian. 'When Suzette had her row with Philippe on the roof, we couldn't see them. The cameras are designed to keep a watch on the perimeter and won't pan far enough to sweep the building itself.'

'Are you sure?'

'Perfectly. We tried when Suzette was on the roof and they wouldn't go that far round. Something to do with the power cables not being long enough.'

'Then it's the roof or nothing,' said Al. 'I'll get the pilot to land on the

roof.'

'Not that simple,' said Suzette. 'They'll see you coming on the tracking screen and know what you're up to. They could then either shoot the hostages or Philippe will remember the roof access and guard it. If they shut the inner doors, there is no way to flush them out. It's totally secure and, while we're knocking on the front door, they can simply press buttons and destroy people.'

'Then we have to find a way to distract them,' said Roger.

'That's what I thought.'

'What had you got in mind?' her brother asked with trepidation.

'You simply fly up to the door and drop me off. Jim is not as experienced as I am with Princess so they would be very silly to turn down a chance of getting their hands on me.'

'Then what will he do?'

'He will open the door and let me in. When he does, you can get in, too.'

'It won't be that easy,' said Roger. 'But I think I can see a close alternative.'

'Then let's go.'

'You're not going anywhere,' said Karl. 'You're not well enough, yet.'

'Maybe not,' said Suzette. 'But you just try and stop me.'

~~~~~

THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 1800 hrs.

Jim's fingers moved over the keyboard as the screens flashed and data flowed. He saw no harm in setting up the information bank. If only he could remember what Suzette had said about the declination angle, maybe he could corrupt the data somehow. From time to time, he looked at the monitor on the wall and saw Marianne strapped down in the tiny bunk room. Philippe watched him closely as he fed in the codes and re-aligned the dish to receive the stream of data from Princess.

'Don't get it wrong, will you?' warned Philippe. 'It will be Marianne who will suffer.'

'I won't get it wrong.'

'Just in case, I will give you a small demonstration.'

He went to a small panel touched a few buttons. Nothing happened, as far as he could see, for several seconds. Then as they watched the screen, Marianne began to writhe on her bunk, straining at the bonds which held her. As Jim watched, her nose began to bleed, then her ears as she fought, wide-eyed, with some unknown force which was tearing her apart. Philippe touched the volume knob and the sounds of her screaming made Jim wince and then shake.

'Stop!' he said. 'No more, please. I'll help.'

Philippe deliberately allowed the sound to go on for a further few seconds before he touched a button and Marianne relaxed and fought for breath as the screaming died away with the struggling.

'What did you do?' asked Jim.

'Simple,' grinned the sadistic Frenchman. 'From this panel, I control the air pressure throughout the whole building. The system is designed to economise, if necessary, by draining unused rooms of air and concentrating it in here. I simply switched the pumps to evacuate the air from the bunkroom. Pressure drops and anyone in there... dies.'

'Suffocates?'

'Oh, no. Not enough time. A normal person can hold his breath for around two minutes. However, these pumps can drain a room of that size in under a minute. The human body has an internal pressure of one kilogramme per square centimetre so, without the external air pressure to hold it together, Marianne simply... bursts, explodes all over the room.'

Jim said nothing. He knew it had to be true because he had just seen Marianne suffer. He felt sick as he turned back to the controls; all thoughts of rebellion driven from him by that terrible screaming.

~~~~~

THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 2200 hrs.

Doctor Mitzen watched with sadness as the helicopter rose into the air while

the sun dipped below the mountains. It was an impossible task, no longer simply a case of rescuing two people, but now one of saving the world from a madman. Somehow, it reminded him of the James Bond films he had seen as a younger man. Never would he have believed such a thing could happen in real life. All the men were dressed in combat suits with blackened faces, Gillian among them. She carried no arms, of course, but was going as radio operator. Al and Martin checked their automatic rifles while Ramon honed his already razor-sharp machete. Roger fiddled with Diablos. Few would have recognised Suzette dressed in that mini-skirt and low-cut, sleeveless beach blouse and with her dark hair bleached almost white and then cut short in a boyish style. She only hoped that Karl had remembered it right.

After about twenty-minutes, they saw the Autoroute and followed the course of the main road North-Westwards, towards Paris. The towns of Avallon, Auxerre and Nemours fell behind them as darkness began to fall. The lake beside the palace at Fontainebleau passed below them as they neared the dark blur where Paris had been. Gone were the familiar landmarks and not a solitary light shone from the devastated city. It was dark as they left the city, following the glint of the Seine as it ran towards the sea.

'Five minutes,' called the pilot.

'You all know what to do?' checked Al. 'We only get one shot at this.'

Roger and Martin nodded. Ramon smiled. Gillian swallowed and tightened the straps around her shoulders. Suzette winked mischievously.

'Good luck, people,' said Al as the outskirts of Rouen came into sight.

~~~~~

THURSDAY 23rd AUGUST - 2330 hrs.

Jim couldn't conceal the data that flowed in, Philippe knew too much about the system.

'Heat source approaching from the South-East,' he announced glumly.

'So I see,' Philippe murmured. 'I was getting worried about whether you were going to tell me.'

'I did promise.'

'So you did. Who are they?'

Jim shrugged. 'I don't know. They're in AX so they must be airborne. At the speed they are travelling, I would suggest a helicopter.'

'Aren't you sure?'

'Suzette is better at this than me. I was only her assistant at Cambridge.'

'I know that, remember? It was me who saved you from the Russians.'

Jim did remember. If he knew what he knew now, he would have willingly gone with the Russians.

'Where is it headed?'

'Here, I think. There is nowhere else.'

'Keep watching and report its every movement.' He pressed a button which kept him in contact with the middle floor. 'Louis? Helicopter approaching, keep an eye on the closed-circuit TV screens.'

'D'accord,' said the intercom. 'I'll turn the external floodlights on.'

'No,' said Philippe. 'Just in case it's just passing over. Keep all lights out until we're sure it is landing here.'

'Understood.'

There were several tense moments as the helicopter slowly passed low overhead and then hovered above the wide car-park. With a cloud of dust, it settled and Louis hit the light switch and the area was flooded with brilliant light. For several minutes, nothing happened as the rotors slowed and then a lone figure stepped down. With a roar, the helicopter rose into the air once more and then banked off towards the north. As the dust slowly settled he could see, in the middle of the pool of intense light, a strange young woman.

'Philippe,' said the intercom. 'I think you'd better come up. One person got out and she is now standing in the car park.'

'She? A woman?'

'A girl of about eighteen or nineteen.'

'I'm coming up,' Philippe said. He turned to Jim. 'Don't move from here and don't forget to warn me if anything else happens.'

'I won't,' said Jim with a glance at the picture of Marianne in the monitor. Philippe went up the steps two at a time and halted before the TV monitor for the external camera. His face went as white as a sheet as he made a croaking noise.

'It can't be,' was all Philippe said.

'Can't be what?'

'Liselle. It... it's my Liselle.'

'You're right it can't be, Philippe. She's dead. You told me so.'

'But she's there, outside.'

Louis looked suspicious and zoomed in one of the cameras. The figure did look strangely familiar but he could not place it as he stared at the screen.

Philippe began to cry.

'Snap out of it, Philippe. It's a trick. It must be.'

'It's not. It's Liselle.' He stepped towards the door. 'I must go to her.'

'No,' said Louis pulling out his gun. 'It's a trick, I tell you.'

Before he could use it, Philippe snatched out his hand and grabbed the barrel, twisting the revolver from the other man's grip.

'Watch him downstairs,' he commanded and turned away.

~~~~~

MARIANNE moved her arms and found she was not tied as securely as she had been. Whatever it was that they had done to her, it had made her pull on the bonds with a strength beyond normal and there was now a couple of inches of movement. Tentatively, she moved the hand that was out of sight of the camera and slowly worked it free. With relief, her left hand came out. Could they see her? She had to risk it. With a lithe movement, she rolled over and stretched for her bag but it was still out of reach. She rolled again and, this time, her hand touched the canvas. On the third attempt, she had it in her hand. She opened the bag and removed from just below the handle the object she had located at the motel. It was nine inches in length, jewelled at one end, razor sharp at the other, an heirloom from Lady Mary Beth de Bosville.

~~~~~

THE five of them crouched on the roof where they had jumped as the helicopter had passed over.

'You stay here,' Al told Gillian. 'I'll need you with the radio to call the pilot back when we need him again. And keep out of sight.'

'Where do you want me?' asked Roger.

'You stay here with Martin. Only you can control Diablos. Ramon and I will try to get inside.'

~~~~~

JIM looked up as Louis walked in and sat on the chair, facing him. On the screen behind Louis, Jim saw a movement. He had to keep Louis talking, prevent him looking at the screen.

'Who has arrived?' he asked innocently.

'Some woman. Philippe has gone to sort it out.'

'Anyone I know?' he asked as Marianne sliced through the bonds which held her ankles, stood up and walked towards the door of the bunkroom.

~~~~~

PHILIPPE paused by the main door. Was it a trick? It could not be Liselle, he told himself. Getting himself under control, he gripped the revolver firmly in his hand. If it was a trick, she would die first. He walked towards the girl. Roger peered over the edge of the roof as Martin raised his rifle.

'Not yet,' whispered Roger. 'He has a gun and might shoot Suzette if you miss.'

'I never miss,' said the offended corporal.

'I don't doubt it but we also have to wait until Al and Ramon can get inside to help Jim and Marianne.'

~~~~~

PHILIPPE stood a metre from Suzette, the gun pointed at her chest.

'Liselle?' he ventured, still not believing the evidence of his eyes.
'Of course, darling,' the girl said. 'Who did you think it was?'
He stepped closer then stopped, the barrel of his gun under the girl's chin.
'Mon Dieu,' he said, recognising Suzette at last. 'You've fooled me yet again.
I ought to shoot you, right here and now.'
'Go ahead. There are two automatic rifles aimed at you right this moment.
Shoot me and you will be dead before I hit the ground.'
He looked wildly around but could see nothing due to the glare of the
floodlights. 'I don't believe you.'
'Call it. I'm not indispensable any more. It's your move.'
'This is not a game, Suzette.'
'Of course it is. And what's more, I've won.'
'Not yet. I have one more move to make.'
'There are no more moves, Philippe. You are finished.'
'Louis has control of the computer and I have already had Jim pre-set the
self-destruct. If I don't return, Louis will arm the satellite and you know
what that means.'
Suzette looked at him and knew he could be telling the truth. She must stall
him for a while longer until the others could get inside and secure the
console.

~~~~~

JIM fought to keep his eyes averted from the empty screen. If Louis were to  
turn now...  
'I must go and see what is happening to Philippe,' said Louis. 'You'd better  
walk in front of me so I can keep an eye on you.'  
Jim stood and walked around the console so that Louis would have to keep his  
eyes off the screen. It didn't work. Louis stopped and did a double-take. He  
pressed buttons to move the camera but the room was bare. He pushed past Jim  
and threw open the door and Marianne stood, framed, in the open doorway. Louis  
reached out and grabbed her by her long, golden hair, dragging her into the  
room. Marianne swung round and her hand came up fast and Louis grunted as the  
long blade sank deep into his gut. He cried out and stepped back as she struck  
again, blood flowing down his shirt front. Before she could strike a third  
time, his left hand grabbed her dagger arm and his right hand encircled her  
petite neck, slowly crushing the life out of her and repeatedly slamming her  
head against the door frame. Jim moved forward to help but he was too late.  
There was a sound like the chopping of a log and Louis stood, swaying slightly  
and then, dropping Marianne's limp form, pitched forward, Ramon's machete  
sticking out of the middle of his skull.  
Louis fell down the bottom two steps into the control room and against the  
tracking console. Jim watched in horror as Louis' eyes suddenly went wide and  
he began to slide down the console and then seemed to deflate like a punctured  
balloon as his life-blood ran all over the floor. With a last, supreme effort,  
he reached out and pushed the red button.

~~~~~

PHILIPPE looked up as the siren started to wail across the empty car-park.
'He's done it without my command,' he stammered. 'Louis has started the
self-destruct sequence.'
'Then you and I must stop it.'
'I can't,' he said as he thought of his power diminishing. 'I don't know the
numbers.'
Suzette was worried. To cancel the auto-destruct sequence, it was necessary to
know those six numbers. Together, they ran towards the building while a
bewildered Roger and Martin looked on. They pushed past Al and ran down the
stairs. Jim smiled with relief as Suzette burst into the control room,
stepping over Marianne in the doorway.
'Look sharp, Jim,' said Suzette. 'We've got to stop Princess from going
haywire.' She turned to Philippe. 'What is she set to do?'
'What I came here to do,' he said, matter-of-factly. 'Destroy them all.'

'All?'

'America, Russia and Britain,' clarified Jim. 'He told me earlier.' He looked at her dress and appearance. 'What on earth have you done to yourself?'

'No time to explain,' said Suzette. 'Did you see Louis enter any numbers?'

'No,' said Jim. 'He didn't touch the console except to press that button.'

She whirled on Philippe. 'Then you must have set it. What are the numbers?'

'Wouldn't you like to know?'

'Yes, I would,' she said, gripping him by the lapels. 'Tell me.'

'For my freedom?'

Suzette looked at her allies. 'Very well, you have my word.' Al came in at that moment and she spoke for them all. 'No-one will harm you if you tell me the numbers.'

Philippe pondered for a moment as the seconds ticked away. There was a groan at his feet as Marianne stirred and rubbed her bruised throat. Philippe suddenly pushed Suzette away and then grabbed Marianne by the waist and held her light body in front of his own as a shield as guns pointed in his direction.

'Go to hell,' he sneered digging his own revolver into Marianne's side. 'I didn't set the number, it was already programmed. When the time runs out, this control room goes up, the satellite goes into its destruct sequence and then you're finished, all of you. And good riddance.'

Somehow, he managed to stagger up the stairs, closing the airtight doors after him and dragging Marianne out into the car park. Marianne screamed and kicked as Philippe dragged her towards his little helicopter and Martin, on the roof, could not get in a clean shot. Philippe threw her inside and started the engine and the rotors began to turn, slowly at first and then racing to give lift. Marianne stirred on the floor where she had been thrown and then realised where she was. Frantically, she struggled and, finally, managed to roll free as the helicopter began to rise into the air. The helicopter lurched sickeningly from side to side as Marianne repeatedly slashed out with her dagger at her former captor and tormentor. His blood splashed all over them both as he tried to fight her off and control the staggering helicopter at the same time. With a final, frantic effort he managed to push her away from himself and clutched at the revolver on the seat beside him. Marianne saw death staring her in the face as his finger tightened on the trigger.

'Bon Nuit, Marianne,' he said but the helicopter lurched as one of Martin's rifle shots hit it and Phillippe's bullet caught her in the shoulder, spinning her round with the force. Frantically, she fought to gain a handhold but missed, pitching head-first out of the open doorway into empty space.

~~~~~

CHECK

THURSDAY 19th AUGUST - 2345 hrs.

Roger watched as the helicopter rose into the air. He jumped when he heard the shot and saw Marianne fall ten feet to the ground. As Martin opened fire with his automatic rifle, they watched Philippe's body jerking as round after round pumped into him. But still, the helicopter climbed. Roger gripped the handle of the portable Diablos launcher firmly and pulled the trigger. With a brief flash of light, the devil flew into the air and headed straight for its target. In his death throes, the Black King tried to move across the board but failed as the White Knight's sword struck with the kind of blow which left nothing but an empty, black square.

~~~~~

SUZETTE stared at the console as the numbers decreased steadily. She had to do something or they were all dead. Her own death was not important but the others were.

'Try some numbers,' said Jim.

'No. We've got to get it right first time. One wrong number and it activates automatically.'

'How long do we have?' asked Al.

She looked at the digital readout. 'Fifty seconds.'

'How do we stop it?' screamed the frantic Gillian who had just come down from the roof.

'Taking the detonator out this time won't help. It might save our lives but it won't stop Princess destroying the rest of the world.'

'What numbers did Philippe mean?'

'The numbers I used at Laroque, it has to be.'

'How?'

'Because the two tracking stations are linked via Princess. One number must control both of them.'

'What was the number you used at Laroque?' asked Jim.

'I can't remember. Eight-Six-Zero something or other, wasn't it?' She stood over the keyboard. 'I hope I get it right,' she said and pressed the three numbers.

'Did you get it right so far?' asked Al.

'We're still here so I must have done.'

'The other three, Suzette,' pleaded Jim. 'What were the other three numbers you used?'

She looked at the readout as it counted down from ten. She closed her eyes and tried to remember. 'Three,' she said and pressed the button. She opened her eyes wide in realisation. 'Gill, your phone number at Newmarket, what was it?' 'Eight-Six-Zero-Three-Two-One,' she recited, puzzled as to why Suzette should want to know that now.

Suzette pressed two buttons and the siren stopped its banshee wailing.

'It was your phone number I used, Gill. I finally remembered.'

Al looked down at the readout which read "0002" and said, 'About time, too, kid.'

~~~~~

FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 0900 hrs.

The control room was very quiet after the helicopter gunship had left, taking the wounded Marianne to Geneva to gain the urgent ministrations of Doctor Karl Mitzen. Gillian had gone to look after her en route and Jim and Roger, naturally, had accompanied them. Fortunately, Marianne had not been seriously hurt because the bullet from Philippe's gun had passed right through the top of her shoulder. Her three metre fall to the ground had not helped but Gillian had given her what painkillers she had with her and they left with her; damaged but comfortable. Al and Martin had stayed behind to guard Suzette as well as to protect the installation from further attack. Ramon watched Suzette closely as her hands ran over the keyboard. For the first time since she had first seen him at Navacelles, he was not sharpening his machete.

'Do you understand computers, Ramon?' she asked without taking her eyes off the screen.

'I took a course at college two years ago, programming and data processing. I was at home for the annual vacances when the bombs struck.'

Suzette turned and looked at him. 'Then you understand what I am doing?'

'Some of it. What I don't understand is why you have so many monitors.'

'Five scanning zones. AZ, BX and CX in the air; DX on the ground and EX below ground or sea level.'

'What can you tell by what you see now?' he asked, leaning forward in his chair.

'It's too early to tell yet. Wait a while and the computer will have enough data to start an accurate analysis.'

'What were that Philippe and the others talking about when they mentioned destruction?'

'I don't know. The satellite, Princess, is by itself completely harmless. It has no destructive potential whatsoever.'

'Then what did he mean? Philippe said he could destroy whole nations. How could he do that if Princess is as harmless as you say?'

'There has to be some signal which can be emitted by the satellite. One that can trigger off something on the ground.'

'You mean there could be bombs in the USA and USSR now waiting to go off? Ready for a signal from Princess?'

'It's possible. I'd guess they would have to be very big bombs though.'

He thought for a moment. 'Not if they were in each others' camps, they wouldn't.'

Suzette started. 'What do you mean?'

'How did the war start in the first place?'

'A signal, presumably via Princess, was sent to the Malinov submarines in the Mediterranean and others in the Baltic. They launched nuclear missiles.'

'And then?'

'NATO fought back, believing itself to be the subject of a Russian invasion.'

'Suppose, just suppose, that it could be done again.'

'Again?'

'How many missiles do you think the Russian fleet has left?'

'I have no idea. Malinovs One and Two launched quite a number from the Mediterranean though I didn't count them.'

'They could still have some left, perhaps?'

'It's possible. What are you getting at?'

'If what I understood from the Major is correct, Malinov Two disappeared some days ago.'

'I believe so.'

'Where did it go?'

'I have no idea. I had no access to Princess at the time.'

'Then just suppose, for a moment, that Malinov Two, or some other sub or subs like it, is off the coast of the United States right now waiting only for a pre-arranged, coded signal from the Kremlin before they fired all their missiles, perhaps hundreds of them, upon the USA.'

'And?'

'And Princess was to give that signal.'

She stood up. 'Ramon. I think you've got it. The USA would strike back immediately. It would have to.'

'Especially if Princess had already given a similar pre-arranged signal to the NATO subs in the Arctic Ocean.'

'Then wham! Just like before.'

'So it appears,' he mused quietly. 'It seems that, from here, we can control the whole world. We can enforce peace between the United States and the Russian Federation.'

'But they already are at peace, Ramon. They were at peace before the war; a peace negotiated between Ex-President Bush and Mr Gorbachev. It was only the Consortium who triggered the war off. I think both nations must know that by now.'

'But with Princess, we can make sure that they do. Force their hand, so to speak.'

'I don't know. That sounds pretty hairy to me. I don't even know the codes they used to contact each sides' attack forces.'

'But we have the computer. You could find out very easily, I'm sure.'

'I'm just a weather girl.'

He faced her. 'You're more than that, Mademoiselle Blackman. You must do it, for France.'

They were interrupted by Al Slazinski who came in and dropped his rifle beside a chair. 'Hi, kid. Found anything, yet?'

'Not yet, Al. Won't be long.'

'When you do, let me know so I can radio the Commander. He will want to know immediately.'

'Why?' Suzette suddenly asked.

'So we can watch for Russians, of course. We want to know if they are planning

to move in on Europe while it is at its weakest.'

Suzette stood up, anger in her eyes. 'You two are as bad as each other. There is no way I am going to get involved in some political manoeuvrings about who is or who is not going to rule Europe. There are more important things to be done first.'

'More important than the security of Western Europe?' shouted Ramon. 'We must be in a position to protect ourselves in case they invade.'

'Not with my Princess.'

'YOUR Princess? Hey, girl, she belongs to the world not just to you.'

'Then let her serve the world, all of it.'

'She will. But only if one or the other side is in total control. Only then can we ensure true peace and security.'

'Get out!' she seethed. 'Get out of my sight, both of you.'

'But,' said Major Slazinski. 'I'm just doing my job. I have my orders.'

'So have I and this is my ship. So both of you get the hell off it before I do something you'll both regret.'

'I can't do that,' said the Major. 'I have orders to keep a close watch on you. I'm serious, Suzette, I have no choice this time.'

'But I do, Al, and I'm just as serious. Get out now or I'll shut Princess down. Permanently!'

'You wouldn't.'

'Try me,' she said. 'I haven't come all this way to hand her over now.'

'But we don't need you. We have Laroque.'

'Then why are you still here? Right now, you need me more than ever. I suggest you check with Laroque. I think you will find that your precious analysts have compounded my data corruption beyond repair.'

'You did that?'

'Of course,' she said. 'I altered the trigonometrical equation that interprets the information and allows for the correct position of Princess. You see, Al, only I know where Princess really is.'

'We are searching for it now.'

'Your people are real dumb, Al. They are not even looking in the right part of the sky. Admit it, they're totally lost.'

'They have had a few problems,' he admitted.

'A few? Look, you only found me at Mandagout because I put the CX data correct and even that took them ages. I did that deliberately so you could find any survivors in Southern France and assist them from Columbia. As for the rest, they're tens of miles out.'

'They'll get it right soon.'

'Wishful thinking, Al. Only...'

Their discussion was interrupted by the sound of the printer starting up.

'What is it?' asked the Major as Suzette tore off the sheet of fanfold paper it spewed out.

Without answering, she went to the screen marked BX and ran her fingers nimbly over the keys. The printer started again.

She read the result. 'There are large airborne movements in Eastern Austria and close to Berlin.'

'Russian missiles?' he said, reaching for his gun.

'I don't think so,' admitted Suzette. 'Aircraft, perhaps.'

'I must warn Columbia.'

'No!' said Suzette.

'But the Russians are invading.'

'You don't know that.'

'What else could it be?'

'It could be anything.'

'Where are they headed?'

Suzette consulted the data and stood up slowly. 'The first wave appears to be converging on Geneva.'

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FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1000 hrs.

The pilot rushed into where the Doctor was applying a dressing around Marianne's shoulder. She smiled up at Roger as the door opened. 'Mr Blackman. Major Slazinski is on the radio for you.'

'Okay. Tell him I'm on my way.'

He leant over and kissed Marianne briefly before walking out to the gunship.

'Roger Blackman here,' he said into the microphone.

'We have a problem,' radioed Al. 'Princess has spotted massive numbers of aircraft crossing Austria and Germany. One group of them seems to be headed your way.'

'Who does Suzette think they are?'

'She can't tell. All she knows is they seem to have come from the East.'

'Russians?'

'Bombers, I reckon.'

'Well, Major. There's not a lot we can do about it here. I brought three missiles with me and have used one already so I have two left. Poor defence against the entire Russian Air Force.'

'Perhaps if you are able to knock a couple down, the rest will go away.'

'Are you serious, Major? It's more likely that they will obliterate Geneva. I can't see the Russians packing up and going all the way home again just because they lose a couple of planes.'

'Then you won't attack them?'

'Not on your life, Al. I'm no coward but neither am I completely stupid.'

'Then you must relay a message forward to Columbia. They must launch a defence squadron.'

'Must they? Think again. Why do you think the Russians left Malinov One guarding the UN fleet? Start launching Hornets in any sort of volume and boom! Columbia will be spread all over the Mediterranean.'

'But we can't just let them walk all over Europe. Not after all that has happened.'

'We have no choice. How long have we got?'

There was a brief silence while Al presumably consulted Suzette.

'Thirty minutes,' he replied.

'Contact me again when they are five minutes away.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Get ready for them.'

'Then you'll fight?'

'Wait and see.' He signed off.

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FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1020 hrs.

The radio crackled on Malinov One. Colonel Narovic grabbed the handset from the operator. 'Da?'

The message was brief and concise and, when it was finished, he stood up and spoke to the crew.

'Now we have a great opportunity to show the whole world what the Russian people are made of. We have received our orders relayed direct from the Moskva via Odessa Control and are to act immediately.' He saluted. 'Long live the Motherland.'

'Long live the Motherland,' the crew repeated.

Colonel Andrei Narovic took one last look through the periscope, closed the eyepiece and said, 'Blow all ballast! Surface!'

MATE

FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1025 hrs.

Suzette looked up from the screen marked BX. 'Tell Roger five minutes.'

Al Slazinski nodded and walked outside to relay the message.

'You're crazy, all of you,' said Ramon. 'You're throwing away the only chance we've got to save what's left Europe for the West.'

'Trust me,' she said simply.

~~~~~

FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1030 hrs.

Roger stood beside the helicopter, the microphone in one hand, Marianne in the other. They stood together in silence as the steady drone got louder. Marianne slipped her arm around his waist. Her other arm was in a sling.

Roger pressed "Talk". 'This is your roving reporter, Roger Blackman, speaking direct from Geneva which, until recently was the headquarters of the Red Cross and occasional home of the United Nations. More recently, it was the centre for the Consortium which sought to rule Europe. I hope someone's recording this for posterity.'

'If there is any,' replied Suzette on the radio. 'Stop messing around and tell us what's happening.'

'Right now, I'm standing at the Western end of Lac Leeman watching a fantastic sight. Between the mountains at the other end of the lake there are dozens of black specks in the sky and I have been informed by reliable sources that they are aircraft from Russia. I am having to shout because the noise level is increasing steadily as they approach, in formation, across the lake at around three thousand feet. It is quite clear that the leading aircraft have their bomb doors open and are lining up to cross the centre of the city. As I speak, objects are falling from the aircraft. Objects cylindrical in shape are falling towards the town.'

There was a silence so Suzette broke in. 'Roger, are you there? Come in, Roger.'

'I'm here,' came back the voice. 'Do you know what's happening?'

'No, tell me. Is it goodbye?'

'Not on your life. Parachutes are opening from the cylinders. They're falling slowly into the city. The other people are all in the shelters, so there's just Marianne and I, with the pilot and the doctor watching as Russia showers us with supplies. Food, tools, materials, all the things we need to start again. It's a glorious sight. I only wish you were here to see it.'

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FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1035 hrs.

Captain Whittaker adjusted his binoculars. 'Malinov One on the surface, Admiral. What do we do?'

'Do, Henry? We wait.'

'Wait, sir?' asked the incredulous Commander Jakes. 'Isn't she going to attack?'

'Narovic didn't need to surface to attack us, John. Let's see what he wants.' The intercom crackled. 'Sparks here, Admiral. I'm getting garbled messages from Geneva. Something about Russia aircraft dropping supplies.'

'What?'

'I also have Colonel Narovic on the radio, sir. Do you want to talk with him direct?'

'Of course. I'm on my way down.'

The three men crowded into the radio room and the Admiral took the mic.

'Admiral Michael Davison speaking. Go ahead, Colonel.'

'Greetings Admiral. You will be pleased to know that we have now received our orders from Moskva. We are to assist you in every way possible. Aircraft have already been dispatched to drop supplies where they are needed.'

'That is indeed good news, Colonel. How can I help?'

'By ascertaining the position of survivors. I understand from what Miss Blackman told me that you are able to do that with your satellite.'

'I am afraid Miss Blackman is not here and our own specialists are having some difficulty reading the data. We will be of little value to you until we can get through to her at Rouen.'

'Then try, Admiral. For the sake of Europe.'

Commander Jakes watched the Admiral put down the microphone. 'Does he mean it, do you think?'

'I'm not sure. But for the moment, we have no alternative but to trust him.' He turned to the radio operator. 'Sparks. Try to contact Geneva. Maybe they can relay messages to Rouen.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

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FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1200 hrs.

Al raced down the stairs and shouted to Suzette. 'We have made contact with the Northern fleet. Apparently, they have found large numbers of survivors in Britain.'

Suzette looked greatly relieved. 'Any further news from Geneva?'

'Roger says that they have started relief centres and are shipping supplies out by truck to isolated areas. What he needs is more information from you as to where the survivors might be. Can you track their heat sources with Princess?'

'I will soon. I am having to fine tune the data balance so that individual people show up. It's not that easy.'

'Right,' he said. 'I'll leave you to it.'

Suzette watched, waited, adjusted, analysed. It took a long time but, eventually, she had the information and gave it to Al to forward on to the groups that were in the best position to help.

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IT was some time before she also saw another unusual pattern emerging. At first, she refused to believe the evidence of her eyes but, in time, she was forced to the conclusion she least of all wanted to reach.

'Ramon,' she said suddenly as a tremendous pain shot across her back. 'Would you get Al for me?'

The lad nodded, stood up and walked out of the door. Quietly, Suzette followed, limping a little. On the middle floor, she waited until Ramon had cleared the building and then closed the airtight door leading to the reception area. Stumbling to the anti-room, she checked the generator and fuel levels before switching off all the outside monitors and lights and then descending into the bowels of the earth. Before she could get into the control room, she heard them hammering on the outside door. Would they realise what she had done? She had no way of telling as there was no radio contact with outside.

After some thought, she also closed the main door separating the two floors and sealed it. Now she could not get out and they could not get in to stop her. From her seat at the terminals, she controlled the whole, wide world. To make certain she could not be disturbed, she painfully got to her feet and went to the small console marked "AIR CONTROL" and, leaning on the wall for support, she pressed the button.

'Location? >' asked the screen listing all the rooms in the tracking station complex. She entered her choice.

'PRESSURIZE OR EVACUATE? (P/E)>' asked the screen. She pressed "E" and the pumps started, draining all the air from the middle floor. Now she was truly alone. No-one could enter to disturb her with a ninety cubic metre vacuum between herself and the outside world. Using the consoles for support, she went back to the screens which continued to relay the bad news. Heat emissions were all converging on one spot - Rouen. They were coming from the Mediterranean, from Switzerland, from Germany. There were no survivors in this part of Northern France, she had told them all that, so why were they coming? There could be only one explanation, they all wanted to get their hands on Princess and they all knew that whoever reached the tracking station first could dictate terms to the world. However, Suzette she did not intend to release her control that easily. She had to stop them and there was only one way to do that.

Painfully, she sat down at the main console and entered a code.

'READY >' said Princess.

'DESTRUCT,' typed in Suzette as another twinge gripped her back.

'ARE YOU SURE? (Y/N) >' came the screen response.

'Y,' she entered and the disc drive whirred as the programme was entered into the mainframe.

'DO YOU WISH TO SAVE THE CO-ORDINATE DATA? (Y/N) >'

The co-ordinate data contained, among other things, all the codes for launching the nuclear weapons. Most of all, she wanted that information irrevocably dumped.

'N' she entered, thus totally destroying the data forever.

'DATA NOT SAVED. DO YOU WISH TO ARM THE SATELLITE? (Y/N) >'

'N' she entered, rubbing her left leg with her other hand to try to bring back the lost feeling.

'DO YOU WISH TO ACTIVATE THE PRNCS SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE? (Y/N) >'

She hesitated for a few seconds. Did she really want to do this? In she didn't, whoever gained control of Princess would try to find a way to use her to destroy others. Maybe they would try to persuade her to work for them, perhaps threatening Roger or Marianne with harm so as to force her hand as Philippe had done with Jim and Marianne. Was there another way? Or was this now the only way left remaining to ensure Europe kept the new-found peace it had acquired?

'Y,' she typed.

'SELF-DESTRUCT INITIATED. ENTER SIX-DIGIT SECURITY CODE >'

Her fingers touched the keys and then she stopped. Last time, she entered a telephone number; something easy to remember so that she could cancel the destruct procedure. Suzette smiled to herself. She dare not even trust her own heart so, after a few moments consideration, she simply pressed "ENTER".

'RANDOM CODE SELECTED,' came the reply. 'DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE? (Y/N) >'

Suzette took a deep breath. This was the point of no return. Having forced Princess to choose her own random destruct code, unknown even to herself as the operator, it would be impossible to stop once the sequence was triggered.

'Y' she typed and was committed.

'SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE IN OPERATION. DEFAULT TIME DELAY IS THREE MINUTES,' read the screen. And then; 'PRESS RED BUTTON TO ACTIVATE >'

Lastly, came the word she hated the most. 'END>'

The screen cleared except for that single, ominous word that illustrated the finality of what she was about to do. There was no way out now. Once she pressed that red button, she had just three minutes to painfully make her way across that control room and enter the tiny bunkroom, lay down on her bed and simply wait for the end. The nuclear device installed inside the console was not a large one as bombs go, so the structure of the building would probably remain intact whereas the interior would be totally obliterated, everything inside instantly vaporized in one flash of blinding atomic-fission.

Suzette put off the moment of decision and reflected on all that had happened over the last few weeks. She thought of all the deceit, the intrigue, the war, the battle for survival. She also thought of the future and smiled for a moment. There was Roger and Marianne, Jim and Gillian, starting again like Adams and Eves. A new world that could only be guaranteed by the deaths of Princess and herself. She sat at the controls and just stared at the red button in front of her which seemed to grow and fill the whole room. She and Princess had worked together for a long time and it now seemed appropriate that they should die together. Suzette and the satellite, White Queen and Princess.

A tear dripped onto the keyboard as she thought briefly of the only man she had ever loved, ever wanted, and even he was now dead because of his own deceit and treachery. At university, they had called her the "Eternal Virgin" and her brother had often ribbed her over it. However, they had been right. She was born one and was now about to die one.

At first, she had refused to believe she had been badly hurt by Corrine but now, things looked different. The pains in her back were increasing steadily and, at times, she lost the use of one or the other of her legs for several hours at a time and it would get no better, she knew deep in her heart. Only this morning, she had noticed a considerable amount of blood in her urine and she knew the doctor had not exaggerated the degree of damage done to her internal organs. However, she had done her best and the rest was now up to the others.

'Goodbye, Roger,' she said sadly. 'Goodbye, Marianne.'  
She sobbed softly as her fingers toyed with the console, drawing patterns in the thin film of dust which coated it while the teardrops splashed onto her hands.  
'Goodbye, Gillian. Goodbye, Jim.'  
Suzette blinked at the screen through her tears and finally said, 'Goodbye, Princess.'  
She pressed the button.

Is this the end for Suzette and Princess?  
Are you sure?  
Then you obviously have not read

Aftermath of a Princess.