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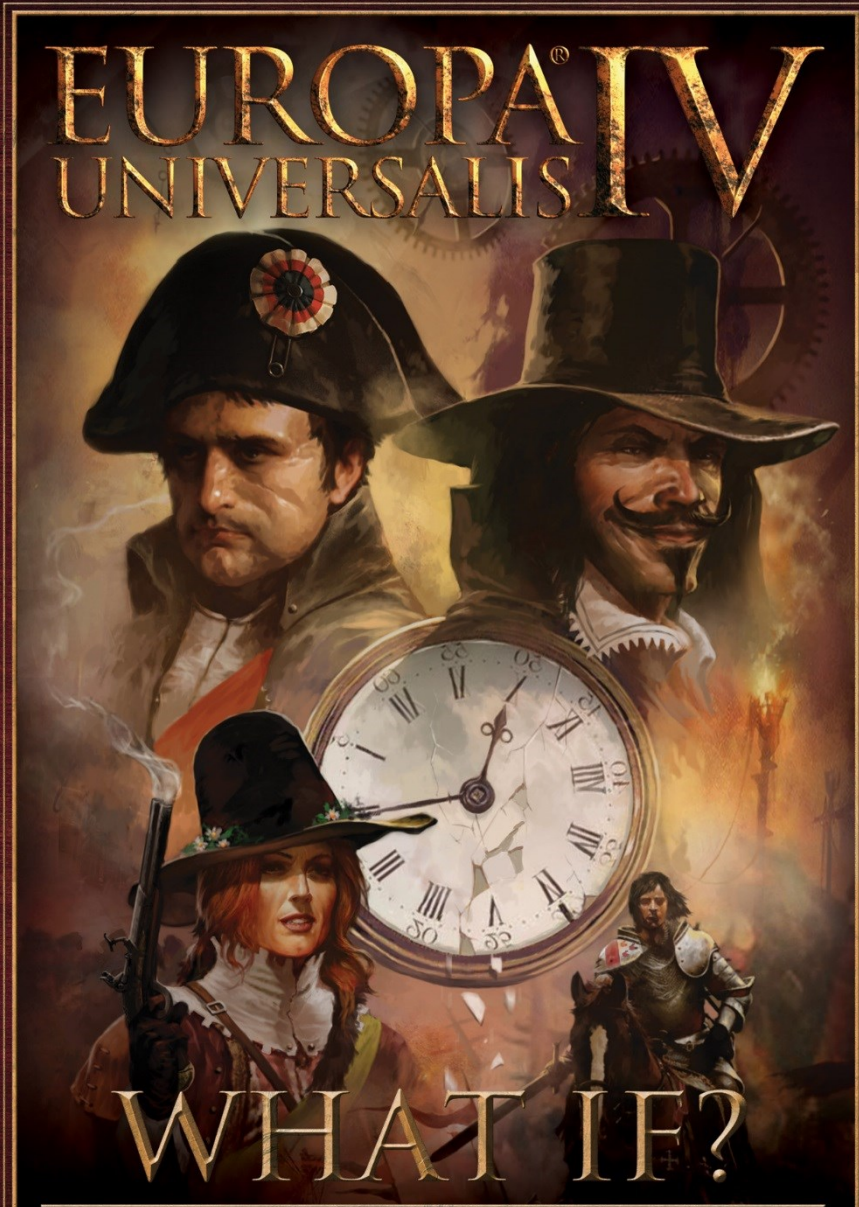

WHAT IF?

THE ANTHOLOGY OF ALTERNATE HISTORY

Harry Turtledove
and Others

paradox
BOOKS®

WHAT IF?

THE ANTHOLOGY OF ALTERNATE HISTORY

by

Harry Turtledove and Others

Pressname: Paradox Books

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ISBN: 978-91-87687-50-1

www.paradoxplaza.com/books

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INTRODUCTION

There is an ongoing debate in academic history about the value of what they call "counterfactual" history—the idea that we can learn about how we got where we are by asking ourselves how things might have changed if the past took a different road. The plague doesn't get to Byzantium. The Germans do get across the Marne. China doesn't stop the treasure fleets. These puzzles ask us to examine what we mean when say that an historical event was "caused" by one factor or another.

Academic debate aside, alternate histories undoubtedly provide as much entertainment as they do illumination. Whether it's a question of seeing how far a writer can push the "want of a horseshoe nail" or simply imagining how all of our lives would be different in a world where, say, Hitler stuck to art school, the possibilities generated by an infinite range of stories can tickle the imagination.

This is not to say that writing a good alternate history is easy. You must have an interesting starting point, you must have plausible connections between

events, and you must have an intuitive understanding of the motivations of men and women, great and small.

Paradox grand strategy games are where history starts going off the rails the moment you press PLAY, and, for as long as we've made these games, fans have entertained us with After Action Reports (AARs); descriptions of their experiences in the game, sometimes with decisions up for community vote. An AAR can be either a straight summary of what happened on screen or a deeper meditation on what it is like to live in this new, computer-generated world, sometimes told from the perspective of a leader or citizen in this newly generated past. Both approaches have their advocates, but both are best done with a strong eye to how the past is always a foreign country.

This anthology is a celebration of the story-telling power of our games, especially *Europa Universalis,* a series that launched Paradox Development Studio (and Paradox Interactive). Strategy games like ours make for good stories because there are never two experiences that are remotely identical to each other. Thuringia replaces Austria as the ruler of Central Europe in one game, in another France bulldozes through the Holy Roman Empire, and in a third Vienna pulls it all together to rebuild the empire of Charlemagne.

Now imagine an alternate timeline where there is no *Europa Universalis;* a dark timeline where an experimental title did not find a global audience willing to embrace the uncertainties of history and the challenges of the greatest of men and women. There are still games, of course, and even strategy games. But they are likely both less grounded in our common love for our history and less celebratory of the wonderful improvisational nature of gamers.

Enough sadness. We bring you stories—tales of great deeds, small heroisms and how everything could have been different.

Troy Goodfellow
Assistant Developer
Paradox Interactive

COMPANY

By Luke Bean

I first met Duckie Wooler when I was sixteen. He had come to Mecklenburg to start a war, and I figured I could get a pack or two of cigarettes out of it. The idea of being invaded didn't worry me much. War, as far as my town was concerned, was the natural state of affairs. Indeed, it was the idea that the invaders might bring *peace* that troubled the locals. So when this strange American showed up waving around a camera and talking of an age of peace to come, he found nothing but closed doors and pursed mouths. I took pity on this lonely man, and I do not think it is an exaggeration to say we saved each other's lives. Today, of course, Silas "Duckie" Wooler is the New York Journal's fabled international correspondent, the man who built the case for the Pacification of Germany. And though my name, Erich Kalb, is little remembered, I too am famous: I am the subject of Mr. Wooler's most iconic photograph, "The Boy and the Banner."

In 1950, Mr. Wooler asked me to write a short foreword for the 20th anniversary edition of *Duckie in Germany*. (It is a fascinating work of journalism, and I strongly encourage you to read it.) I found it difficult to bottle my feelings on the topic. The story of my travels as Duckie's translator meant little to me without the context of how I had arrived at that point in my life. Soon my short foreword had exploded into a hundred pages of anecdotes, arguments, and explanations. "If you want to make me look like an idiot," Duckie eventually told me, "You can do it in your own damn book."

With all respect to Mr. Wooler, I believe there is an error at the heart of his reporting on Germany. My world was not divided into predatory mercenaries and innocent victims. The companies maintained their grip on Germany by making everyone an accomplice to their crimes. At some point, we had all housed them, fed them, traded with them, fought for them. Everyone knew their local company men, and counted family and friends among them. When a boy turned thirteen, Mecklenburg's largest company, the Duke's Rifles, would come to their door. "Fight with us," the sergeant would say, "You'll come home rich or you'll come home in a box, but either way you'll be a man." They wouldn't actually waste effort carrying your coffin home, but you understood. Duckie once asked me why people didn't turn on the companies. The question made me laugh. Who was there to turn? We *were* the companies, every last one of us.

1. The Balloon

One of my earliest memories is of a hot air balloon. I was in town with my mother when it appeared in the distance. She lifted me onto her shoulders to see. We

walked around like that, Mother going about her business and me craning my neck to always keep an eye on the distant balloon, as if it was waiting for a chance to slip away. When the balloon came closer, Mother took me off her shoulders and told me not to look at it anymore, but I looked anyway, and she didn't stop me. Three men dangled from nooses tied to the basket. Mother needn't have worried about me. I thought they were just taking a ride.

I still don't understand this. It's clear the hangman wanted everyone to see his handiwork. If it could be read as a threat, that I could accept. "This is what happens if you resist conscription!" "These men collaborated with Wehrwolves." Cause and effect. But if the balloon knew who hung those men, or who they were, or what they did, then it wasn't telling. Maybe someone just wanted death to remain familiar to us, so we would not recoil from its touch.

2. The Lübeck Watch

I grew up near Grevesmühlen, on the very edge of company lands. To the east was Hansestadt Wismar, to the west Hansestadt Lübeck. The Hanseatic Cities were an object of fear and fascination for me, lands of unimaginable debauchery. It was held as unimpeachable fact at my school that the merchant princes of the Hansa considered the flesh of children a fine delicacy, and nearly everyone had a friend whose cousin had been sold to Lübeck to be devoured. But alongside the lurid stories, there was the recognition that these strangers were somehow like us. People from Russia or England or the United Kingdoms seemed unimaginably alien, but our wayward brothers talked like us and

traded with us. They sung foreign tunes in our native tongue. This combination of strangeness and familiarity excited me. Lübeck was a wicked and dangerous place, and I wanted desperately to see it, to slouch between cinemas and cabarets and strangers' bedrooms through streets foggy with cigar smoke.

But nobody was allowed into the Hanseatic Cities. The Rifles didn't want us getting seduced by their decadent ways. Thinking too much about the outside world was discouraged. We were told history had ended with Wallenstein, and outside Germany nothing of interest had happened ever again. When the Duke's Rifles raided beyond Germany, they would target rich Dutch cities, weak Polish towns—some companies braver and more foolish than the Rifles even crossed west into the United Kingdoms before the wall went up—but the Hanseatic Cities were untouchable. They bought the companies' plunder, processed our poppies, and made the money flow. We were expected to hate and fear them, but not to live without them.

There was a lieutenant in the Rifles, Erich Gersten, who spent time with my mother. She often had men over; it kept her in good standing with the Rifles. Most of them ignored me, but Erich was kind to me, and I think Mother loved him a little bit for it. He acted like it was terribly significant that we had the same first name. "We Erichs have to stick together," he would tell me. "Listen to your mother and fight bravely for your company and you'll do our name proud." Sometimes I liked to imagine he was my father, and I was named after him, but my mother said that wasn't true.

Erich was more pretty than handsome, and could have almost been mistaken for a woman without his sleek red beard. He often tried to keep his face from

smiling, but it always found a way. I'd seen Mother get angry with him for laughing when she banged her head on a doorframe, things like that—he wasn't a sadist, he just couldn't help but find things funny. Erich loved boasting about his adventures, and I loved listening to him. He was proud to be a member of the Rifles. This gentle, happy man was surely responsible for more deaths than he could remember, but that was just part of the job. When he paced back and forth making up stories about daring raids and desperate escapes, I didn't doubt for a moment that I was going to be a company man with the Rifles, and I was going to follow him into battle.

One of Erich's most sacred duties was the Lübeck Watch. Once a year he would gather together a band of fifteen trusted men from all over Mecklenburg. They would meet in the Hart's Head Tavern and speak in whispers just loud enough to make sure everyone knew they had secret business. When night fell, they would buy everyone a round of drinks, swear them to secrecy, and march off towards Lübeck. They would return the next day, nodding grimly to each other. I could only imagine they were infiltrating Lübeck to some unknown (but presumably exciting) end. I couldn't get Erich to tell me anything about the Lübeck Watch. "I was making sure Lübeck's still there," he said blandly. "It is."

When I was thirteen I was short for my age, with a young face. If I couldn't look like a man, I was determined to at least act like one, which to my mind mostly involved fighting over imagined insults. The Rifles weren't shy about wasting boys my age as cannon fodder, but I was regarded as officer material. I was just annoyed that it meant they would not take me with them into combat. So when Erich Gersten came to my

door in full uniform and announced that he was enlisting me for the Lübeck Watch, I was giddy. I expected Mother to set her jaw and growl her disapproval, but she nodded calmly.

Erich gave me a uniform. I didn't care that the sleeves covered my hands. I trailed his band of men, trying to match their gait and catch their jokes. I couldn't do either very well, so I ended up spending most of the journey to Lübeck petting the pack mule. We left the road before reaching the city and stopped in a grove of trees. The sloping fortifications in the distance marked the end of company lands.

Erich's men began unpacking the mule's bags. They contained folding wooden chairs. Everyone took one, and we marched out of the trees, straight towards the walls of Lübeck. I had no idea what was going on, but I followed along. We unfolded our chairs and sat them in a line at the base of the wall. One of the men opened his backpack and spilled a small pile of rocks on the ground. Another passed around bottled beer.

Guards started pooling at the top of the fortifications. They were armed, but seemed more curious than hostile. Erich picked up a stone and flung it up at the guards. It fell short, scuttling down the wall into the trench at the bottom. The guards laughed. Some peeled away to go back to patrols, but others stayed to watch. Erich handed me a stone and grinned. I flung it as hard as I could. And so fifteen company men and I sat and spent hours drinking and flinging stones at the walls of Lübeck. The guards shouted insults down and we shouted insults back. Soon my hand was sore and my elbow numb. I loved it.

It was about an hour before someone managed to actually hit one of the guards, but the stone struck him

square in the face, splitting the guard's lip and drawing an audible yelp of pain. We all hooted and cheered and lifted the soldier who made the throw into the air like he'd just taken the city singlehandedly. The crack of rifle fire interrupted our celebration, and one of the folding chairs was split open by a bullet. I wanted to run, but Erich stopped me. "They're aiming around us. Those cowards know what will happen to them if they provoke the Rifles." Sometimes the men would wander off to find more stones, or spend a few minutes swapping jokes and stories, but always they returned to throwing stones, until late until the night.

We had picked the area clear of stones. Some of the soldiers had gone to sleep or passed out drunk. I helped Erich start a campfire. Erich looked away from the wall and into the fire and was quiet. He smiled to himself, and for a moment the man who told me adventure stories was replaced with the man who looted cities for a living. "It's all well to play at war with them. But we're going to do it one of these days. I know people have been saying that for years, but we're really going to do it. I'm going to reach down those fat bastards' throats and pull the food right out of their bellies. I'm going to get myself a Bernardi Autocycle, and I'm going to get your mother a radio."

That was in 1925. The next summer was the Sack of Lübeck, and Erich Gersten got his wish.

3. The Brown Banner

The Brown Banner was a tradition handed down to the Duke's Rifles from the Sixty Years' War. When the Rifles wanted to punish someone, they would peel a strip of skin off of them, tan it into leather, and sew it onto

the Banner. Stealing from the Rifles might lose you a square of skin the size of your hand; betray them and they'd take every inch of skin. You could tell exactly how each square of skin was forfeited, because the offender's name and a short description of their crimes were etched into every patch. When old Banners grew too heavy to carry they were retired to the Great Barracks in Schwerin, where they hung from every rafter like sagging folds on an old woman's bones.

This is one of Erich Gersten's stories, most of which were pure fantasy, but something about the way he told this one made me believe it. The Duke's Rifles were skinning a man for the Banner. He'd murdered his wife, and if you wanted to murder someone in Mecklenburg, you'd damn well better belong to the Rifles. When Erich took him from his cage and led him to the Tannery he was quiet, almost bored-looking. They laid him on the table and he went limp. The moment the knife touched his back he giggled. As it sliced his flesh he started laughing. It wasn't that he didn't feel the pain; he was crying and clenching his fists so tight his fingernails broke skin. But the more the flaying hurt, the more he laughed, cackling so loud it started to frighten Erich's men. Erich gagged him, and that stopped the noise, but they could still see his face contorted in laughter. In the end they killed him to make him stop. They took the rest of his skin, but they didn't add it to the Banner. The cut was too sloppy—from the laughing, and from Erich's hands trembling.

4. History

Schooling was sparse in Grevesmühlen, and ended at a young age, but my school made sure we took pride in

the parts of our history they were willing to tell us about. I assume my readers have been raised on the Western history of Germany: three hundred years of anarchy and bloodshed. Here is the version I was taught.

The age of the companies began with the Sixty Years' War. Sometimes books called it the Fifty Years' War, or the Ninety Years' War, or basically any number they felt like. It was confusing because the war hadn't really remembered to end properly. I suppose one day nobody showed up to battle, and then it was over.

Every town had its own local heroes from the Sixty Years' War, lords or generals or mercenaries who had taken the town under their wing. Grevesmühlen's patron savior was none other than the Father of our Country himself, Albrecht von Wallenstein. Some called him the First Captain, or the Great Liberator, or the King Who Broke His Crown. He'd held a hundred titles from Admiral to Emperor, but he was the Duke of Mecklenburg, so to us he was the Good Duke. He led the first companies to war for the Emperor to drive out the foreigners. But as Wallenstein grew strong, the Emperor came to fear him, until he tried to have Wallenstein killed. Wallenstein evaded the assassins, and when the companies saw how the Emperor betrayed his most loyal servant, they proclaimed Wallenstein the only man they'd ever kneel to again. Even the companies that fought for the foreigners were impressed by his promises of land, wealth, and freedom. He deposed the tyrannical Emperor and drove off the wicked foreigners, and from that day all the people of Germany grew strong and free. The Duke's Rifles were directly descended from Wallenstein's armies. Plenty of companies could make the same claim, but Grevesmühlen

had few enough things to be proud of, so we took whatever we could get.

Among company men, the reverence for Wallenstein was genuine. He had liberated us from the tyranny of the state. Only in Germany was a man free to do as he pleased. If you and your brothers were strong enough, you could take what you wanted. And if you were weak, well, Germany had no patience for weakness—as it should be. You could pay a company if you wanted protection, and if you didn't, it was your loss. Everyone wanted protection. Once in a while you'd hear rumors of a town that had the audacity to try to elect a mayor and govern themselves. This kind of Statist corruption inevitably met swift justice.

Change came slow to Germany. Old companies grew strong, upstart companies toppled them, and the Duke's Muskets started using rifles, but the German way of life changed little over the centuries between the Sixty Years' War and my birth. This was by design. The Maxim War was a typical example of how the companies reacted to change. In 1889 the Redshanks Company returned from a contract in Swedish West Africa with ten Maxim machine guns. Within a month, a coalition of twenty-eight companies had formed to oppose the Redshanks, and by the end of the year the Redshanks Company had been wiped out, their company towns sacked, and their Maxim guns smashed to pieces. There was no point, the captains all agreed, in turning war into slaughter. One did not need machine guns to prey on the weak.

But progress whittled away at Germany. Not five years after the Maxim War, a gunsmith with the Württemberg Knights invented the Daimler Automated Rifle. Unlike the Redshanks, the Knights were willing to share. The Daim-Aut could be finicky, and if it broke

you might not be able to find the parts to fix it, but it was a treasured status symbol and a viciously effective weapon. During the Sack of Lübeck a platoon of Quartered Men with Daim-Auts held off a Swedish landing force outnumbering them eight to one.

As long as the companies spent all their energy on raiding and backbiting, they were regarded as a benign tumor, more harm to operate on than to tolerate. Napoleon had tried to excise the tumor, and look how that turned out for him! But the Sack of Lübeck changed everything. Too many companies had cooperated to make it possible, their new automatic weaponry was too powerful, and it was a violation of the implicit accord between the companies and the Hansa. But worst of all, nobody had seen the Sack of Lübeck coming. The companies were no longer predictable. The West began building the case for surgery.

5. The Wehrwolf

When I was eleven, I came in from the poppy fields one night and found my mother talking with a man. This man was different from most of the company men who buzzed around my mother—filthy and unshaven, but with a preacher's voice and urgent eyes. Mother told me to go upstairs, but the man said no, I should hear this. He spoke to us of a land of freedom to the south, where a woman did not have to give her body to the companies, where a boy would only be called to war to defend his home, not to burn someone else's. He didn't spell it out, but I knew enough to figure out that he was a Wehrwolf.

We ate with him, and then Mother sat with him for hours, nodding and letting him talk. I had a thousand

questions, but Mother grabbed my arm, telling me to close my mouth and open my ears for once. Eventually she sent me to bed. She came upstairs with me, and told me to stay in my room until she came for me in the morning, and to never breathe a word of what happened that night to anyone.

In the morning, the Rifles came to our house. They thanked my mother and added the man's skin to the Brown Banner.

The present German government would have you believe the Wehrwolves were virtuous liberators. Don't believe a word of it. They were no better than the companies. They looted towns, raped women, and conscripted boys just the same; they just did it with Justice's name on their lips, as if one more blasphemy could turn their sins to virtue. Whichever Wehrwolf band sent that man to Grevesmühlen was looking to expand their turf, not set us free. But even if he was lying, that man was the first person to tell me about a world without companies. The second was Duckie.

6. My Hand

The air itself seemed to vibrate with excitement before a raid departed. We wanted the wealth. We wanted the food. We wanted the victory. Every indignity the Rifles ever inflicted on Mecklenburg was forgiven in the weeks before and after a raid. I practiced my aim until my trigger finger blistered, popped, and blistered again. I going to see Lübeck, and I was going to bring back whatever I could carry. It took hours of staring at the ceiling before I fell asleep.

I woke to unbearable pain. I tried pushing myself out of bed, but my right arm collapsed under me. I

dragged my right hand onto my chest to look. It was a bulging, purple mess of swelled meat and jumbled bones. A brief glimpse of my mother standing at the door with a hammer was all I needed to understand what had happened.

I screamed every foul word I knew until I ran out of words and then I screamed incoherent gibberish and then my tongue gave up and I just screamed. By the time I'd worked up the strength to stand, Mother was long gone. I raced into town without even pausing to tend to my hand. I don't know what I intended to do. Would I have reported my mother? I'm not sure. But by the time I got to Grevesmühlen the Rifles had already left for Lübeck. It didn't matter. I'd never be able to fire a rifle, let alone be one.

Mother had never spoken ill of the companies, or argued when I talked about joining them. She was loyal to the Rifles and they were loyal to her. But I thought I understood. I thought my mother didn't want me to grow up, that she was scared to let her son risk his life, that she wanted me to be a coward so I could be her boy forever. We didn't talk about it properly until years later, when she joined me in Philadelphia. It wasn't that she was scared of me dying. She was scared of me dying for a company. Quietly but fervently, she hated them with every fiber of her being.

7. The Radio

Two days after the Rifles set out for Lübeck, a small group of recruits rode back into town, and with them was every horse the Rifles had brought. I was with the crowd waiting for our company to return. Word rushed through the crowd that these were the only survivors,

then in the very next breath, the story changed. The men were on their way, they just didn't need to ride their horses home.

The Duke's Rifles drove into town four hours later, and every last one of them at the wheel of a Bernardi Autocycle. Most of them kept on driving to Schwerin, but our local Rifles were heroes like never before. Everyone wanted to drive an autocycle, or ride in one, or at least just honk the horn. By the time people started creeping home to sleep, three cycles were stuck in ditches, one had crashed through the wall of a house, and nearly half of them were out of fuel. Throughout the night and into the next morning, Rifles trickled in on foot from the road to Schwerin, having also crashed their cycles or run out of gas. The men had brought back several barrels of petrol, but it quickly became clear that it wasn't enough to keep the cycles fuelled for long, and within a year or so the last of them had run dry. They remained chained up outside houses as rusting monuments, testifying that the men who lived here'd had their way with the Queen of the Hansa.

Erich got Mother her radio. He pulled up at our house the morning after the Rifles returned with this huge cabinet radio taking up the driver's seat and him leaning out the side, barely keeping control of the autocycle. Just a week before I'd have laughed my head off. Mother still hadn't come home after breaking my hand, and I wasn't able to help him carry it, so he had to nudge the radio into our house inch by inch. Erich was disappointed that Mother wasn't home to greet him, and probably a little worried. He said what a shame it was about my hand, but he didn't ask for an explanation, and we never really talked about the Rifles anymore after that.

My mother came home the next day. We didn't talk, but she found the radio, and she read the note Erich had left, and they seemed to cheer her up a little. With my broken hand, I couldn't train to join the Rifles anymore, and it was weeks before I could work the poppy fields. The radio became the new center of my life. At first, every broadcast was about Lübeck. It amused me to hear Rostock and Hamburg lamenting our victory. When the Swedes tried and failed to relieve Lübeck from the companies that had stayed to pick it clean, the radio wept and I cheered. At night I stayed quiet to see if I could hear gunfire, but it was too far away.

After a few days some of the pleasure went out of the constant coverage of Lübeck. Grevesmühlen was raided only rarely, and not as harshly as a town without company protection would have been, but even so Lübeck's plight was not impossible for me to relate to. Sometimes they would broadcast lists of survivors who had been separated from their loved ones, and I turned off the radio for that. But eventually the mournful tributes to Lübeck waned, and my love affair with radio began in earnest.

I became a hermit and a man of the world at the same time. I listened to American jazz and English marches and Hansa cabaret and strange atonal Russian music and just about anything else they'd put on the air. Mother took up some of the slack in the poppy fields, partly in penance for my hand and partly on a condition: I was to learn English. The Hanseatic Cities had a significant population of refugees who had fled England when the Leveller Party took power, enough to have English-language radio stations. They played detective stories and Westerns brought over from the

US, and even before I understood what they were saying I understood the sound of a gruff man and a sultry woman and a gunshot. This was my life for two years: hunched over a radio, listening to a world I'd never known.

As young love often does, my relationship with the radio came to an end. The radio was hidden in a storage cellar. It was a treasured item, and it was better not to attract attention to it. This worked for a time, but Erich could not be kept from boasting about how he'd brought his woman a radio. Eventually, the Rifles were contracted to go off and fight in some foreign war (I'd stopped keeping track) and Grevesmühlen was raided.

The Stranger's Band was led by a man named Heinrich Robledo. He was not born to the life of a company man. He had chosen it. He was from the United Kingdoms—his real name was Enrique—and had fought with the Spanish separatists for a long time. They got tired of fighting before he did, so he came to Germany so he could keep fighting forever. The captain of the Rifles had offended him somehow, and we suffered the consequences.

Robledo came to our door himself with a small group of men. He'd heard we had a radio. My mother had made sure to be far away by the time the Stranger's Band arrived, but I had remained behind to help them find anything they needed. It was best not to let raiders look for things on their own, because if they couldn't find them they got frustrated, and that could put them in a destructive mood.

I led Robledo to the cellar. He took one look at the radio and spat. "It's too big. Why's it so big?" he said, as if I'd somehow enlarged it to spite him. I said I didn't know. His men tied a rope around it and hauled it out

of the cellar. It banged against the wall as it rose, knocking off a chip of its sleek casing with each strike. And then Robledo didn't know what to do with it. He'd imagined a newer, smaller model of radio. His wagons were with the main force, looting Schwerin. His men could lift it, but couldn't carry it far. They tried tying it to a horse and the horse collapsed. They dragged the radio out in front of our house. Robledo smashed it to pieces with his rifle butt so that if he couldn't have it, at least we couldn't either. By the time the Quartered Men arrived to reinforce Grevesmühlen, Heinrich Robledo was long gone.

8. Duckie

The wreckage of the radio was still outside my house when Duckie Wooler arrived in Grevesmühlen. It had been there for nearly a month, but neither Mother nor myself had the heart to get rid of it. He was taking a photograph of the broken radio, and I accidentally stepped into the back of the shot. He made an "out of the way" gesture, and I told him to fuck off, and he said "What?" in English, and I told him to fuck off in English, and he offered to hire me as a translator, and I told him to fuck off again, and off he fucked.

Duckie lingered in town, and quickly became a local laughingstock. He had not yet grown fat, but already he gave the impression of one destined for fatness. People tolerated his pictures at first, then let him take pictures if he paid them in cigarettes. He was sometimes flanked by two blank-faced men that everyone assumed, probably correctly, were Hansa agents. It was thanks to these men, whose names I've forgotten, that I came to work for Duckie. I happened to be in the

Hart's Head on an errand, and I overheard him introducing them as the Duck's Rifles. The pun didn't work in German, but I couldn't help but bark a quick laugh. He noticed.

As I left the tavern, I found Duckie matching my stride. He explained his situation to me. Grevesmühlen had sucked Duckie in like mud. He had spent all his money bribing his way past the Hanseatic border, and now he had an escort but no translator and no way of getting around. He said he needed someone to provide a local touch. But more than that, I think he needed someone to care. He thought his photographs could set us free from the companies. He was starting to realize that we were our own prisoners. He needed just one person to *ask* to be free.

Duckie walked me all the way home. He gave speeches about liberty, and when those made my eyes glaze over he told horror stories he'd heard about the companies, and when that didn't move me he gave me a box of cigarettes and promised me two whole cartons. Something about him reminded me of the Wehrwolf. Not just the things he said, but the way he talked, even the way he carried himself. Maybe that's why I told him I'd think about it, as a way of apologizing. I don't know. He didn't want to let me go before I'd agreed to help him, but I insisted I was going to sleep. He scrunched up his face like a wounded dog and said "Don't you want to do something about all this?"

I manipulated the question in my head as I lay in bed. "Don't you want to do something about all this?" It shocked me that I'd never considered the question. I dreamt of the men hanging from the balloon, and throwing rocks at the walls of Lübeck, and laughing at Erich's jokes so hard I cried, and that man laughing as

they peeled his skin off, and the joy that ran through the town after a successful raid, and my beloved radio, and the look on the Wehrwolf's face as they dragged him away, and in the morning, I knew my answer.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

Albrecht von Wallenstein was the commander of the Habsburg armies in the Thirty Years' War. His forces were largely made up of mercenaries, who were supported by looting the countryside. Though a highly capable general, Wallenstein was erratic, ambitious, and untrustworthy, traits that eventually lead to his assassination on the orders of his own Emperor. *Company* imagines a world in which the 1634 attempt on Wallenstein's life fails, and his conspirators depose Emperor Ferdinand II.

The Thirty Years' War—known to the characters of *Company* as the Sixty Years' War—was devastating to Germany in real life, but the Holy Roman Empire survived as a patchwork of states rather than devolving into a no-man's-land ruled by mercenary companies. The Holy Roman Empire helped defeat France in the War of Spanish Succession and Spain in the War of the Quadruple Alliance, averting the Franco-Spanish union known in *Company* as the United Kingdoms. In real life, of course, the United Kingdom refers to the union of the English and Scottish thrones, which here has been divided by a powerful France's support of the Jacobite Rebellions.

The 1910 book *Der Wehrwolf,* about peasants defending their town from raiders in the Thirty Years'

War, inspired a very different guerrilla organization in real life: the Nazis' Wehrwolf commando force. And Gottlieb Daimler, inventor of the Daimler Automated Rifle, abandoned gunsmithing at 18 to focus on mechanical engineering. Instead of the first assault rifles, he would go on to create the first modern cars. Cars are replaced in *Company* by the more rudimentary autocycle, a motorized tricycle descended from the designs of Enrico Bernardi.

ABOUT LUKE BEAN

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THE MORE IT CHANGES

By Harry Turtledove

Yitzkhak the cobbler loosened the vise and checked to see whether the glue had set between the half-dozen thicknesses of leather. Finding it had, he let out a small grunt of satisfaction. On the topmost layer, he drew an outline of the rears on the pair of boots that needed re-heeling. The knife he reached for was sharp but sturdy. Sturdy it had to be, to cut through that much leather.

He bore down with the knife, using all the strength in his right arm. *If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning*. The verse from Psalm CXXXVII was seldom far from the Jew's thoughts.

He muttered to himself as he cut. Too many people had forgotten too many things over the course of too many years. To Yitzkhak, it seemed as though more people had forgotten more things lately. That might have been because his rusty beard had more white in it than he cared to remember. Or, on the other hand, it might not. The way things were these days, you never could tell. And no one ever seemed to forget trouble.

After cutting the new boot heels, he used brass nails to fix them in place. Iron nails would have been cheaper, and would have served just as well…till Chaim the butcher walked in mud or splashed through a puddle. After that, they would have started to rust. *Do it right the first time* was one of the rules Yitzkhak's father had beaten into him. The habit was too deeply ingrained now for him to lose it, or even to remember he'd once had to acquire it.

Warm, sweet summer air and light came through the open door and the narrow window of the cobbler's shop. So did the exciting, almost intoxicating gabble of trade. Monday was market day in Kolomija—the town's name could be spelled at least half a dozen different ways in at least three different alphabets. The same was true for Yitzkhak's own name. This was a debatable part of the world in all kinds of ways.

It was summer, yes. Just what the date was was as debatable as the spelling of Kolomija. By the calendar the Catholics used, it was August 24, 1772. To the Orthodox, it was August 13 of the same year. In the Jews' system, which reckoned from the creation of the world, it was the twenty-fifth of Av in the year 5532. The Ottoman Empire lay not far to the south—just on the other side of the Carpathians. To Muslims, it was the twenty-fourth of Jumaada al-awal, 1186. And, by the new reckoning that threatened to swallow all the others, it was the twenty-fifth day of the eleventh month in the year 95.

Even the frontiers in these parts rippled and shifted like a river. Until a few months before, the Jews of Kolomija had paid taxes to a nobleman who mostly didn't send them to the King of Poland. Now, though, Kolomija—and that nobleman—owed allegiance to the

Emperor of Austria. If the nobleman held out on Joseph, Yitzkhak suspected he would regret it.

The cobbler looked at the boots he'd just fixed. He looked under the counter. He had to patch a torn upper for Shmuel the rope-maker. That could keep, though. Shmuel was down in Jablonow, fifteen miles to the south, tending his sick mother. Unless the poor woman took a turn for the worse and died (*God forbid*, Yitzkhak thought), he wouldn't come home for a week or two.

Yitzkhak didn't have anything he needed to do right this minute. It was gloomy and stuffy inside the cramped shop. It smelled of leather and sweat and glue. Under that, it smelled musty.

Outside, the sun shone. Outside, the market square would be packed. Kolomija had a fine market day. It wouldn't just be peasants bringing in chickens and white radishes and peas from the countryside. Merchants came call the way from Czernowitz, sometimes all the way from Rowne, to buy and sell and trade. Rowne was on the other side of the border now, but nobody yet had fussed about it.

He closed and latched the shutter, stepped outside, and put a big iron padlock on the front door. The lock was ancient and rusty. A half-witted child could pick it or force it. So far, no burglar had figured that out. With luck, none would till Yitzkhak got back. *"Alevai omanyn,"* he murmured as he started for the market square.

His own well-made boots kicked up dust at every step. It *was* hot outside. The broad brim of his fox-trimmed black hat kept the sun off his face, but sweat sprang out on his forehead.

He wasn't the only man who might have been working but was heading for the market instead. He called

greetings to Jews and to Catholic Poles. Like most people in Kolomija, he could get along in Yiddish or Polish, German or Little Russian, or even Slovak in a pinch. He talked to his God in Hebrew, as the Poles talked to theirs in Latin.

Czeslaw the tavern-keeper had a bottle of plum brandy under each arm. He was on his way back from the square. His red nose and the veins that tracked his cheeks said he drank up some of his profits. He and Yitzkhak nodded to each other. Kolomija wasn't such a big town that everyone didn't know everyone else, at least by sight.

"How's the square?" Yitzkhak asked.

"Busy. Busiest I've seen it for a while. With the roads dry, people from a long way off can get here." Czeslaw frowned. His ice-gray eyes narrowed. "I'm not so sure that's a good thing, not the way it is nowadays. They'll go home and remind their neighbors we're around."

Yitzkhak made an unhappy noise. "I'm not so sure it's good, either. Sometimes—a lot of the time—the most you can hope for is that everybody forgets about you and leaves you alone."

"Too right, it is!" Czeslaw said. "There was talk that *haidamacks* are gathering." He crossed himself to turn aside the evil omen.

"God forbid!" Instead of thinking it, Yitzkhak said it aloud. He wanted to give the Lord a better chance of hearing it. *Haidamacks* meant *rioters*. They were Cossacks and other ne'er-do-wells who swarmed like locusts every so often, killing and looting and burning for the greater glory of their notion of God—and for the fun of it. Yitzkhak went on, "I hope the talk is wrong. The last time they came through was only—what?—four years ago?"

"Yes, that's when it was," the taverner said. "Before that, we didn't see them for fifteen or twenty years, and then another fifteen before that. We were both little boys back then."

"I remember." Yitzkhak touched the brim of his hat once more. "Well, I'd better head on to the square myself and hear it with my own ears. May the Lord bless you and keep you, Czeslaw."

"And you, Jew. And you." Bobbing his head, the Pole headed up the street toward his place of business.

On to the market square trudged Yitzkhak. The joy, the anticipation, were gone from his step. The only thing he had to look forward to now was bad news. The day felt darker, as if clouds covered the sun. They didn't, but the cobbler saw with his heart as much as with his ears.

Wagons and carts filled the square. Women in embroidered head scarves sat on the ground, selling eggs or mushrooms or turnips from baskets they'd made themselves. A donkey brayed. Stray dogs skulked, looking for food they could steal.

Peddlers who'd come to Kolomija from bigger towns shouted their wares: plates; big, clunky clocks with gilded wooden cases; books in German and French and Latin and Hebrew; the brandy Czeslaw had bought; carved meerschaums from Vienna; singing finches in brass cages; and almost anything else someone thought he might be able to sell.

Yitzkhak eyed the meerschaums with longing, especially one in the shape of a bare-breasted mermaid—you smoked through her tail. His current pipe was baked clay. It worked, but it was ugly as the mud it came from. He asked the trader what a meerschaum cost. The answer made him retreat in a hurry. The best

haggling in the world wouldn't bring the price down to anything he could afford.

He did buy a bagel for a copper. His jaw worked at the chewy dough as he went through the square, though not before he recited the *brukha* over bread. A sausage-seller held up a link. Yitzkhak politely shook his head. Tadeusz used pork in his sausages; it wasn't forbidden him.

The cobbler wished he had ears like a cat's or a fox's, ears that could swivel and track things he particularly wanted to hear. But he turned out not to need anything like that. People were talking about *haidamacks* in several different languages. They would have talked about a rising storm the same way when clouds were still low on the horizon.

He wasn't the only man from Kolomija whose face got glummer the longer he stayed in the market square. Alter the druggist and Casimir the stonecutter were talking when Yitzkhak came up to them. Alter touched his hatbrim; Casimir bobbed a token bow.

"It doesn't sound good," the stonecutter said.

"They're coming, sure as sure," the druggist agreed sadly. "For our sins, they're coming."

"We must have done something awful, to make God hate us so much," Yitzkhak said. "Another pogrom, so soon after the last one . . ."

As Czeslaw had before, Casimir made the sign of the cross. "I'm a good Catholic—well, as good a Catholic as an ordinary man can be," he said. "All I want to do is to worship God the way my father and my grandfathers and all my ancestors did before me."

"That's all I want, too." Yitzkhak and Alter said the same thing at the same time. The two Jews looked at each other and laughed. It was that or burst into tears.

Casimir glowered at them from under bushy eyebrows. "That miserable . . ." The stonecutter growled a Polish obscenity, adding, "He was just a rotten *Zhyd* himself."

"*Nu?*" Yitzkhak shrugged an expressive—and nervous—shrug. He didn't want to tangle with Casimir; the man's trade had given him shoulders broad as a bull's and upper arms bulging with muscle. He tried simple truth instead: "So was the one you go to church for."

"It's not the same," Casimir said, but he stopped glowering.

"Besides," Yitzkhak added, "would it make any difference if he'd been a Turk? He still would have been…what he was. What they say he was, I mean."

"What they say he was, eh?" Casimir seemed to like that. He nodded. "Maybe the God-cursed *haidamacks* will be afraid of the Austrian Emperor. This is his land now. Maybe they won't come. Maybe the town can fight them off if they do." He lumbered away. He'd talked himself into feeling better, anyhow.

Softly, so the stonecutter wouldn't hear, Alter said, "And maybe I'll grown like an onion, with my head in the ground."

"Maybe you will," Yitzkhak said. "You never can tell." They both laughed again. Again, Yitzkhak heard the sorrow under the mirth.

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Summer slipped toward fall. The High Holy Days came and went. The Jewish year 5532 gave way to 5533. Yitzkhak fasted and prayed through Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He begged forgiveness of everyone he'd offended the past year, and did his best

to forgive everyone who apologized to him. It wasn't always easy, but on that day of days a man had to try.

The fall rains held off long enough to let the peasants bring in a good harvest of barley and wheat. The winter would be hungry—winters usually were. But no one seemed likely to starve.

As soon as the rains came, roads went from dusty tracks to rivers of mud. Travel slowed, or else stopped altogether. The roof in Yitzkhak's shop leaked. He put a chipped bowl under one drip and a dented tin cup that had lost its handle under another. Every so often, he would toss the water into the muddy street.

He didn't mind one bit, not that autumn (during which the new reckoning passed from year 95 to 96). Every time a drop plinked into the tin cup, he would smile. *Forty days and forty nights, Lord*, he thought. The longer it rained, the longer before the *haidamacks* could come, if the *haidamacks* did come. They swept out of the east when they came, and the rains were usually worse in that direction. Everybody said so.

But the rainy season didn't last forever, no matter how much Yitzkhak wished it would. Snow whitened the upper slopes of the Carpathians. Frost traced magic patterns on the glass windowpanes of rich men's houses. Yes, the rich—mostly Poles—in Kolomija had glass windows, as if it were Czernowitz or Kiev or Warsaw.

And the cold weather hardened the ground, as it did toward the end of fall every year. The muddy roads turned to something more like rock. With the crops in, the worst of the year's work was done. Some men out in the countryside lay up through the winter like sleepy bears—though bears didn't have vodka to help make time spin by.

Yitzkhak didn't mind the men who stayed in their houses and drank their way through winter. They were harmless. Oh, they might beat their wives and children, but they might do that sober, too. The trouble was, vodka also inflamed other men, the kind who loaded their muskets and pistols, climbed into the saddle, and went riding in the name of the Messiah—and in the name of kicking up as much trouble as they could.

Haidamacks torched the synagogue in Zastawna. They burned the rabbi in it, and howled with laughter at his screams. Zastawna lay between Czernowitz and Kolomija, west of the one but east of the other. It wasn't nearly far enough away to let anyone in Kolomija feel safe, in other words.

Snyatyn was a smaller town a little southwest of Zastawna—even closer to Kolomija, that is. Two days after people fleeing Zastawna came to Kolomija, people fleeing Snyatyn got there.

"God have mercy on us!" a Catholic woman from Snyatyn screamed in the street as she stumbled past Yitzkhak's house. "Christ have mercy on us! They murdered the priest, the holy father! They cut his throat on the altar in the church, as if he were a hog! Their horses drank from the holy-water fount! Oh, Christ have mercy!"

Yitzkhak's wife was a small, dark woman named Rivka. She was quiet and steady. He could see that those shrieks shook her even so. "They'll be here next, won't they?" she said, her voice not much above a whisper.

"I'm afraid so," he answered.

"They went away the last time," his son Aaron said. "They went away, and we're still here, and we're still

Jews." He was fifteen. He thought he was a man. Under religious law, he was. Otherwise . . . less so. He did have a certain gift for the Talmud, which made Yitzkhak proud. An open volume sat on the table in front of him.

"It's like a bad storm," Yitzkhak said heavily. "It blows for a while. Then it eases back, and you think maybe it's over. But it blows some more, stronger than ever. And before this one is done, if it ever is, it's liable to blow all our houses down."

"What will you do, then, Father?" Aaron asked. "Will you bend to the storm?"

Yitzkhak understood what that meant. He shook his head. "A lot of people have, but I won't. I'll stay a Jew, a proper Jew, as long as I live. *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one*. That was the first prayer I learned, and those will be the last words that ever pass my lips."

"Some of the Catholics want to fight the *haidamacks*," Aaron said, his voice cracking with excitement. Talmud or no Talmud, he added, "I want to fight alongside them."

"What do they say about that?" the cobbler asked. His wife looked horrified. He understood; that was what mothers were for. He knew horror, too, but also a grim determination.

"They say every man with a knife or a hatchet in his hands can help," Aaron answered. "If we don't fight, we'll go under."

No Jew in Kolomija owned anything much more dangerous than a knife or a hatchet. The Catholics had firearms. Some had gone to war; others hunted. That they were willing, even happy, to have Jews stand with them was a telling measure of how desperate they were.

Well, by the woman from Snyatyn's cries, they had reason to be desperate. Time was when they'd looked down their noses at Jews. They still did, some; *goyim* were like that. But the passage of Kolomija from Poland to Austria was the least of their worries.

Poland, Austria, Russia, Turkey—even, from what Yitzkhak had heard, Prussia . . . The same storm was blowing through all of them, and showed no sign of blowing itself out. If anything, it was spreading. Where it touched, nothing was the same again. Would the proud Catholic Poles of Kolomija want Jews at their side if things were the same as they used to be?

Tell him no. Tell him he's too young—Rivka's eyes begged Yitzkhak. But the cobbler could see that the only way to keep Aaron from doing something like that would be to tie him up and sit on him. Easier to ride a horse in the direction it was already going.

Besides… "Enough is enough. If nobody stands up to the *haidamacks*, they'll ride roughshod over everything," Yitzkhak said. "And if the Catholics will take one Jew who doesn't know much about this fighting business, chances are they'll take two."

"Vey iz mir!" Rivka said. Yitzkhak could hardly hear her through his son's war whoop. He didn't feel like a warrior himself. Unlike Aaron, he didn't want to fight. But he didn't think things would turn out any worse for him if he did than if he didn't. There was even some small chance they might turn out better.

He got something better than a hatchet. The Catholics gave him a spear. A spear of sorts, anyhow: an old scythe blade lashed to a staff. He had Rivka's longest knife on his belt, and a small one from his shop stuck in one boot for a holdout weapon. Aaron hefted a makeshift spear, too.

Casimir carried a stout wooden club with nails driven through it. Yitzkhak wouldn't have wanted to be on the wrong end of a buffet from that, especially not with the stonecutter swinging it. But the *haidamacks* were horsemen. A spear at least gave you extra reach. How much good could a club do?

A couple of Poles had iron helmets. One even wore a back-and-breast that must have come down from his great-grandfather. It might keep out a musket ball. It would surely make the man very slow. Several Catholics shouldered muskets. One was a businesslike modern flintlock. The rest looked at least as old as the corselet: wheel-locks and an ancient matchlock.

Czeslaw had a pistol. A taverner needed something to keep himself safe. He surveyed the ragtag militia. "We're a fine bunch, aren't we?" he said. "Maybe the *haidamacks* will get a good look at us and laugh themselves to death. Christ, it's our best hope!"

"If you feel that way—" Yitzkhak began.

"Why don't I pack it in?" Czeslaw finished for him. "Because I'm a stubborn son of a bitch, that's why. We all are, or we wouldn't fight back. We'd do what the *haidamacks* want, and that would be that. Only then we'd hate our own reflections for the rest of our lives."

Yitzkhak nodded. He felt the same way. He wouldn't have stood there shivering in the cold if he hadn't. So many, though, had gone over to the new reckoning without so much as a backward glance at what they'd once believed.

One of the Poles who'd done some real soldiering before his hair grayed took command of the fighters. He stationed them on the streets just inside the east end of town. "We'll make things crowded for the

haidamacks, anyway," he said. "We'll run up what barricades we can and hope for the best."

"What if they swing around to the west side?" Aaron asked him.

The veteran scowled. "You're one of those damn smart Jews, are you? If they go over there, they screw us up the ass, that's what. But they won't. They aren't long on tactics, the *haidamacks*. They just charge on in and start smashing things."

Townswomen brought the fighters soup and stew in big, steaming kettles. After a hurried *brukha*, Yitzkhak ate whatever got ladled into his bowl without worrying much about breaking dietary laws. He'd atone for his sins later, if he had a later. When you went to war, you dispensed with a lot of the formalities anyhow.

As night fell, Casimir pointed out into the gathering gloom. "Look! You can see their fires!"

Yitzkhak cocked his head to one side. "Yes, and you can hear them howling, too. If they aren't already plastered, they will be soon."

A drum began to pound out there. The first thud was so deep and sudden, for a panicky moment Yitzkhak took it for a cannon firing. But it thumped again and again and again. The *haidamacks'* drunken shouts coalesced into a chorus that rang out between the drumbeats: "Sabbatai! Sabbatai!"

"God damn Sabbatai," Casimir said in Polish at Yitzkhak's left hand. He spat on the ground.

"God curse Sabbatai," Aaron said in Yiddish at Yitzkhak's right hand. He spat on the ground, too.

"God's already done whatever He chose to do with Sabbatai Tzevi," Yitzkhak said, first in the one language and then in the other, though Aaron followed

Polish perfectly well. "It's here on earth that we're still sorting things out."

"God damn Sabbatai," Casimir repeated. "God damn him and the Devil broil him black!"

Sabbatai Tzevi had been dead for almost a century; the date of his death marked the first day of the new reckoning his followers used. He'd been born an ordinary Jew in Turkey, but he had messianic ambitions and pretensions. He also had the kind of spellbinding character that made people who heard him take those ambitions and pretensions seriously.

They said he worked miracles. Yitzkhak didn't know the details; he didn't want to know the details. Sabbatai had preached in Asia Minor, and in the Holy Land, and in Egypt. Some from Europe who'd heard him believed his claims as firmly as the folk in the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, in the year the Christians called 1666, Sultan Mehmet IV summoned Sabbatai to Istanbul to hear at first-hand what he had to say. The canny Turk listened to the man who called himself the Messiah . . . and declared that he was changing his name to Sabbatai I.

The new faith exploded through the vast Ottoman domain, and out into Europe as well. Sabbatai Tzevi lived another ten years after converting Mehmet to his cause. Mullahs, cardinals, patriarchs, rabbis—every religious authority called curses down on his head. It did them little good. When people were ready for something, they grabbed at it whether their leaders approved or not. Christianity and Islam had spread the same way.

And when people were ready for something, they were also ready—eager!—to ram it down their neighbors' throats, regardless of whether the neighbors were ready, too.

"Sabbatai!" the *haidamacks* roared. "Sabbatai!" They danced around the fires like…like Yitzkhak didn't know what. He vaguely knew there was a New world beyond the ocean far to the west (he only vaguely knew there *was* an ocean far to the west), but tales of its natives had never reached his ears.

He turned to the grizzled veteran who ordered the defenders around. "We ought to go out there while they're drinking and yelling and carrying on—take them by surprise."

"Another Jew who thinks he's a general." The Pole sounded more amused than annoyed. He waved toward the fires. "Go ahead, Jew—be my guest. If you guys were real soldiers, not odds-and-sods, I might try it. But they'd chop you to bits if I did. You don't know how to hold together. No, our best chance is staying where we're at and making them come to us."

"All right." Yitzkhak had no idea whether it was or not. But the gray-haired Pole understood more of war than he did. He pulled his black coat tighter around him, lay down on the ground behind a barrel, and tried to sleep.

He didn't think he would, but he managed a light, on-and-off doze. He was dozing when a *haidamack* rode out of the gray predawn light in the east and shouted, "You misbelievers there! Give your souls to Sabbatai Tzevi, God's great light on earth, and we'll leave you alone! Otherwise, you'll pay for your wickedness in this world and the next!" He sounded like a Little Russian trying to speak Polish, but no one in Kolomija would have trouble following him.

"Go away! Leave us alone! Let us worship the way we want to!" Yitzkhak shouted as he grabbed his spear and scrambled to his feet. Other men yelled variations on the same theme.

"On your heads be it—and it will." The *haidamack* turned his horse and rode back to his encampment. Sabbatai's followers, like those of Muhammad and Jesus before them, were sure they knew the one right answer and had the right, even the duty, to inflict it on everyone else. Jews didn't proselytize—which was, no doubt, why there were so few of them.

The drums began to pound again. When the sun rose, the *haidamacks* came trotting toward the town and its homemade barriers. Some bore lances, some short muskets, some pistols. They wore fur hats; their capes streamed out behind them. As they came, they shouted Sabbatai's name.

One of the defenders steadied his musket on a board and fired. The shot missed anyhow. Yitzkhak was too excited to be afraid—till a pistol ball smashed Casimir's face. The burly stonecutter wailed and gobbled at the same time. Bright blood poured out between his fingers as he clapped his hands to the wound. Then he fell, and it puddled and steamed under him. He never got to use his fearsome club.

A raider's horse went down. The *haidamack* howled—his leg was broken or crushed beneath the thrashing animal. The others kept pushing forward, though. They had more guns and less fear than Kolomija's amateur defenders.

Yitzkhak awkwardly thrust his improvised spear at a horse. The rider didn't get close enough to let the weapon bite. He shot at Yitzkhak, missed, and cursed horribly.

Another *haidamack* skewered a Jew with his lance at the same time as his comrade shot the Catholic next to that Jew. Their horses chested planks aside. Whooping, the *haidamacks* poured through the breach in the miserable barricade and into Kolomija. A couple of them went down, but most rode on.

Some made for the Catholic church, others for the synagogue. That split the defenders: the Poles tried to save the one, the Jews the other. The fire in the synagogue started first.

Aaron lay in the street, bleeding from the head. "No!" Yitzkhak shouted. He tried to skewer on of the raiders. Laughing, the man yanked the spear from his startled hands. "No!" he shouted again. "Your Sabbatai, he was a Jew, the same as we are!"

"He got over it." The *haidamack* aimed a musket at Yitzkhak's belly. "Will you, fool? Admit that Sabbatai was the Lord's chosen, the Messiah, and you can have your worthless life."

Yitzkhak grabbed for the kitchen knife on his belt. "It isn't true," he said. Even as the words came out of his mouth, he wished he had them back. Why would you condemn yourself like that? *Because I* am *a Jew*, he thought. *Because I can't be anything else.*

Laughing still, the raider pulled the trigger. Maybe the gun would misfire. If it didn't, maybe he would miss. Maybe—

Flame and smoke burst from the muzzle. The bullet caught Yitzkhak square in the chest. It didn't hurt. Then it did, horribly. He crumpled, blood filling his mouth. Through it, he managed to choke out, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" before darkness swallowed him.

The synagogue burned. A couple of hundred yards away, so did the church. "Sabbatai!" the *haidamacks* cried, over and over again. "Sabbatai!" Like the smoke from the houses of God, the name mounted to the uncaring heavens.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

The real career of Sabbatai Tzevi (1626–1676) is the same as that described in the story up to the point where he met Mehmet IV. The Jewish mystic began to preach that he was the Messiah in 1648, and was aided by a man in Istanbul who said that he had heard a proclaiming that Sabbatai was truly the Redeemer. He was a man of rare personal magnetism. He always fascinated children, and the way he sang the Psalms helped draw men to him. He travelled to Jersualem and to Cairo, where he married a beautiful young girl. From the Middle East, the belief in Sabbatai's Messianic nature spread to the leading trading cities of Western Europe through merchants, many of them Jews. Most of the turmoil he created, though, was centered in the Ottoman Empire, where he lived. In early 1666, the Ottoman sultan, Mehmet IV, summoned him to Istanbul for questioning. In September of that year, he was brought before the sultan and, instead of being accepted as the Messiah as he was in the story, was offered the choice of conversion to Islam or death. He converted. Naturally, that threw his movement into a tailspin from which it never recovered. Sabbatai Tzevi lived out the rest of his life in obscurity in Albania, abandoned by most of those who had followed him. A handful of believers refused to accept his apostasy, and continued to think he truly was the Messiah. A tiny remnant of them survives to this day.

ABOUT HARRY TURTLEDOVE

Harry Turtledove lives in Los Angeles, California. He earned a doctorate in Byzantine history from the University of California, Los Angeles, and taught at UCLA, Cal State Fullerton, and Cal State Los Angeles. At about the same time, he began selling science fiction and fantasy. Because of his training and interests, much of what he has written is based on history. He worked as a technical writer to support himself and his growing family until 1991, when he began to write full-time. He has won the Hugo, the Sidewise for alternate history (twice), the John Esthen Cook award, and the Hal Clement award for young-adult science fiction, and has been a Nebula finalist. His books include the four novels of *The Videssos Cycle* (modeled after the history of the Byzantine Empire), *The Guns of the South* (set in the American Civil War), the *Worldwar* books (in which aliens invade in 1942), *Ruled Britannia* (set in a world where the Spanish Armada succeeded and Shakespeare is brought into an English uprising), and *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (in which the last Jews in Berlin struggle to survive a lifetime after a German victory). He is married to fellow writer Laura Frankos. They have three daughters, one granddaughter, and the inevitable writers' cat.

A SINGLE SHOT

By Rod Rees

September 11, 1777: Brandywine Creek, near Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania

"That's a Frog 'Ussar, that is, Captain," whispered Sergeant Hopkins.

A cautious Captain Ferguson eased back a branch of the bush he was cowering behind to give himself a better sighting of the two horsemen who were taking such an infernally close interest in the disposition of the British Army. Hopkins was right: the flamboyant uniform of the nearer of the two men was unmistakable. Only French Hussars favoured so much gold braid.

"The other bloke's a Yankee."

Ferguson nodded. The blue and buff uniform and tricorn hat were typical of those sported by Colonial officers.

"Shall we let 'em 'ave it, Captain?' Hopkins asked as he brought his rifle up to his shoulder. 'Easy pickings at this distance."

That was true. The horsemen were only fifty yards from where Ferguson and his three men were hidden, well within range of their rifles. And they were enemy officers…

Something made Ferguson hesitate. In truth he was sick of how brutish the war in the American Colonies had become, disgusted by the atrocities he had seen perpetrated by both sides. He judged himself to be a gentleman, possessed of Christian sensibilities, and Christian gentlemen did not sneak up on their enemies and blast them in ambuscade. Anyway, there was a family tradition of Fergusons—all staunchly Episcopalian—sympathising with rebels: his father had been a resolute supporter of the Jacobite cause.

"Hold your fire," Ferguson ordered and with that he rose to his feet and hallooed the two horsemen. "Gentlemen, I am Captain Patrick Ferguson, officer commanding the Rifle Corps attached to the army of Sir William Howe. I would most respectfully request you to surrender yourselves—"

The Colonial didn't even have the courtesy to acknowledge Ferguson's demand, instead he hauled the head of his bay around and made to gallop away. There was a crack of a rifle to Ferguson's left. Hopkins had fired.

"Damn your eyes! I said hold your fire," snarled Ferguson as he watched the American stiffen in his saddle and then tumble from his horse to the ground.

"Beggin' your pardon, Captain, but 'e wos disobeying your order," answered an unapologetic Hopkins. "Got the bugger anyways, and like the General says, the best sort ov Reb is a dead Reb, wot wiv them all bin traitors to the King and such."

Biting back a rebuke, Ferguson fired a warning shot

over the head of the hussar who had dismounted to tend to his fallen comrade. The hussar, seeing the four British riflemen advancing towards him, decided that discretion was the better part of valour, climbed back on his horse and rode away.

When they came up to the fallen man, Ferguson could see that Hopkins's shot had taken the Colonial square in the back and now he lay, dead as mutton, in a puddle of blood. In life he must have been an imposing individual, lean of build and topping six feet in height; a man, if Ferguson wasn't mistaken, more used to giving orders than receiving them. Trying to disguise his distaste of such an unnecessary death, Ferguson watched in silence as Hopkins searched the dead man's pockets. The sergeant, not having any letters, handed the packet of papers he found to Ferguson who quickly scanned them.

Then he read them again more carefully hardly daring to believe what was written there.

"It seems, Sergeant," he said finally, "the body we see before us is none other than that of General George Washington, commander of the rebel army."

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July 4, 1978: Carleton Building, at 5th and Chestnut Streets, Pennsylvania, the United States of New England. Co-Dependence Day Bicentennial Celebrations

Andy Hidell knew the key to successfully executing his mission turned on being able to bluff his way into the office of Rayborough Securities on the tenth floor of the Carleton Building, the office which overlooked Old

Parliament Hall…the office where the rifle was hidden. Whilst he had been assured that the false papers he was carrying were nigh-on perfect there were hundreds of EBI agents patrolling the building and it would take just one radio call—one *un-intercepted* radio call—made to check his bona fides and the whole masquerade would be revealed.

As Hidell approached the building's front door he fortified himself against the trials to come with the thought that he was doing God's work…that God was watching over him.

"Papers," snapped the EBI agent guarding the building's entrance. He *had* to be EBI given the grey pin-striped, English-style three-piece suit and the bowler hat he was wearing: J. Edgar Hoover, the man who had established the Empire Bureau of Investigation, had been a fervent anglophile who liked his agents to dress like English gentlemen.

Hidell clicked his heels and saluted. "Pavel Andreyevich Pronin," he answered as he proffered his faux-identity card, inflecting his intonation with a cod-Russian accent, "Captain in the Okhrana, charged with acting as security liaison with the New England EBI. I have been assigned to surveil the ceremony and be on the look-out for any potential trouble-makers and known Commune-ist agitators." For emphasis Hidell patted the binocular case he had slung over his shoulder.

The EBI agent gave Hidell the once-over, taking in the Russian cut of his suit and the Poljot watch ticking on his wrist: Hopkins, the mission's mastermind, had been obsessive about the details needed to make Hidell's disguise convincing. Satisfied, the agent turned his attention to the identity card and from the way his brow furrowed it was obvious he was flummoxed by

the Cyrillic script but then this was the first time the Okhrana—the Tsar's secret police—had been given permission to operate on American soil.

"I thought you Ruskis were leaving security in the hands of us Yanks."

"Change of plan," Hidell answered in what he hoped was a suitably careless manner. "The Okhrana has received information that known terrorists are intent on using the Bicentennial celebrations to perpetrate a political assassination and with Grand Duke Gorbachev being in attendance…"

The EBI agent nodded. "Yeah, I guess with Philly awash with big-wigs from all parts of the Empire—*and* from the European Commune—it's all hands to the pump. Can't have anything untoward spoiling the festivities, especially as Her Majesty is gracing us with her presence." The agent handed back Hidell's documents. "You armed?"

"No. I was advised that police in New England do not bear arms."

"You were advised right, Captain, no one in the Empire carries a gun. Even so, with this being a maximum security area, I'll have to get clearance from MI5 before I can give you admittance. If you'll bear with me." The EBI agent turned away from Hidell and spoke into his walkie-talkie.

This was the moment of maximum danger. If the call wasn't correctly intercepted then the game would be up.

"MI5 confirms your clearance is genuine, Captain Pronin, and that I am to provide you with full assistance."

Trying desperately to hide the feeling of relief that washed over him, Hidell smiled a reply. "Excellent. I'd

like to be afforded a position overlooking the ceremony. I thought somewhere on the tenth floor…"

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Once snug in the tenth floor office and with the door locked firmly behind him, Hidell used his binoculars to scan the dignitaries taking their seats on the stage erected in front of the Old Parliament Building, Prime Minister Gerald Ford glad-handing for all he was worth, milking every morsel of publicity from the Bicentennial celebrations. Hardly surprising, Hidell supposed, given the world's press was gathered to cover the event and there was an election scheduled for next year. Ford bowed to the Queen; shook hands with Prime Minister Jimmy Carter, there to represent the Confederation of Southern States; kissed that hateful harridan Prime Minister Thatcher on both cheeks; hugged Grand Duke Mikhail Gorbachev, Tsar Alexander's Foreign Minister; and then, in what had been billed as the Great Rapprochement, welcomed Erich Honecker, President of the European Commune, to the stand and ushered him to his seat.

The press photographers jostled to record this seminal moment, the first official visit a President of the Commune had ever made to the British Empire. Not that Hidell approved of this show of détente: the Commies—Satan-led atheists to a man—were the intractable and uncompromising enemies of the God-fearing Empire, and hence all of them would be cast into the everlasting fire on the Day of Judgement. Studying Honecker through his binoculars, Hidell decided he looked every inch the devil-worshipper, his thin face and narrow eyes signalling to all good Christians that

he was a man without pity or compassion. As such he deserved to die, to be struck down by a bullet fired in the name of the Lord. The bullet Hidell would fire.

Honecker took his seat next to Gorbachev, the two of them exchanging smiles and by doing so confirming the rumours that soon the Commune and Holy Russia would join forces in opposing the British Empire. War was coming … the final war between God and Satan.

Unfortunately, by the reckoning of the Warriors of Christ—the group of fundamentalist Christians Hidell was honoured to belong to—it was a war that wasn't coming quickly enough. The sooner Satan was defeated the better, history needing the shove which Hidell would provide: the assassination of Honecker on American soil would be an insult the Commune would be unable to ignore. It would be the spark that would ignite Armageddon.

As he pulled the rifle from its hiding place behind the wall panel, Hidell saw Prime Minister Ford walk towards the microphone. Hidell turned on his transistor radio.

Your Majesty; Mayor Rizzo; reverend clergy; Members of Parliament; distinguished guests; lords, ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you all to Philadelphia.

Gerald Ford spoke in the elevated, cut-glass, English public-school accent Hidell so detested. If his memory served him right Ford had been educated in Eton and then Oxford, the same path to the top followed by most of those who made up the Empire's establishment, the effete, liberal elite who had so readily espoused sinfulness and apostasy and had legalised the deviant activity of homosexuality. They didn't seem to realise that the Manifest Destiny of the British Empire was to be God's bulwark against Satan. But he and the

other Warriors of Christ knew it and they were determined not to stand watching helplessly while the Empire's godless, spineless leaders brought the Christian nations of the West floundering to the brink of death.

We are especially honoured to have Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, with us today as she is a direct descendant of King George III who, following the defeat and surrender of the rebel forces at Saratoga, displayed the statesmanship and the virtue of Christian forgiveness 'to know the right time, and the manner of yielding, what is impossible to keep'.

Saratoga, the battle in which the British had routed Horatio Gates's rebel army and sealed the end of the rebellion…but only just. Hidell agreed with Burgoyne's assessment that it had been 'a damned close-run thing'. Maybe if Washington had been alive…maybe if Benedict Arnold hadn't been ordered to assist Nathanael Greene after Washington's death and had been there in Saratoga to stiffen Gates's resolve…maybe then the Colonials would have won. Unfortunately for the Colonials, history was awash with 'maybes'.

King George realised that all nations have the right to govern themselves in their own ways and his magnanimity in victory was the first step in healing the differences which had threatened to tear the English race asunder. Thus the British and the Colonials came to work together as brothers, friends and allies, the five nations making up British North America imbued with the principles of Magna Carta and the Christian faith, this laying the foundation of what would become the mightiest empire the world has ever seen.

A trifle sycophantic, decided Hidell: it had been Lord North's Conciliation Plan, rather than King George's munificence, that had placated the defeated Colonials. But then, he supposed, Queen Elizabeth was attending the ceremony so Ford had to be diplomatic.

He began to assemble the rifle—a Russian Dragunov sniper's rifle. Hidell would have preferred to use a good, honest American rifle but Hopkins had insisted and Hidell had conceded. After all, Hopkins was the one who had so skilfully planned the assassination, the man who had conjured up the false identity papers, the man who was privy to all Honecker's movements, the man sent by God to initiate the Cleansing.

Sycophantic or no, Ford's rhetoric was rewarded by applause from the Prime Ministers of Canada, the Southern Confederation, Greater Mexico, and California, the nations which, together with New England, formed British North America. That had been the British master-stroke: never to allow the Colonies to coalesce into one nation, a nation too big and powerful for even Great Britain to handle. Divide and conquer had been the philosophy followed by Westminster, one carried through with typical English cunning.

In 1833, on the birthday of the first Prime Minister of the United States of New England, Benedict Arnold…

A cheer from the crowd at the mention of Arnold, the father of the American nations, the Great Patriot, the man, who, following the defeat at Saratoga, had been charged with making peace with the British.

…just a fortnight after the six southern states had formed a renegade confederacy in protest of the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in Westminster…

Hidell saw Jimmy Carter shuffle awkwardly in his seat. The Second Rebellion of 1833 had led to a bloodbath, with four hundred thousand killed or wounded before the Rebel States were subdued. The one good thing was that as the French and the Spanish had backed the losing side—the Confederacy—and this had given Britain an excuse to take over their possessions in North America.

Not that the Frogs had been in any position to resist: they were too busy bickering about who should lead the Commune following Bonaparte's death in 1834. Nevertheless, Redcoats marching into New Orleans was why the European Commune and the British Empire had been at loggerheads ever since.

…Prime Minister James Brinley came here to Parliament Hall knowing that he faced the greatest national crisis in our country's 55-year history. "I am filled with deep emotion," he said, "at finding myself standing here in the place where collected together the wisdom, the loyalty, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live."

Today, we can all share these simple, noble sentiments. Like Brinley, I feel both pride and humility, rejoicing and reverence as I stand in the place where two centuries ago the United States of New England was conceived in liberty, transatlantic brotherhood, loyalty to the Crown and dedication to the proposition that all men are created equal. From this small but beautiful building, then the most imposing structure in the Colonies, came the great document—the Declaration of Co-Dependence—that underpins the moral and intellectual power of all the nations enjoined in the British Empire. It is to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Co-Dependence that we are met here today.

After easing open the window he'd be shooting through, Hidell stepped back into the shadows and fitted the rifle's telescopic sight to the slide rail atop the barrel. He had to be careful not to be seen handling a rifle by the sharpshooters stationed on the roof of the Old Parliament Building and this would necessitate him shooting from the very back of the office. To get a sight line of the stage from there he would have to have an elevated firing position. He began to rearrange the office furniture and as he worked he pondered on the Declaration of Co-Dependence.

What this generation of politicians seemed to have forgotten was that whilst the Declaration had settled the *modus vivendi* of Britain and the Colonies it had also stipulated that the religion of the Colonies would be Protestant Christianity. Hidell knew this part of the Declaration by rote. *Whilst the Parliament of the United States of New England shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion it is acknowledged that the King's most excellent Majesty has supreme authority over all persons in matters ecclesiastical. This power is exercised through the Church of England, a congregation of faithful men in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments duly ministered to Christ's ordinance in all things that of necessity are requisite to the same.*

The pure word of God…not this evolutionary nonsense…not the blasphemy that men could lie with men…not the pornography spewed out by the film studios in Elstree. The Empire had to be brought back to God, Cleansed in the fire of Holy War. The fools leading the Church of England espoused peace between nations—they wanted rain with no thunder—and as the Warriors of Christ knew, a church that claims to hold the cause of right, yet condemns confrontation, is little more than a social club. The British Empire had become a realm populated by idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, drug-takers…and wanton women.

Hidell gave an exasperated shake of his head. Yes, women were the cause of so many of the Empire's woes, women like that termagant, Margaret Thatcher. That the First Minister in the Empire should be a woman signalled that the Empire had turned its back on God. Women had forgotten that the Bible told them to submit to their husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Just as Marina had refused

to submit, leaving him for another man. His wife had betrayed him…humiliated him. But he would forgive her: when he had visited Holy Russia back in 1959 he'd not only found a wife, he'd found God, and it would be God who would punish her for her lack of respect. After the Cleansing…

Trying to still his anger at the memory of his wife's lack of respect, Hidell turned his attention back to the radio and Ford's speech.

The American settlers faced many, many hardships, but they had more liberty than any other people on Earth. That is what they came to America for and what they meant to keep. And though the British government and the Colonials differed and warred, less than a year after the rebellion was settled, on the 4th July 1778, they united as brothers.

As a symbol of this freedom, before me stands the famous Liberty Bell. It came here over 200 years ago when Philadelphia, after London, was the largest English-speaking city in the world. Inscribed on the bell is the message, "Let Freedom Ring": this is a message in which all peoples of the Empire can join and which I hope will be heard around the world for centuries to come.

Hidell snorted: Ford didn't know the true meaning of the word "liberty". Liberty didn't flow from Parliaments, it flowed from God. Didn't the Bible say that only "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty". Better for Ford to talk about liberating the people from the seductive, corruptive wiles of women, from the lies of science and from the pernicious influence of those who had embraced a life of sin.

Of course there were nay-sayers, those who preferred the bullet to the ballot-box and we still struggle with the consequences of their wrong-headedness.

As he set one table on top of another to make his firing platform, Hidell found himself marvelling at this

piece of understatement. When the so-called War of Independence was lost, its leaders—the cabal of traitors who had gone down in history as "the Seditious Six": Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Robert R. Livingston and Roger Sherman—had decamped to France in order to avoid the hangman's noose. What they had got up to there still echoed around the world. The failure of their revolution in America had persuaded them that the fault lay in their not having being radical enough in their demands and the upshot was the spawning of that foul creed of secular humanism that became the creed of the Commune. Those who fought against King Louis XVI during the French Revolution of 1795 didn't just demand "*Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité*" but also the complete remodelling of the economic structure of France—of the world!—whereby all the means of production were owned by the people and managed on their behalf by elected Communes.

Following the success of the French Revolution this perverse philosophy swept across Europe—helped, of course, by the military successes of that Commune-ist extraordinaire, Napoleon Bonaparte—such that, on Bonaparte's death in Paris in 1834, the European Commune stretched from Gibraltar all the way to the border of Holy Russia, the countries of the Commune welded together by one language, one currency, one legal code, one uniform system of weights and measures, and a single-minded belief in the ultimate triumph of the *sans-culottes*…of the proletariat.

There had been great hopes within Empire that when Napoleon died the Commune would crumble and for some years it did, indeed, totter, but then came the man who would reforge and remodel the European

Commune such that it would challenge the British Empire for hegemony over the world…President Otto von Bismarck. Hidell loathed Bismarck, Satan's Chief Lieutenant on Earth.

Because of Bismarck, the people of Continental Europe became finally and fatally in thrall to the perverse, atheistic doctrine of Commune-ism, trapped behind what Disraeli called "the Iron Curtain". Because of Bismarck, Commune-ism had grown until today it threatened to subsume the world. Now only the British Empire stood against this realm of Satan—backward, introspective Holy Russia was of no real consequence in the world—and it was Hidell's mission to provoke the Empire to war against it. Armageddon beckoned.

The members of that first Parliament met here in 1778 to form a more perfect inter-dependency of nations, a permanent legal mechanism that would translate the principles and purposes of the Conciliation Plan into effective self-government for the Colonies. The Declaration of Co-Dependence which resulted from this constitutional debate was hailed by William Gladstone, a great British Prime Minister, as "the most wonderful work ever struck off by the brain and purpose of man."

This notion of corrected wrongs and expanded rights enshrined in the Declaration has brought two centuries of a Pax Brittanica, the British Empire becoming a beacon of hope for all those struggling to secure their liberty.

As Hidell settled himself on his makeshift firing platform he used the rifle's telescopic sights to focus on Honecker's face and to watch the emotions stimulated by Ford's speech. The smirk told him that Honecker knew the final cataclysmic struggle for the soul of humankind was fast approaching.

The thought of world war didn't discomfort Hidell. He was pleased that soon all Christians would have to

find the courage to put on the armour of God and stand firm against the forces of the devil. Soon all Christians must be ready to beat their ploughshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears. Soon even the weakest must be ready to say, "I am a warrior".

But the struggle for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is never truly won. Each generation of those of us who are citizens of the British Empire must strive to achieve these aspirations anew. Liberty is a living flame to be fed, not dead ashes to be revered, even in a Bicentennial Year. So it is fitting that, on a glorious day like today, we ask ourselves are our God-given rights secure, our hard-won liberties protected?

Hidell loaded ten bullets into the magazine of his Dragunov. He doubted that he would need more than one to kill Honecker but over-confidence smacked of hubris, and pride was a sin. As he pushed the bullets home he pondered on the question Ford had posed to his audience. It was obvious to him that Americans' hard-won rights were far from secure. His reading of the Bible told him all Christians must flee immorality and abstain from fleshy lusts which wage war against the soul. And in this regard it was the responsibility of women not to lead men into temptation with their female wiles. Women had to shun provocative clothes and make-up, and marry while still young, it being better to marry than to burn with passion. But as Hidell looked around modern America he saw that women had surrendered to lust and perversion, and were seemingly incapable of practicing temperance and self-control.

Women had been duped by the Satan-inspired cult of feminism. Just as Marina had, rejecting his teachings, scorning him as a husband, ridiculing his beliefs, belittling him as a man.

Another reason why there had to be a Cleansing.

The British Empire has always been a defender of liberty. In 1914 the American nations and Britain stood shoulder to shoulder to protect Holy Russia against the illegal and avaricious demands of its enemies. Then Prime Minister William Howard Taft, said, "We, the nations of the Empire, were born to freedom and, believing in freedom, are willing to fight to maintain that freedom. We, and all others who believe as deeply as we do, would rather die on our feet than live on our knees."

Hidell slammed the magazine home, disgusted that Ford had seen fit to remind his audience of the piece of cowardice that had been the Nearly War of 1914. When the European Commune had threatened to invade Russia in support of the Mensheviks who were trying to oust the Tsar, instead of declaring war on the Commune, Taft had listened to that arch-appeaser, David Lloyd George, and opted for peace rather than confrontation. The signing of the British-Russian Common Defence Pact, whereby the British Empire guaranteed military assistance in the event of Russia being attacked, had deterred the Commune-ists…and had given the armies of Satan another sixty years to prepare for Armageddon.

Damn Taft to Hell! Now though there would be no shrinking back from war.

Hidell hauled the walkie-talkie out of his coat pocket, tuned it to the wavelength Hopkins had given him, took a deep breath and then pressed the "Transmit" button. "Agent Ferguson in position and ready." Hidell had chosen his code-name in honour of that other patriot who had changed history with a single shot.

A second's delay and then the walkie-talkie crackled into life. "Message received and understood. No action to be taken until you have my command."

Just minutes remained. Again Hidell peered through the telescopic sight, zeroing in on the podium. According to the rangefinder he was only one hundred and fifty yards from the target and hence had no need to make any bullet-drop compensation. With the Dragunov having a muzzle velocity of almost three thousand feet per second it would take just a blink of an eye for the bullet to strike Honecker. Given the short range Hidell had decided to go for the luxury—and the kill certainty—of a head-shot.

The Declaration of Co-Dependence is formulated in a common conviction that the source of our blessings is a loving God, in whom we trust. Therefore I ask all members of the Empire and our guests and friends, to join me now in a moment of silent prayer and meditation in gratitude for all we have received and to ask continued safety and happiness for each and every one of us and for all the nations of the British Empire.

Thank you and God bless you all. Long live the Queen.

Hidell prayed for God to make his shot true. When he opened his eyes he saw Prime Minister Ford raise his hand to acknowledge the applause and the cheers and then turn and gesture President Honecker to the podium. Hidell settled the Dragunov against his shoulder, sighted through the telescopic sight, flicked off the safety and then cocked the rifle. He was ready, his concentration so intense he didn't hear the office door being unlocked and then eased open.

Honecker came to stand at the podium, placed his notes carefully in front of him and then gazed out over the hushed and expectant audience. He began speaking in French, the official language of the European Commune, and it took a moment for the radio station's interpreter to get up to speed.

I bring you fraternal greetings from the citizens of the European Commune and congratulate you on your two hundredth birthday.

A theatrical pause and then Honecker gave a half-smile.

My puzzlement is that by my reckoning this is only your forty-seventh birthday. I had understood that the nations comprising British North America were only granted their independence courtesy of the Westminster Act passed by the British Parliament in 1931: before that you were nothing more than…colonies. I think it is symbolic of the duplicity of the reactionary, capitalist government based in London that it can dupe a people into believing they are free whilst keeping them firmly under their thumb. It is for this reason the European Commune so strenuously opposes the expansionist tendencies of the British government, a crusade in which we have been joined by Holy Russia. A non-aggression pact will be signed—

"Execute!" came the order from the walkie-talkie.

Hidell squeezed the trigger, the rifle's butt jolted back into his shoulder, there was a "phutt"—the sound of the bullet muffled by the silencer—and then he saw Honecker's head explode in a miasma of blood and blasted brain. There would be no need for follow-up shots. Now all he had to do was get out of the building as quickly as possible. He was just levering himself upright when he felt the muzzle of a pistol pressed against the side of his head.

"Excellent shot, but then I guess being an ex-Marine it's to be expected you'd be handy with a rifle."

"Hopkins? What're you doing here? And why the gun? You're one of us! You're a Warrior of Christ!"

"Not really. My day job's running counter-intelligence in MI5. I've been charged with putting a spoke in the Commune's wheels and making sure they don't

get too pally with the Russians. An ambition you've been remarkably helpful in furthering."

With that Hopkins shot Hidell through the head.

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The brouhaha caused by Honecker's assassination was enormous, but that a British MI5 agent had come within seconds of thwarting the deed went some way towards mollifying the Commune-ists, who turned their ire on the perfidious Russians. Which they had every right to do: after all the official word was the gunman had been a Ruski and a card-carrying member of the Okhrana to boot. The speculation was that Captain Pavel Pronin was part of a faction in the Russian Court which was less than enamored by the thought of Tsarist Russia climbing into bed with a bunch of Commune-ist madmen who for the last hundred years had been plotting to overthrow the Romanovs and install a dictatorship of the proletariat. It got so acrimonious there was even a suggestion that the Commune and Russia might go to war. The non-aggression pact was dead in the water.

Of course, there were rumours flying around that this was all a set-up by MI5, that a lone-gunman couldn't have penetrated EBI security, but these had been dismissed as the ranting of deranged conspiracy theorists.

Which, Hopkins decided, was all very satisfactory. To persuade Andy Hidell—one of the more lunatic of the lunatic Christian reconstructionists who populated the Warriors of Christ cult—to do the deed had been a stroke of genius, as had the decision to have him masquerade as an Okhrana agent, Hidell having bought

Hopkins's story that this was necessary in order to dupe New England's EBI hook, line and sinker.

Everything had gone exactly as Hopkins had planned, so much so that the word from on high was there might be recognition for his "skillful and resolute action in thwarting the attempt of the European Commune to elicit an alliance with Holy Russia"…*sotto voce* recognition, of course, but recognition never the less. Which just showed how a single bullet could change a man's career prospects...could change history.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

On September 11, 1777, at Brandywine Creek, Pennsylvania, Captain Patrick Ferguson, the officer commanding a Rifle Corps attached to the British Army fighting the rebel Colonists in the American War of Independence, encountered two horsemen reconnoitring the British deployment. When challenged, the two men rode away and Ferguson's sensibilities regarding shooting men in the back prevented him ordering his men to fire. One of the men fleeing was General George Washington.

If Ferguson had fired, if Washington had been killed that day, the Americans could have lost the War of Independence. There is a strong possibility that command of the Colonial Army would have passed to Horatio Gates, a man who was to prove himself inept, timid and decidedly skittish under fire. Gates could have lost the war for the Americans and as a consequence the speech made by President Gerald Ford to celebrate the Bicentennial of the signing

of the Declaration of Independence would have been radically different…

ABOUT ROD REES

Rod Rees came to writing late in life after spending a career roaming the world. En route Rod has lived in Iran, Qatar and Russia, and has travelled extensively in Africa and the Middle East. He's built pharmaceutical factories in Bangladesh, set up a satellite telecommunications system in Moscow, and established a successful countertrade operation in Africa. Rod has spent the last four years writing the *Demi-Monde* series of books the action set in the counter-intuitive virtual world of the Demi-Monde, the fourth and final instalment of which, *The Demi-Monde: Fall* was published in August 2013. Rod's latest book, a semi-graphic novel entitled *Invent-10n*, was published in December 2013, the story following twenty-year old jive-talking, nuBop singer and angry young lady, Jenni-Fur as she struggles against the suffocating strictures of the surveillance society that is the Britain of 2030. Rod lives and writes in Daventry in the UK and worries that one day he will wake up to find that what's happening in the world isn't just a bad dream.

THE BUONAPARTES

By Anders Fager

I. Under the Bridge at Arcole

It felt like being kicked in the groin. He fell forward, dropped the colour and his sword. The din and thunder of the world faded. The last thing he saw was Colonel Murion. He lay on his back, some distance away on the riverbank. Blood trickled out of his mouth.

"This is not going well", thought Napoleon Bonaparte, commander of the Republic's Army of Italy.

Then all went dark.

Napoleon Bonaparte didn't remember hitting the ground. Didn't remember the bodies falling on top of him. They must have rolled down the ravine together. He and whoever they were. The water was cold. That's what woke him up. That and the pain in his gut. He tried to crawl, but couldn't move his legs. Napoleon Bonaparte resigned himself to his fate. Didn't bother opening his eyes. He was as good as dead. That much he knew. A shot in the gut and paralysis—there was nothing to be done. How miserable. He had just turned twenty-seven. He had been

married, and army commander, for eight months. He had only gotten eight lousy months to make his mark on history. It felt petty.

The pain in his stomach wasn't too bad. Yet. It would get worse soon. When the shock wore off. He had seen men live for days after a shot in the gut. In horrible pain. It dawned on him, in a haze, that no one had come for him. That meant his army was losing. General Augereau's troops must have been completely routed. Such rabble. Augereau and his bandits. You lead them to all the world's glory. Let them sack Lombardy. And they cannot even drag you to the surgeon. How miserably petty.

He thought of Caesar. Caesar, who always wore a red mantle on the battlefield. Who always threw himself into battle where his men wavered. And the legionnaires who saw his red mantle knew that Caesar was with them. That he saw their courage and shared their fate. Napoleon Bonaparte had read the old texts so many times. In his room at Brienne. Fourteen years old and cheeks flushed with excitement. Even then he wanted to be like Caesar. And he had heard it time and time again. "If you want to be like Caesar—act like Caesar". When he got the chance he really tried. He had been bold and resolute. Taken risks on the front line. Seen the bravery of his men and shared their fate. They had cheered at his bravado. And now he was lying by a creek in a ravine, waiting to die.

It wasn't even a glorious death. Just a gloomy end to a gloomy week. Uninspiring misery in the cold and rain. The Austrians' third attempt to retake Mantua had started out just the same as the first two. They had come slogging again, but this time, everything had gone their way. Field Marshal Alvinczi der Borberek, sickly and ancient, had beaten Napoleon Bonaparte. Twice. Napoleon Bonaparte, who in a few months had conquered Piedmont and Milan. Napoleon Bonaparte, who had brought the Pope to his knees and won two dozen battles, had been beaten back at Bassano and Caldeiro. It was embarrassing. Now only Verona

stood in the way of Alvinczi becoming the savior of Mantua. And Napoleon Bonaparte lay bleeding in a ravine.

He thought of his mother. And coughed. One of the bodies on top of him twitched. In the distance, he heard shouts. Muskets. Were they yelling orders in German or French? No matter. Soon the pain would really come. Would he call for Mother then? Severe, composed Letizia Buonaparte who refused to speak French. What would she do after he died? Would she stay in Marseilles? Who would take care of her? His younger siblings? Luigi, who served in his headquarters? Angry Elisa, his eldest sister? Paola? Twelve-year-old Girolamo? Little Carolina who fell in love every time she met a man in uniform? The last time it had been the charming Major Murat. Big brother Giuseppe and little brother Lucien? They were in France, in love with Paris and politics.

Napoleon Bonaparte coughed. It hurt like hell. His thoughts drifted back to his big brother. Giuseppe Buonaparte, who had married Julie Clary, Desirée Clary's older sister. Desirée had been engaged to him. General Bonaparte. He almost laughed, despite the pain. That would have been something, him marrying Desirée at the same time as Giuseppe married her sister. How very Corsican. Mother would have liked it. If you can name four new-born baby girls Marie Anne you have to be wonderfully stubborn. The fourth had lived. They called her Elisa now. As if she had outgrown being "Marie Anne who soon will die". She was eighteen, testy and stubborn. Far too much like her mother. Rural, snappy and unsophisticated. And she hated Josephine just as much as Mother did. Perhaps because she would never get a man of the same caliber as her big brother. Because she had to settle for Captain Bacciocchi. A captain. Of decent Corsican ancestry. Nobility with goats and herdsmen in the pedigree. How wretchedly petty.

It felt like a wolf was tearing at his guts. Soon he would start to scream. He thought of Josephine again. Of their passion. Of her body. The thought made him smile. Even lying in a ravine underneath some grenadiers. Josephine. After the wedding they

had had two days together before he went to join the Army of Italy. He had written to her almost every day. Wise, beautiful Josephine. She was all Napoleon Bonaparte wanted to be. Urbane, sophisticated, erotic, exotic. He loved her company. Her world. The doors opened by her many friends and old lovers. He should thank Barras. Member of the Directory and responsible for matters of internal security. It was this horny idiot who had paired up the young general with his discarded mistress. It was scabrous, but now Napoleon Bonaparte was one of them. And Barras and Carnot and the others in the Directory depended on him. When he saved them from the riots on the 13th of Vendémiaire they gave him the Army of Italy. And he had married Josephine. Barras never got to do that.

Josephine had laughed when he changed the spelling of his name and got rid of the provincial Buonaparte. She had called him vain. It was the first time he had ever been angry at her. Napoleon Bonaparte hated it when people made jokes at his expense. He had always hated it. He hated everything that didn't go his way. Everything.

After the setback at Caldeiro they held council in Verona. General Massena proposed another attack and General Augereau—as usual—had no opinion at all. The two best divisional commanders in the world. Men Caesar would have been proud to lead. An old smuggler and a former dancing teacher and deserter. They were confident. Hardened, experienced men, hungry for money and glory. Napoleon decided on a flanking maneuver. Massena listened absentmindedly and immediately understood the plan. To Augereau, one had to explain like a schoolmaster. We are here on the map. They are there. While Alvinczi is busy at Verona we move east. Here. In behind him. We cross the Adige here and Massena moves north. Behind Alvinczi. You, Augereau, march to the Alpone, the next river. Further in behind him. If you cross the Alpone you can cut off Alvinczi's supply lines, and he'll be doomed.

It was a mediocre plan. Bold, if it made Alvinczi nervous about what they were doing behind his back. Idiotic, if Alvinczi didn't care about them at all and advanced on Mantua. At first, all went according to plan. They crossed the Adige and Massena marched north through the bogs. Then Augereau reached the Alpone. At a village called Arcole. That's where everything went wrong. The weather was miserable. The Alpone was a ravine. The bridge was thirty yards long and crumbling. Arcole was full of stubborn Croats with a couple of cannons. As if that wasn't enough, Augereau had had a lousy day. His brigadiers too. Both Lannes and Verdier had been wounded in vain, no one could find a ford and Augereau's grenadiers were hiding in ditches. Napoleon Bonaparte had scolded Augereau, looked down on him despite being the shorter man.

And Augereau had done what he did best: led a charge across the bridge. He was followed by a few dozen men from Bon's brigade. The Croats gunned down every single man except Augereau, who was left standing alone on the middle of the bridge. He stood there, tall and majestic, and made no attempts to run or seek cover. He danced a few steps and saluted the Croats. Then he turned and walked back. Not a shot was fired after him. Both the Croats and his own men cheered. Napoleon Bonaparte saw the whole thing and hated it. Stupid antics. He sat hunkered down behind the embankment for a long while. Heard Augereau's voice in the distance. Guns firing from both sides of the creek. Little brother Luigi chattering away with the other adjutants. Nothing happened. No one was taking charge. He thought of Caesar. "If you want to be like Caesar—act like Caesar."

"A colour", he had heard himself shout. "Get me a colour. Let's show them how it's done."

Luigi, Marmont and the others had stared at him. Murion rose and called for a colour. A colour, damn it. A sound, like the beating of a carpet, then Jean-Baptiste Murion fell forward across the embankment.

A lieutenant called out, waving a colour. They ran toward him, heads down. Slipped in the mud and crawled on hands and knees along the embankment. All those studies. All that knowledge. All those years in school among spoiled brats. All that hard work at the Topographic Bureau. All that groveling to Barras and Carnot. All that work for the Directory. This is where one ends up. In the mud. Far from any glory. Behind an earth wall in the middle of nowhere. Ogled by a pack of grenadiers.

"Are you the victors from Lodi?" he had yelled. They stared at him. Remembered the day when he had led them across another bridge. In a meaningless charge against a fleeing enemy. That was the day when he had won their hearts. Became "our little corporal" and "Bonaparte" with a proper French spelling.

"Follow me, grenadiers."

Some of them got to their feet, still crouching. Grabbed their muskets. He saw more and more of them tense up. They got that look in their eyes. The will to conquer. The hunger for glory. Caesar saw them. It was time. He drew his sword.

Napoleon Bonaparte roared "forwards!" and took a few steps up the embankment. He heard the men cheer. Heard them call out his name. Josephine should see him now. Mother should see him. Caesar should see him. He took a few more steps. Heard the men rise. They were with him. They chanted about him, about the Republic and: "We are the winners from Lodi. Forwards! Forwards!"

He posed like he had practiced so many times. When he was Caesar. Fourteen years old in his room at Brienne. With the colour in his left hand, resting in the bend of his arm. His sword pointed toward the enemy. The Croats over there. Let's run them off.

He took one step. One more step. And was shot.

It was miserably petty.

II. The Sun of Belfiore

Late in the afternoon General of Division Massena got word that Bonaparte had fallen, and assumed command over the Army of Italy. He asked for Bonaparte's body. Augereau snapped that he had forgotten it. He had been busy getting his damn division in order and getting the wretches across the creek, he didn't have time to look for the damn little general who had given the damn order to cross the damn creek. Surely Berthier and all other little adjutants must be good for something? Augereau had not realized that two of the little adjutants had fallen trying to retrieve the general's body. Bonaparte's little brother Lieutenant Luigi Bounaparte and Major Auguste Marmont both lay in the mud under the bridge. Eighteen and twenty-two years old. Along with the soldiers who had followed them over the embankment. Men who would soon be forgotten.

He woke up at dusk. There was no shooting. Only shouts some distance away. The pain in his stomach came and went. He should let go. But he wanted to know. Would the two pompous fools of generals be capable of carrying out his plan? It wasn't that brilliant. But it would work. If they only stuck to it. Would they? Did they understand that the whole plan hinged on pressing on so stubbornly that Alvinczi was forced to react? Because no general in his right mind would attack through the marches at Arcole if he didn't have a grand plan. That's what we must make Alvinczi believe. That we are doing something clever. You cannot stop attacking.

His stomach turned into a fire of pain. Napoleon Bonaparte's mind drifted. Josephine. Mother. All the brothers and sisters he had planned to take care of. What would they say about him in Paris? Would Luigi tell the story of his last battle to the

Directory? Would they be moved to tears, say that the flame that burns half as long burns twice as bright? That sounded good. Some flames burn like a fire in the stomach. The pain was terrible now. Someone should come by and shoot him. And would Massena be up to it? Would he carry out the plan and make it seem so obvious that only Massena could? The spoiled child of victory, to whom everything came naturally. Had Massena only bothered to read a book every now and then he could have been the one to lead the Army of Italy. But he was only interested in women and money. Neither housemaids nor countesses were safe from him. Neither monasteries nor churches.

Napoleon Bonaparte never got to hear about the triumph. On November 15 at Belfiore, five miles from where he lay bleeding to death, Massena had torn apart three Austrian brigades that had been set against him. He crushed them one by one and kept his position in the little village. When the night fell, the Croats at Arcole searched the Alpone's ravine for wounded troops. They found the dying general and dragged him out. By the time they had found a medic he was already dead. It would take a few days before his body was returned to his army. The bodies of his little brother and his adjutant no one cared about. They were thrown into a mass grave together with everyone else who had fallen at the bridge that day.

If only they would remember whose plan it was. He thought of Mother again. Of Josephine naked. Now she was a widow again. He hoped she would inherit what he had sent home. And that Barras would take care of her. And that his brothers and sisters would get along without him. And Mother. He succumbed to the pain. Mother, Massena and Josephine. Deep down, into the abyss. In a ditch at Arcole. It was a lousy death in a lousy place.

Massena's division spent the night at Belfiore. Slept in battle order. Ten miles away, Alvinczi tried to decide what to do. Marching on Mantua was out of the question as long as the French in Belfiore threatened his rear. Should he destroy them and then march on Mantua? Late in the night he made his decision. The deciding factor was the French setback at Arcole and the news that the young general Bonaparte had fallen. The more of his generals he spoke to, the more confident Alvinczi became. The French were in disarray and Massena's men at Belfiore were covering the retreat. An Italian Jew disguised as a general stood between him and victory. Now he would teach the little rascal a lesson. Alvinczi ordered his brigades to march on Belfiore at dawn. The French would be hunted like dogs.

Massena had a sleepless night. Later, in his court in Milan, he would tell his retinue about those hours before dawn. How he had eaten for the first time in over a day and how he had dried his socks. How he had lain down for a while on a cart, but wasn't left in peace. The chief of staff Berthier needed his attention. Augereau wanted to know what to do. Vaubois and Macquard reported from afar. The questions never ended. He had to get used to it. He was the commander now. Commander of the Army of Italy. And he wasn't about to give up that position. It would take months for the Directory to find a replacement for Bonaparte. And who would they send? Moreau and Jourdan were fighting in Germany, and Hoche was busy with an expedition to Ireland. Surely they couldn't call on Schérer or some of the other old fossils who Massena had endured during the years. Perhaps they would force Kléber back into active duty? Or Peichegru? Or they would finally realize ability was more important than having shared a

mistress with Barras or being Carnot's obedient servant. Granted, Bonaparte was talented, but he was a kid. Grumpy and not even thirty. Peace be with him.

A lousy death in a lousy place.

Massena made up his mind, lying there on the cart. With Berthier at his side, he would be as successful as Bonaparte. He had spoiled the Directory with victories, and Massena would continue to do so. Carnot would be so busy reading victory reports that he wouldn't have time to replace him. And Massena would continue to send money. He would grease Paris like no other. Italy was rich. It was enough for both himself and the Directory.

The sun rose a little after seven. In Belfiore, drums thundered and men fell in line. Massena's troops were starving and freezing like dogs. He rode among them. Encouraged them, scolded them. Explained, again and again, that Bonaparte had fallen and that they would now avenge him. The cheers were tired. By eight, Massena got word from Augereau. He was on his way. Massena set his division in motion.

It was a triumphant day. The sun broke forth at nine and later people would talk of how "the sun at Belfiore" shone that day, when the war against the Coalition was won. Alvinczi's brigades came chasing stragglers but ran into two of the best divisions in the world that were not retreating a bit. Massena and Augereau tore the Austrian units apart wherever they met them. Late at night, when the sun had already set, Massena took Villanova and cut the Austrian army in half. Alvinczi and his officers were chased through the city by French hussars. The night was an orgy of wine and food, when the Austrian stores

were plundered. Massena rode around in his division and saluted men who had distinguished themselves. The triumph was complete.

The next day Massena sent Dumas' cavalry to hunt down the remains of Alvinczi's forces. The Black Devil chased the Austrians to Vicenza and captured Alvinczi himself. Augereau cleared the way to Verona and pushed some Austrians into the already overcrowded Mantua. Almost eight thousand prisoners were rounded up outside Villanova. Massena sent word to Paris that the young Bonaparte had fallen but that he, André Massena, had taken charge of the situation and won a great victory. Alvinczi was captured and his army routed. The message of victory was delivered by Rampon and Murat, who brought with them some coffins laden with silver and a carriage full of conquered colours.

On the twenty-second of November 1796, Massena defeated the last remaining Austrian forces in Italy. In a blizzard he attacked Davidovich's divisions at Rivoli, and when darkness fell another two thousand Austrian prisoners were marched south. There were now no Austrians between Massena and the Tyrol, and along the way to Vienna only a few thousand men remained. The Army of Italy could at any time wipe them out and cross the Carinthian Alps. There was near-panic in Vienna.

Three weeks later Mantua surrendered and another twenty-two thousand Austrians were taken prisoner. Massena sent carriage after carriage laden with guns and colours to Paris, where the Directory argued over who would replace Bonaparte. Barras thought Massena was not to be trusted. He was too devious, and Italian. A dog of war, to be kept on a short leash. Murat and Rampon made sure the arguments took time. Financed demonstrations and held court.

It was wretchedly petty.

Meanwhile, they celebrated young Bonaparte's memory. His body was brought to Marseilles by oxcart. His mother took his coffin to Corsica and buried him in Ajaccio. His little brother got a tombstone next to him. It was said her heart was broken by losing two sons in one day, and that she considered joining a convent. She never left Corsica again. She died in 1806.

III. A Family of the Republic

Letizia Buonaparte's youngest daughter, Carolina, followed her mother to Corsica but left her six months later to join Joachim Murat in Paris. Carolina and Joachim got a few months together before Massena broke with the Directory and Barras ordered every disloyal officer to be arrested. But while Rampon was imprisoned and guillotined, Murat and his Carolina managed to escape. After many adventures they ended up in Cadiz, where they were married. The next few years Murat served in the Spanish army, before the couple moved to Naples and then on to Constantinople. In 1807 they came to the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, where officers were recruited to the army the King of Spain was sending to the Louisiana War. A year later the couple arrived in New Orleans, in the company of their three children and 3,000 horsemen. They spent four years taking part in the slow war between Spain and the United States before Joachim Murat fell in battle near Birmingham, Alabama. Even today he is considered a freedom fighter in the Spanish parts of North America and the capital of the Republic of Texas is named after him. Carolina Murat stayed in

Louisiana until 1819, when she moved to London with an English cotton trader. For the rest of her life she would deeply resent "all countries with presidents".

Napoleon Bonaparte's brothers and sisters managed fine without him. His older brother Giuseppe stayed in Paris, eventually changing his name to Joseph and started spelling his family name like his little brother had. He was a member of the Council of Elders through the Civil War and the War of 1803, serving the Republic and six presidents. Both as minister and as envoy to the United States and Austria. During Czar Alexander's War in 1826 his skillful diplomacy helped avoid a great European war and united Prussia, Austria and France in the European Central Pact that came to play such a big role during the latter part of the 19th century. He retired after the Imperial Elections of 1832. He had two daughters with the older sister of his little brother's fiancée. Both were to name their sons after their dead uncle, the general.

While the Directory spent the New Year of 1797 arguing, Massena sent an olive branch to Vienna. Had they not fought enough? Archduke Charles had managed to hold off Moreau and Jourdan on the Rhine, but soon the threat to Vienna would force him to retreat toward Bavaria and the Tyrol. His army would face three French ones when spring came. Shouldn't they rather talk?

The young general's younger brother Lucien Buonaparte also remained in the politics of Paris. He was one of those in favor of giving the Italian command to Hoche. The young, handsome Hoche, who had beaten down royalist rebellions and just come back from an expedition to Ireland, was the people's choice. But the

men in the Directory were suspicious of him, and Massena's agents Rampon and Murat obstructed all attempts to come to a decision.

At the end of January 1797 Archduke Charles and Massena met in Trent to discuss a truce. Massena spoke for France without actually having the mandate to do so, but army commanders Jourdan and Moreau had secretly let both him and the archduke know that they supported the negotiations. It had been a long war and both France and Austria were weary. Austria's brother-in-arms Britain was kept out of the talks, a fact that would distance Austria from the British and set the stage for the Central Pact thirty years later. In many ways, the idea of the Central Pact was born there in Trent. In a meeting between an emperor's resolute little brother and three self-indulgent French generals.

On the first of March 1797, Archduke Charles and Massena signed the truce, which stipulated that the parties should meet for proper peace negotiations in Bolzano two months later. Massena presented the Directory with a fait accompli. A peace with the arch-enemy and the coalition against France was no more. The Directory, that had just agreed to replace Massena with old Kellerman, was left with a peace it never asked for. It was Massena the traitor's great political moment. And the only one.

For the Directory the peace was a disaster. The almost bankrupt state lived off the spoils from Italy and in May, Massena cut off the flow of silver. At the same time, he called his generals to a meeting in Mantua. For once, he had read a book. About Caesar. A passage about casting a die had made a great impression on him, and he had spoken to the rulers of the North Italian city-states. Piedmont, Milan, Venice. The idea of a

union was discussed. A union that evolved the Transpadane Republic that Bonaparte had founded.

Barras and old Kellerman went to Italy to sort out the situation. When Barras met Massena in Milan he had already cast his die, and he was arrogant. Why should the most feared legions in Europe, led by Europe's best general, bow to a bumbler like Barras? Especially when he had the Pope, the Doge of Genoa and the King of Sardinia on his side?

Josephine never got to see her husband's remains and never visited his grave. She was busy saving what she could of the inheritance she was entitled to. And in the spring of 1797 she fell for another handsome officer, the General of Brigade Bernadotte who Jourdan had sent to Paris to defend the interests of the Rhine armies. But Bernadotte, who would become a leading figure of French 19th century politics, wasn't interested. Some say Napoleon Bonaparte's little sister Elisa spread malicious rumors about Josephine. Others say Elisa herself seduced Bernadotte to keep him busy.

In Milan, Barras and Massena couldn't agree on a single point and the atmosphere was hostile. Kellerman declared that he was uninterested in politics and left them both to argue, and went home to retire. Barras too soon left Milan, and Berthier, Kilmaine and some other lower officers decided to follow him. At the city gates of Milan, stones and rotten vegetables were thrown after them. The Army of Italy split in two. Some battalions marched on Milan. Others on Nice. There were rumors of mutiny in the Army of the Alps. That it too was siding with Massena. That Barras had been killed. That British troops had landed in Genoa to support Massena. So far, there was no open fighting. But it was in the air. On the sixth of June, Massena

formally took power in the Transpadane Republic and declared his right to the iron crown of Lombardy. The schism with the Directory was complete and Barras sentenced Massena to death in his absence.

Spurned by her husband's family and penniless, Josephine went to Italy to seek help from her husband's allies. She lived through the Civil War at the court in Milan and then went into exile with Massena. First in Rome and then in Naples. After Massena's murder in 1802 she moved to Spanish New Orleans, which had become a popular haunt for exiled French nobility. She died a pauper in 1810. It is said that she, on her deathbed, laughed at the news that Bernadotte had been elected the third president of France. Her nemesis Elisa Bounaparte-Bacciocchi remained in Paris for some years before moving with her husband to Marseilles, exporting wines. She had eight children, and it is unclear how many of them her husband had fathered. The Bacciocchi family is to this day one of France's leading wine exporters. And still the Elisa grape is said to rouse the passion of married women.

In Paris, Lucien Buonaparte supported making Hoche "dictator until the war is over", but after the Civil War he was one of the first to warn that the Republic's savior could easily become its next enemy. Lucien hated how all attempts to fight oppression led to more oppression. When the murder of Massena could be traced to circles close to Hoche, Lucien resigned from all offices and moved to Georgia with his two young daughters and a maid. Not even when his older brother Joseph, Barras and Bernadotte forced Hoche to resign, he came back home. He lived for a time in Savannah, engaged in the struggle to free the Louisiana Territory from Spanish oppression.

After the war the family moved to New York, where Lucien worked as a lawyer and a teacher. He died in 1836 without ever considering changing the spelling of his family name. In 1861, his granddaughter Elise became the first female doctor in America.

When Barras reached Nice at the end of May 1797, he gave the command of the newly formed Army of the Riviera to Berthier. He immediately set to work to make sure Massena wouldn't cross the Alps. Fréron, the proconsul in Marseilles, helped Berthier. They ruled with an iron fist and quashed all attempts to join Massena. The coastal fortifications remained French. The mountain passes to Piedmont did too. It would take months for the Directory to gather an army around Nice, but France was secure. The rebellion would not spread.

In all this, it was an ironic twist of fate that Fréron had just been engaged to marry Napoleon Bonaparte's little sister Paola Buonaparte. She was twenty-eight years younger than Fréron, beautiful and pleasure-loving. In the fall of 1797, a year after her older brother's death, she married the man who by then was known as "the Butcher of the Riviera". It was said that she enjoyed watching him work.

The Civil War, as it came to be called despite actually being a war between Massena's Lombardic Republic with the support of Spain and Britain on one side and France supported by Austria on the other, had reached a critical stage. Set upon by four armies, Massena tried to protect his union, but his Italian allies deserted him and his French elites grew doubtful. To whore and pillage one's way through Italy was one thing—to die for Italy was quite another. Massena deserted the council he had formed in Milan and left it to

Don Giovanni, a bombastic nobleman from Milan who had become his chancellor.

It was a grand drama. Massena and his retinue avoided combat and tried to negotiate. Negotiation had always been Massena's weakness. He should have fought. Too late he realized only General Massena could save King André. At Alessandria, Augereau deserted him on the battlefield and let his men, cheering, go to the forces of Archduke Charles and General Moreau. At Moreau's headquarters Augereau was cut down by a hussar colonel by the name of Michel Ney. The battle of Alessandria was over before it had even started, and at dusk Massena fled south with a few followers, mistresses and servants.

Fréron died in 1829 after a long career in the Republic's security committee. It was said that his dead enemies could be heard uttering a collective sigh of relief when he died. Paola Buonaparte survived her greedy husband by only two years. She died in a fire at the old harbor of Marseilles. It was said the ghost of Hoche had found her. Hoche, who had been forced by her husband to confess his plans to declare himself Emperor.

The last of the young general's siblings was Girolamo Buonaparte. He turned twelve on the same day that his older brother fell at Arcole. He stayed in France under the protection of Fréron and Paola, and studied to become a naval officer. Lieutenant Jerome Bonaparte served onboard the frigate Uranie in the War of 1803, and distinguished himself in the battle of Cadiz. In 1807 he became the youngest captain ever in the navy, when he at age twenty-three took command of the frigate Hortense. He distinguished himself again during the Louisiana Wars and led a French-American frigate-

squadron. He was seriously wounded at the Keys, but continued leading his squadron. In 1816 he was named vice admiral and became the ambassador to Washington. As one of those who had saved the United States from a blockade during the Louisiana Wars, Jerome was incredibly popular in the country. When it became known that the charming Frenchman was a bachelor he was inundated by letters from brash American women. He was married in 1818 to the beautiful widow Elisabeth Patterson-Franklin, and the couple became the center of Washington high society. During Czar Alexander's War Jerome returned to France for a while and led the French-Prussian navy in the Baltic Sea. After the war he worked for a few years with the development of the joint Central-European navy, before leaving Europe for his love in Washington.

Jerome's final deed in Europe was to make sure the navy's new and advanced steam frigate was named "Napoleon Bonaparte" after his brother. The promising young general who fell in battle on the same day that the traitor Massena triumphed at Belfiore.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

The Battle of Arcole was fought between the 15 and 17 of November 1796, during the third Austrian attempt to raise the French siege of Mantua. The battle consisted of three days of repeated French attacks against the Austrian position at Arcole. The attacks were carried out with none of the usual French finesse or skill, but were determined enough to get across and make the Austrian commander Alvinczi take notice

and stop his advance on Mantua. After the battle Alvinczi lost heart and retreated, despite having lost less troops than the French.

There have been several spectacular paintings made of Napoleon's dash across the bridge at Arcole. Napoleon's aide Muiron gets shot in most of the paintings and that is about the only true part in them. In real life Napoleon seem to have gotten up a bit away from the bridge to wave his men on and then either slipped and fell into a ditch or got knocked over by Murion who got shot seconds later.

ABOUT ANDERS FAGER

Anders Fager is aging well while living in Stockholm. He writes mostly horror and has to this day written two novels and three collections of short stories, all set in a contemporary Lovecraftian universe. He has so far been published in Swedish, French and Finnish and the short story you have just read is his first try at historical fiction as well as his first published short story in English. The fall of 2014 will see him writing a play called *the Queen in Yellow* for a major Swedish theatre.

LET NO MAN PUT ASUNDER

By Aaron Rosenberg

Villa Belvedere, Rome, 1513

Strong hands. Deft hands. Masterful hands, even now. They shifted fluidly across the page, lines forming from their motion and that of the small ink brush one held, an object rapidly taking shape upon the vellum and then growing in definition and detail as the hands returned again and again, hovering here and there before skipping into motion once more. It was wedge-like, the object, but with antennae or segmented legs extending from the front before curving back around. They crossed at the top, like oars at rest, though it was clear even from this drawing that they were intended to swivel and move independently but in tandem. The hands added an additional shading here, a bracket there, and then stopped and fluttered down to rest on either side of the page, finished at last.

Until, a minute later, they darted in like starving wolves, latching onto the paper and thrashing it

soundly, rushing toward each other with the helpless page trapped between them, its delicate surface crumpling under the pressure. The hands touched, overlapped, circled each other, then sprang apart again, leaving only a wadded-up ball where the proud page had lain instants before. Then one hand scooped up the offending sphere and hurled it off to the side.

"Garbage!" their owner cried out. "Rubbish! Utter nonsense!" A thoughtful pause. "And yet…" The hands selected a fresh sheet, laid it carefully out atop the table, lifted the brush, dipped its pointed tip in ink, and began to sketch once more.

London, England, 1527

"This will not stand!" The heavy, jewel-encrusted goblet hurtled across the table, narrowly missing the pudgy, scarlet-clad man. A second object, this one a tall, graceful pitcher, followed the goblet's path, and again the man barely evaded the awkward missile. "One task I gave you, Wolsey! One! How hard can that be?"

"Very, your Majesty," Thomas Wolsey answered, mopping his brow with a cloth from his sleeve. Sweat was dripping from beneath his red cap, less from the draft in the great dining hall than from nerves and fear of the man shouting at him. A man who ruled all of England, and who had been Wolsey's own patron for many a year—but might not remain so disposed for much longer. "It was a daunting task, and I have performed it as best I could, but even your brother king was unable to change his Holiness's opinion. I would that it were not so." Which was certainly true, he reflected somberly. He had tried his utmost to persuade King Francis I of France to use his influence on Pope

Clement, but either Francis's words lacked power now or Clement was simply too determined to be swayed. Though of course the recent actions of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, might have something to do with that as well—Charles had attempted to imprison the Pope in order to bend the holy man to his will, but the papal forces had rousted Charles' army and driven them from Rome entirely. Unfortunately, this victory had given Clement the courage to resist the demands of any and all monarchs, and he had rebuffed Wolsey's request almost out of hand.

Sadly, none of these things mattered much to the man before Wolsey now. "Perhaps you did not try hard enough," he suggested, eyes narrowing beneath red-gold curls and the crown that held them in place. He stroked his short, neatly trimmed beard in apparent thought. "Perhaps your true intent when you visited France was not to drive this matter toward my desired conclusion but instead to prevent such."

Wolsey did his best to avoid rolling his eyes. He also deliberately avoided glancing to the king's left, or the woman who sat there, pretending dismay and disappointment even as her dark eyes flashed barely concealed mirth. This was all her fault! Wolsey had warned the king that this was a terrible idea, fraught with difficulties, but she had worked her wiles on him and the king would not be gainsaid. If only he had chosen someone else!

"Your Majesty," Wolsey tried again, "I swear to you, upon my honor, upon my faith, and upon your crown, that I am your true and loyal servant and that I am doing my utmost to bring about that which you desire." He sighed and bowed. "I will send to his Holiness and request yet again that he grant me legacy." If appointed

a Papal Legate, Wolsey would have the authority to try the king's suit for divorce here in England, and to determine the matter once and for all on the Pope's behalf. Unfortunately, given how obstinate Clement had been thus far Wolsey doubted very much that his request would be granted. Still, he had to try.

As if reading his thoughts, the king grunted but nodded, grudgingly it seemed. "Yes, make the request," he agreed, reaching for the goblet a servant had retrieved, wiped clean, replaced on the table, and refilled for him while they talked. His massive hand closed about its base and raised the heavy drinkware. "If that fails, however, we must be prepared to try other approaches."

"Of course, your Majesty." Wolsey bowed again, deeper this time, accepting the obvious hint of dismissal. He knew it was beneath his dignity to be sent away like an errant dog—he was the Archbishop of York, after all!—and yet, at this moment, he knew it was far safer for him to accept the snub and depart quickly, before the king's ire could return and fasten upon him once again.

Even when in his cups, Henry VIII was a dangerous, dangerous man. And never more so than when Anne Boleyn sat by his side, whispering evil thoughts in his ear and guiding him by the power of her dark, seductive gaze. Wolsey shuddered picturing that, and quickened his pace. The sooner he was away from her, the better.

Villa Belvedere, Rome, 1514

"Closer, closer." He cackled to himself as he sketched again, his brush flying across the sheet of parchment,

his vision taking form there upon the page in lines and daubs of ink. A wing, with joints like those of a bird for flexibility and rods and narrow beams like a ship's hull for strength. A frame upon which to lay, with hoops about the waist and neck, smaller loops about the ankles controlling the tail. Hands working controls for the wings themselves, via more rods linked to the collar and then up to those joints. It would require crouching, perhaps, the knees to either side of the platform, weight upon pelvis and chest, the head straining to stay up. Launching would be difficult in such a curled-in posture, no chance to run and leap, either a fall or an assisted elevation would be required, but it might work. He paused, sprinkled sand atop the paper to dry the ink, and studied the images he had etched there.

Yes, it might work.

With one last cackle, he rose to his feet, shook his robes back into place, and scurried off to find his assistants. They would begin constructing a model immediately. If that performed well, they would then proceed to a full-size version. He grinned as he half ran, half walked, his long beard and equally long hair streaming out behind him. He loved this part, challenging the old notions, building something new, and then using it to shatter those ancient ideas and drag the people around him into the light of the new day.

Whether they wanted to be there or not.

London, England, 1528

"It is not ideal, I grant you," Wolsey began, keeping his voice low and even, friendly and nonthreatening. "Yet it is a step in the right direction."

"The right direction?" Henry sneered down at him. The king was atop his favorite horse—he had been about to go hunting when Wolsey had found him and delivered the latest news from Rome. "By hosting some trumped-up little priest with delusions of grandeur, and having to flatter him and pamper him so that he will find in our favor and report back to the Pope? I fail to see how that improves matters for us." Although it was only mid-morning the king was already flushed from exertion, his curls sweat-dampened and clinging to his forehead, cheeks, and neck. At least he was keeping his temper this time, though.

For now.

"Cardinal Campeggio has the authority to try the case with me, on the Pope's behalf," Wolsey pointed out. "If he has been granted full plenary power, he can in fact pass judgment on the matter."

Henry frowned, considering this. "And do you think that likely? That the Pope sent his lapdog and gave it permission to bite if it chooses?"

Wolsey chose to ignore the slight to his fellow clergyman, which was in its way an insult to him as well. "It is a possibility we must be prepared to take advantage of, if it were so," he answered. "And if it be not so, then at least we will still have the ear of the Pope's representative, whose word might carry some weight with his Holiness. Convince him and we are that much closer to convincing Clement himself."

The king nodded. "Very well. Do what you must to make this foreign Cardinal feel at home and admired." He pinned Wolsey with his gaze. "He should feel every inch the honored guest, and of course the holy man. But do not let him mistake himself for the king." With that Henry clicked his tongue to his teeth and backed

his horse up several steps before wheeling the handsome steed about and then into a mighty gallop toward the waiting woods, all his servants hurrying to pack up and follow him as quickly as possible.

Wolsey watched them go. He had not missed the point of the king's comment. Campeggio would be an honored guest, but it might become necessary to remind the Italian priest that he was now in England, and here Henry VIII was the only monarch worth watching. Or obeying.

Villa Belvedere, Rome, 1514

"No, no, no!" He wrung his hands together and then tugged at his beard and at his sideburns as he watched the contraption flutter, tilt, and then spiral down out of control. He leaned forward as if the sheer force of his will might keep the device aloft, but even his powerful mind was no match for the forces of Nature, and there was little he could do as his invention plummeted to earth. The crash echoed all the way up to his tower balcony, as did the splintering of wood and the screams of pain, but he turned away. Servants were already running toward the disaster, equipped with bandages and medicines to tend the hapless pilot as best they could. There was little else he would be able to do for the man, other than be grateful for his courage and sad that it had ended so badly.

Why, why, why? He asked himself, stepping back into his study and crossing to his drafting table, where the latest design still lay flattened by lead weights at either end. What had gone wrong? It had worked so well as a model, why had it failed so utterly now? Was it the pilot's fault? But the man had been not only brave but

strong, swift, and agile, with good reflexes and dexterous hands. If he could not work the device, no one could. No, there was something else wrong. Perhaps it was the balance? The wind had tipped it, and the pilot had been unable to regain control afterward. If he spread the weight more evenly, and removed that bottom so that there was nothing to drag it down, or for the wind to catch . . .

Excited again, he brushed the old design aside, snatched up a clean page, placed it in the now empty space, and began to sketch again. He was getting closer, of that he was sure. Surely, with a few more attempts, he would get it right! And then, oh, the possibilities!

London, England, 1529

"You cannot do this to me!" Wolsey raged as the guards took him, one at each arm. They pulled his hands back behind him, none too gently, and locked heavy iron manacles about his wrists, the chains slapping against his backside like a stern taskmaster scolding an errant schoolboy. Which is exactly how they were trying to make him feel, he knew, but he kept his head up and his back straight. They would not cow him, not now!

"I have done everything you asked!" he continued, addressing the stern monarch before him. "I have been your servant, your Majesty! You cannot dismiss me simply because I have not been able to obtain the outcome you desire!"

"Can I not?" Henry snapped back, leaving his stance by the hearth to loom over Wolsey. The king was a powerful man, and right now, with his face darkened by anger, his hands clenching and unclenching,

Wolsey felt the same primal fear as any boy bullied by his elders. He was a man of the church, the highest-ranking clergy in England, and yet he still felt as if the king might strike him at any second, ignoring all propriety and boxing him about the ears like a common thug. It would certainly not be the first time the king had loosed his anger through physical violence, though Wolsey himself had never before been the intended target of such crude behavior.

But for now the king reined in his response. "You serve at my pleasure," he reminded Wolsey instead, loudly, eyes wild. "At the pleasure of your king! And it no longer pleases me to have you serve, with your failures and your excuses. 'It is a step in the right direction,' you told me! 'Campeggio can pass judgment in the Pope's name, or at least carry a favorable opinion back to him!' And has he?" The king grabbed up a random item off the nearby table, a heavy golden candlestick, and broke it over his knee, tossing the shattered halves aside. "Now he has fled, vanished into the night by some unholy art, and we are left only with his parting remarks: 'You do yourself no service with this suit, nor do you honor your faith. Leave off this foolishness or know the wrath of the Lord God, and the censure of his servant on Earth, his Holiness the Pope.'" Another grab and the second candlestick soon followed its fellow into destruction, one half flying dangerously close to Wolsey's eye as it was hurled away.

The bitter note had been waiting in Campeggio's room when Wolsey had arrived to escort his fellow cardinal to the docks to take ship back to Italy. No one had witnessed the Cardinal's departure, though there had been reports of a strange noise near his quarters that night, as of a giant bird taking flight. None of it

made much sense, unless the strange rumors Wolsey had heard whispered in seminary were in fact true, but that was hardly their greatest concern right now. Henry's was still trying to obtain his divorce from Catherine so that he could marry Anne, and Wolsey's was even simpler: he was trying to maintain his office, and with it his life.

It seemed, however, that the divine was not with him this day. "Take him away," Henry ordered the guards. "Keep him under house arrest until he can be tried for his crimes. For treason," he added pointedly with a glare at Wolsey, who shuddered. Treason was one of Henry's favorite charges, and its sentence his favorite punishment: death by beheading.

"You will never win Rome's support this way!" Wolsey shouted as the guards half-escorted, half-dragged him from the rooms that had until now been his, the hem of his carmine robes marred as they slid along the floor. "The Pope will never grant your request!"

Henry stared after the man who had been his friend and confidant even after Wolsey had been taken from the room and the door had shut behind him. "No, I will not," the king agreed softly, all of his anger draining out of him at once. He stroked his chin as he fully considered that fact. "I will never have Rome's permission," he said again, slowly. "Yet why should I need it? Am I not the king? What right does even the Pope have to issue me orders in my own house?" Looking up, he caught the eye of the man who had been Wolsey's assistant. "Is that not so, Master Cromwell?" he asked.

The man beamed at being addressed directly by the king, clearly relieved at not having been dismissed like his former mentor, then bowed deeply. "It is, your Majesty," he agreed, his voice deep and low, the perfect

picture of religious authority. "You are the supreme ruler of these lands and its people, the defender of the faith, and the source of our spiritual power. What could faraway Rome know of England, that it can dictate our actions? God speaks to you, and through you to us, and that is all that need be said."

Henry smiled and clapped his new favorite minister on the shoulder. "Well said, my good man," he assured the slightly dazed Cromwell. "Well said indeed. Now let us make plans."

And as they talked, those plans took form. Bold plans, and dangerous ones. But ones that would, if successful, cement England's independence once and for all.

Villa Belvedere, Rome, 1515

It soared overhead like an enormous bird, and he laughed as he watched from his balcony. Yes, yes! The new design was lighter than the old one but better balanced—the wind could move it but not toss it about in the same way, guide it but not batter it, aid it but not flip it end over end. The pilot hung from the frame like a fish from a hook, suspended only by the harness he wore and the sturdy poles linking that to the wings themselves, yet that granted his body the freedom to shift with the wind, taking advantage of its currents, angling the wings so that they could adjust and adapt and keep him aloft. Yes, yes!

The pilot circled about once more, then, at the old man's impatient gesture, turned and made for the clearing beyond. Another circle but this time a narrower one, transforming into a downward spiral, as the pilot used his weight to bring the craft down and the wings'

buoyancy to keep it from simply crashing, drifting gently to earth instead. He landed a little hard, stumbling as his feet struck grass and dirt once more, but recovered quickly, crouching to let the full weight of the device settle to the ground around him. It had an impressive wingspan, over twenty feet across, and despite being made of wood and leather and silk and canvas there was still enough weight there to crush a man if it all struck him at once. But no matter—the important thing was that it had worked! And even landed successfully! Up in his tower, the old man allowed himself to smile, even to chortle a bit with relief. He had finally done it!

Idly he watched servants rush to help the pilot from the device so that they could then haul it back to the tower. Already he was pondering ways to make it smaller, lighter, more portable. But those were merely refinements. He had proven it would fly, that was the important thing. Proven it to his own satisfaction, at least.

Now there was another he would have to prove it to. But he was confident that would not pose a problem. Not anymore.

Calais, France, 1532

"We cannot take to the water this eve," Henry declared angrily, slapping one hand into the other. "We must needs stay the night."

Anne eyed him carefully, trying to gauge his mood and his intentions. That the weather was foul she could judge for herself by the sound of the wind howling past the windows, and the clatter of the heavy shutters, and the pelting of the rain as it lashed against the palace's

roof and walls and the balcony beyond. And she was sure her love truly did wish to be gone from here, for Henry hated being in the debt of others, and this storm meant they would be forced to prevail upon their host, Francis I, for the night. Yet was he truly as displeased about this turn of events as he appeared? Because the French king had placed them in adjoining chambers—ah, the refreshing audacity of the French!—and Anne suspected the king hoped that this night he might find the connecting door open, and her in her bed waiting to receive him.

Before, Anne would have scoffed at such a notion. And had, many a time. The king had tried for years to bed her, ever since he had first clapped eyes upon her and fallen for her. But she had resisted at every turn. She did not want to be just another royal dalliance. She wasn't even willing to settle for the role of mistress, as her sister had done. No, she was determined to be his lawful queen, and nothing less. And since her favor was her greatest weapon, it was that she would continue to wield until he acquiesced.

Although…he had been trying. She had to grant him that. She had seen the efforts her love had gone to these past few years, working to win Rome's approval and then more recently working to distance himself from Rome so that the Pope's condemnation would not matter. And although he had certainly entreated her to yield many times, Henry had never tried to force her. He had always taken her refusal as final, and had simply redoubled his efforts on her—on their—behalf.

And now here they were, in France, away from the prying eyes of his subjects and the resentful glares of his advisors. Here they were, trapped by the storm as if God Himself had chosen to grant them a night of

privacy together. And here they were, on the verge of separating from Rome, of cleaving from the Church, and of finally being free to marry.

Perhaps, then, after so much diligence, her Henry was due a reward for his labors.

Perhaps it was time to finally grant him a taste of that which he had worked so passionately for, and for so long.

Perhaps it was time to fuel his passion further, but giving him just a small sample of the pleasure he would receive when she finally had her way.

Which was why Anne now leaned back against her chaise lounge, one armed draped over its curving, carved top, and smiled up at her king. "Well," she said softly, "if we're to stay another night, I suppose we must needs make the best of it." She crooked a finger at him, and almost laughed as his eyes went wide with excitement and delight. "Come here."

And Henry VIII, undisputed ruler of all England, one of the mightiest men in the world, hastened to obey.

Villa Belvedere, Rome, 1515

"Where is he?" the old man groused, pacing back and forth. "He should have been here by now!" They had expected his patron two days ago. Of course, the roads were difficult this time of year, and there were other demands upon his time, but still—he should be here by now!

Just then, the clatter of hooves and the shout of men reached the old man's ears. He hurried to the balcony and peered down into the courtyard below. A carriage! It was just pulling up in front of the villa, its

armed escort fanning out from it, each man wheeling his horse about and taking up a defensive position around the gilded carriage, pikes angled outward to create a veritable wall of steel. The old man watched from above, his age and infirmity excusing his manners, as his servants hurried to set out a padded step by the carriage door and then to stand by as the door swung open from within. A single man stepped out, tall and heavyset, round cheeks and a weak chin offset by deep, serious eyes and a kindly look. Despite his finery, there was an air of humility about him, and of knowledge.

At last!

"It took you long enough!" the old man called down from his balcony. His patron paused in the act of stepping down to gaze up, squinting, toward the speaker.

"I got here as soon as I could," he answered, seemingly unperturbed by the old man's casual familiarity and complete lack of manners. "You said it was urgent, and would be well worth the time. I hope you're right."

The old man grinned. "Oh, I am," he promised. Then he slapped the balcony's stone railing. "Come up and see."

London, England, 1533

"Sire, please, I beg you, reconsider," Cranmer urged. "To be bold is one thing, but this, this is mere foolishness!"

"Silence!" Henry shouted, cowing the new Archbishop, who quailed back from the monarch's rage. "You knew this day would come! It was inevitable! And necessary!" He calmed as he turned and glanced lovingly at his recent bride, admiring the roundness of her figure. Anne was six months pregnant, the results of that overnight

stay in France, and glowed with health and joy. Clad in flowing robes of rich satin and ermine, she looked every inch the queen she was about to become.

"Of course, she must be confirmed," Cranmer agreed hastily, wringing his hands. "But quietly, with dignity befitting her station and yours. Not like this." He gestured past the steps, past the altar and the choir toward the rest of Westminster Abbey, where the peers of the realm sat waiting. "You are daring them to act—goading them, even!"

"Ha, what will they do?" Henry replied, sneering down at the clergyman. "Excommunicate me? I am already my own church! They no longer have any power over me!" He laughed and clapped the smaller man on the shoulder. "And a good thing for you, hey?"

Which was true in and of itself, Cranmer knew. As the Archbishop of York, he was the head of the newly founded Anglican Church, the church of England. Henry had made good on his threats and had severed ties with Rome entirely, establishing himself as the only authority over Cranmer and his subordinates. Otherwise Cranmer would just be one of many Catholic archbishops, instead of the spiritual leader of an entire nation.

That proud thought did little to allay his fear, however, and he tried one last time. "Sire, please, I beg you, for your own safety, do not do this!"

But Henry brushed him aside, along with his concerns. "My mind is made up," he insisted. "Now get out there and perform your duty."

There was nothing else for it but to bow, turn on his heel, and step through the curtains separating the chapel—the king's father's chapel—from the long nave. Cranmer gulped and did his best to look dignified, saintly, and most of all unconcerned as he made

his way across to the altar. The king had made his decision, and Cranmer was all too well aware of what that meant. Henry would not change his mind. Which meant now they were all stuck playing the parts as he'd cast them. And for Cranmer, that meant returning to the role of the loyal priest, the faithful clergyman, the wise overseer. Straightening his robes, he checked his cap, covered the remaining distance at a slow, stately pace, and then stopped at the altar.

"Let all in England take note," he intoned, turning and staring out at the lords and ladies gathered before him. "This day, we recognize our king's beloved, Anne Boleyn, as his true bride and queen of all England. Long may she reign at his side!"

The crowd cheered, and the musicians began to play as Anne stepped into view, one hand in the crook of Henry's arm, the other curved protectively over her belly. She smiled at the assemblage, already looking very regal, and started forward.

Which was when Cranmer noticed a strange sound in the air. It was almost like the buzzing of bees, but louder, much louder—even a full apiary couldn't make a sound like this. It came from outside, and as he glanced up a strange silhouette slid across the stained glass windows there, long and dark . . . and winged, like some sort of demon had taken flight. Instinctively he shied away, one arm raised to protect his face—

—which was why, when the windows shattered above them, raining down glittering shards of tinted glass, Cranmer was one of the few to escape injury.

That also meant he was one of the few to remain standing, and thus in a position to look out through the newly shattered windows—and turn pale at the menace hovering just beyond their scattered borders.

"They've come," Cranmer whispered, staring for a moment before frantically searching among the glass for his liege and his liege's queen. A second later he spotted Henry, his clothing torn here and there but otherwise unharmed, and breathed a sigh of relief. Anne was rising shakily to her feet as well, and was clearly mussed but did not look unhealthy or injured.

But the attack was not over yet.

"What is happening?" Henry demanded, stepping up close to Cranmer and looking down at his Archbishop. Beyond them, people were running and screaming, all thoughts of decorum and polite behavior vanished by fear and an overpowering urge toward self-preservation. The king, however, looked more angry than afraid.

That was about to change.

"There!" Cranmer pointed up through the empty window frame. "It's them!" Both men stared as first one, then another, then another winged figure drifted into that gap and hung there, like grapes dangling from a tree, swaying gently in the breeze. Only these were far more dangerous than any fruit. Staring at them, Cranmer idly noticed the clothes they all wore, close-fitting tunics and jackets and pants that were probably far less cumbersome than his robes, and more practical. Strange headcoverings with what looked like small faceted glass panes hung before their eyes, making them look like a horde of oversized bees, especially as that buzzing drone continued to wrap around them.

"I don't believe it," Henry whispered beside him, just as transfixed. "I didn't think they were real. Not really." He leaned forward, studying them. Then frowned. "What are they doing?"

Cranmer shook his head. The droning sound increased, becoming piercing. Sighing, Cranmer returned to the altar and there offered a prayer to Him. By the end he couldn't even hear his voice, so loud had the noise become.

Then there was a faint pop and the pressure seemed to burst. Just as the sounds from outside increased yet again.

And small round objects fell from the sky, plummeting into the abbey from every direction.

Wherever those objects touched down, they shattered, releasing gouts of flame and heat. Greek fire!

Within minutes, there were dozens of merry little blazes through the church, heating even the stones enough to melt. Cranmer bowed his head. It was too late to escape, he knew.

He was still praying minutes later when the fires set by the Papal Air Brigade consumed him, the king, the queen, and everyone else in Westminster. The entire royal church had collapsed in on itself from the heat before the fliers spun away and headed back over the channel, back to Italy.

England's attempts to break away from the Church were over.

Villa Belvedere, Rome, 1515

The old man watched eagerly, impatiently, as the pilot climbed into the machine, adjusted the straps, checked his wings, and then leaped off the balcony—and an instant later soared back up in front of them before passing the balcony and zooming off to circle the entire villa.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently. "What do you think?"

His visitor smiled warmly at him, though his eyes continued to search the skies for any sign of the returning pilot. "What do I think?" he repeated. "I think it is amazing, my friend."

"Then you like it?" The old man wrung his hands together.

His patron's smile never dimmed. "I do, I truly do," he promised, careful not to get dirt or ash on his fine robes. He leaned forward and patted the aged inventor's hand. "You have outdone yourself, Leo, And with this contraption, you have changed the world."

Leonardo da Vinci beamed at the praise and bowed deeply, then kissed the other man's ring. "I live to serve, your Holiness."

Leo X nodded. "And you have served beautifully, my friend," he promised, resting his other hand on the old man's head. "The Church thanks you for your devotion, and for the addition of this brilliant invention to her cause." The two of them turned to watch the pilot circle the tower once more, both of them thinking about how this one little invention was exactly what the Church needed to cement its hold over the nations of the world.

The skies were now theirs, and would rain down their holy fire upon those who sought to go against their authority.

Now and forevermore.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

Henry VIII was King of England from 1509 to 1547. He married Catherine of Aragorn in 1509 but decided to set her aside for Anne of Boleyn over two decades later—when the Pope would not grant the divorce, Henry broke away from the Catholic Church and established himself as the head of the Church of England. He and Anne Boleyn were married in early 1533. Henry had six wives in all, and died in 1547.

Leonardo da Vinci was an Italian Renaissance artist, writer, scientist, and inventor. He lived from 1452 to 1519. He served Pope Leo X from 1513 to 1516, creating both art and engineering marvels for the Catholic Church. Da Vinci was fascinated with the idea of human flight and designed several flying machines, but many of his designs were never tested.

ABOUT AARON ROSENBERG

Aaron Rosenberg is an award-winning, bestselling novelist, children's book author, and game designer. His novels include the best-selling *DuckBob* series (consisting of *No Small Bills*, *Too Small for Tall*, and the forthcoming *Three Small Coinkydinks*), the *Dread Remora* space-opera series and, with David Niall Wilson, the *O.C.L.T.* occult thriller series. His tie-in work contains novels for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *Warcraft*, and *Eureka*. He has written children's books, including the original series Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles, the award-winning *Bandslam: The Junior Novel*, and the #1 best-selling *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*. Aaron has also written educational books on a variety of topics and over seventy roleplaying games, such as the original

games *Asylum*, *Spookshow*, and *Chosen*, work for White Wolf, Wizards of the Coast, Fantasy Flight, Pinnacle, and many others, and both the Origins Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets* and the Gold ENnie-winning *Lure of the Lich Lord*. He is the co-creator of the *ReDeus* series, and one of the founders of Crazy 8 Press. Aaron lives in New York with his family.

ROARING GIRL

By David Parish-Whittaker

This happened.

May, 1606.
Somewhere on the Scottish Border.

Laird Gray scratched himself as best as he could through his rusting mail, as he rode slowly over the border moors. "You'd think the bastard Dixons would have the decency to at least take a few parting shots at us," he said, squinting at the three score head of cattle he and his men had recently acquired.

"Perhaps they just don't fancy the fight," his nephew Stephen said, riding up from behind. "Makes a fellow feel unappreciated."

"Or perhaps they're waiting in ambush over that ridge."

Stephen spat. "Weak stomached sheep, the lot of them." He kicked his skinny horse and galloped towards the distant rise.

Stephen would know about a man's fondness for bloodshed, Gray thought. That overgrown beard of his hid its share of scars, souvenirs of too many cattle raids turned sour. But Stephen still seemed to relish every moment he held a sword, lance or pistol.

For his part, Gray just wanted to be home. All the wealth in the world was of little value to a man with a bullet in his head. But if Stephen wanted to scout, let the fool go. There were enough Grays to go around. Centuries had passed filled with feuding, raiding and all out warfare, but the border clans remained. Men died, were avenged, then babes grew up with lance in hand to take their fathers' place. As it was in the beginning, was now and ever would be.

World without end.

Stephen reached the top of the rise. There was a brief flash of light as the morning sun glinted off his armor. Then his horse reared, falling sideways. Faintly, through the distant mists, Gray heard the familiar sound of a dying animal.

On his feet, Stephen fired a pistol at the still unseen enemy. Then he ran.

Gray cursed and charged towards Stephen. Without being ordered, his men raised their lances and followed. They swept around Stephen as they headed up the slope to meet the unknown.

Stephen saluted them with his sword, then spun about as a musket ball pierced his throat. At the top of the ridge were a good ten dragoons, dismounted next to their horses, calivers in hand. Gray heard the bee like whine of shot as he couched his lance and led his men to the outnumbered dragoons.

"Kings men!" Gray cried.

"What does James care for us?" someone yelled back.

"Not enough to send more than a patrol!" Gray answered, grinning. This could have been worse, had they ridden into ambush. He'd give that fool Stephen this much, he'd saved them.

Then as they crested the hill, Gray realized he was wrong on both counts. The King did in fact care. And Stephen hadn't saved them. For there was a full troop of horse waiting for them on the other side of the ridge. And when the borderers turned to flee, a hundred more emerged from the woods behind them.

What Gray hadn't realized was that a Scottish King on an English throne was the worst of all worlds. It took a Scottish king to realize dangers of the wild borderlands. And it took an English king to do something about it.

The Pacification of the Border had begun.

***

This almost happened.

November 1, 1605. London.
A house of ill-repute.

"Time to be stirring," the woman said. "A new, glorious day awaits."

Baron Monteagle peered out from under the bedcovers. The day was still waiting, judging by the darkness. The woman in question narrowed her eyes as she raised a lamp to look at him. She was scarcely twenty, but there was no girlishness to her at all. For one, she was wearing a man's silk doublet and Venetian breeches. For another, she was aiming a pistol at him.

"Tsk," the woman said. "All alone. What's the point

of staying here if you aren't going to avail yourself of my girls?"

Shaking his head in drunken befuddlement, Monteagle patted the covers next to him. The whore was gone.

"Madam," he said slowly, "I confess to bewilderment. I paid for an evening with a less…martially minded lady."

"No, my good little lordling, you didn't pay for anything." The woman walked over to the dresser and examined his purse. "Haven't for a while, in fact." Hefting the purse, she shook her head. "Damn near empty. Well, men with empty purses end up enjoying the company of the madam of the house instead."

"Listen, I'll pay in good time. But if you think to threaten a—"

"Known Catholic sympathizer? Son of a recusant?"

"Here now, that was in the past! I even wrote the King himself to pledge loyalty."

"What an inspiring tale of reformation. How sad if it turned out to be false. Sadder still should the King find himself disappointed in you. Tell me, do you think you're the only one with access to the royal ear? I provide girls and boys to some very refined markets." She leaned forward. "And some of those market-goers owe me favors. Like you."

Monteagle slumped back against his pillow. "Fine, madam. What do you want?"

The woman opened his purse and pulled out a letter. "There we are, just where Anne said it was." She gave him a feral grin. "Didn't think a whore could read, did you? I hire none but the best."

Monteagle could feel his pulse in his throat. "That's just some blathering from a friend."

"Who for some reason doesn't think it would be healthy for you to attend the opening of Parliament for 'they shall receive a terrible blow.'" She whistled. "I imagine you don't wish to be about when things 'blow.'"

Monteagle shook his head.

The woman grinned again. "Then perhaps you'd best take this to Lord Cecil." She put the letter in his hand and patted it. "Deliver it at the absolute last minute, though."

"Why not immediately?"

"Oh, a little wagtail bird tells me Cecil would prefer it that way. Must be his flair for the dramatic."

"So that's it?" Monteagle's head throbbed. "But I was going to do all that anyway!"

"Of course you were. Now run along. Tell the Chief Minister the Roaring Girl sends her love."

***

November 5, 1605. London.
Beneath the House of Lords.

"We should have been here yesterday," Tom grunted as the pair of guardsmen worked their way down the crude tunnel. "King and Parliament weren't here then."

"Yesterday is gone and buried," his sergeant said, tapping Thomas on the back of his armor to keep him moving along.

"Hope this is another false alarm or we'll be what's getting buried." Thomas unslung his broadsword, pressing his back along the wall as they advanced. "Tunnel underneath Parliament? Ain't the work of a few drunken jackanapes. This is someone who knows what they're about."

"Don't you worry about a pack of weedy spies. We'll catch them with their breeches down." The sergeant lit his musket match off the torch he was holding. "Least wise, we will if you manage to keep quiet."

"Too late," said a dark clad man as he stepped out of an alcove behind them, neatly stabbing the Sergeant through the base of his skull with a bollock dagger. Thomas spun backwards into a dark room, tripping over a barrel. Sprawling across the floor, he could see by the glint of the Sergeant's dropped torch that the room was packed with barrels.

The air stank of sulphur.

The man grabbed the dropped torch. Lit by its ruddy flickering light, with his neatly trimmed beard and moustache and dark cloak, he looked like the devil himself. Tom scuttled backwards across the ground as the man slowly aimed a wheelock pistol at him.

Tom felt a musket ball crack across his armor as the room filled with gun smoke. Stunned but alive, he rolled across the ground in the direction of the man. Clambering up to his knees, he swung his broadsword wildly through the dark smoke.

He was rewarded with a deep animal moan as his sword connected. Grabbing out with his free hand, he seized the man's arm. He pulled the man to him, putting his sword at the fellow's throat. The man was holding onto the sergeant's torch, which was still lit with a small flame. Tom could see dark blood streaming freely down the man's face from a deep cut that had sliced his hat in half.

"You're coming with me, you bastard," Tom said, trying to sound authoritative and failing miserably. He pressed his face close to the man's. "You'll be burnt alive for this."

"Oh?" the man said, his voice tinged with pain. But he smiled nonetheless. "I think I'll answer to God and Freedom before you, if you don't mind." He glanced downwards at his feet. Tom followed his gaze and saw that there was a wide trail of gunpowder there, leading to the barrels.

The man bit him hard on the cheek and spun backwards out of Tom's grasp, leaping up onto a stack of barrels. He fanned the torch about, its flame growing stronger.

Clutching his cheek, Tom eyed the distance. Three strides. Two too many to stop the fellow if...

The man crossed himself and slowly lowered the torch.

"Wait!" cried Tom, hating the cowardice in his voice. "You're a papist, right? You lot can't suicide! Condemns you to hell, don't it?"

"Then let's say hello to the Devil together."

The torch dropped.

***

December, 1605. London.
The chambers of the Lord Regent.

"Pity about the King," the Northumbrian emissary said.

"Pity?" Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury, former advisor to Queen and King and now by the Grace of God regent for the young King Henry, leaned back in his chair. "I suppose out of all the words available for use, that is certainly one of them. "

"My Lord, I only meant—"

"Unfortunate, perhaps? Lamentable? A bit of a setback, this dodgy little regicide and mass murder incident?

The emissary flushed. "I suspect His Lordship is having fun at my expense."

"Fun? What fun is there to be had with half the government torn to smoke stained shreds and the other half quivering in fear in their mothers' cellars, whilst every man with a grudge against the world uses the chaos to loot and burn?"

"Indeed, my lord, that is what I was sent to speak to you about."

"We do live in an age of wonders. The northern marches find themselves suddenly sympathetic to the troubles of London. What aid do you think you can provide?"

"Would that we could but—"

"Then why do you waste my time?" Cecil shouted, slapping his desk hard enough to make his inkwell jump.

"Waste your time? You speak of burning and looting, my lord, but we've lived with that since the time of the first James. The border reivers see weakness in England and it will only get worse unless something is done."

"I'm sorry, I had no idea that there were no *men* in the north to protect you."

The emissary's hand twitched towards where his sword would be if Cecil allowed such things in his office. The Lord Regent allowed himself a small smile as he watched the emissary force himself to calm down.

"His majesty took an interest in the security of the border," the emissary said, staring at the wall. "Were he here, he'd aid us."

"You know the thoughts of a dead man well, it seems. Did you hold a séance?" Cecil clicked his

tongue disapprovingly. "And you know how our dearly departed monarch felt about witchcraft."

"Laugh if you will, but farm holds burn and blood runs while you do. My lord."

"What would you have me do? Pull armies away to deal with a few criminals? Criminals, I might add, that you lot have dealt with since...when was it? Oh yes, the First James. Someone told me that once."

"In the meantime—"

"In the meantime, London is filled murderous papists running wild while across the water our enemies smell weakness like a badger on a dying rabbit's scent. You'd have me ignore the viper nestled in my bosom in order to chase your snake in the grass."

"Prettily put." The emissary made no effort to hide the anger in his face. "London or Newcastle, we're all English here. Those who die are your countrymen. Your responsibility."

"Then in the spirit of such brotherhood, I'm sure you'll sympathize when I say no."

The emissary gave him a small nod. "When the day dawns that you need our help, pray that we're still there to give it."

"Come that day, I have no doubt that your flesh will be able. I will ask God's aid to ensure your spirit is willing."

***

May, 1606.
The Scottish Borderlands in a different world.

Stephen rode back, the mud spraying under his horse's hooves as he slid to a stop next to Lord Gray.

"See, old man?" Stephen called, laughing the laugh of a man who should be dead. "Naught over that ridge but frightened rabbits. Not to be confused with any Dixon, as easy as it would be to mistake one for the other."

Gray grunted. "Call me old, if you will. Didn't arrive at my senile years by accident, boy. And these ancient bones just feel that something isn't right. This path is too easy. Call it an old fool's instincts."

Stephen stopped laughing, suddenly serious. "Fair enough, sir. Point me at that stone in your shoe, and I'll dislodge it. Anyone who vexes you is a sworn enemy of mine. And one not long for the world."

"Blood runs true," Gray smiled, clapping Stephen on the back. "That's our strength here. Watch London burn, as its people fret about whether to say a Mass or elevate a host. Mind you, we're all damned in the end. But here at least we have family to hold true to."

"What did the preacher ask when he visited the North?" Stephen said. "Seeing a pub filled to the doors on a Sunday morn, he cried out, 'Are there no Christians to be found?"

"And the men there answered, 'Nobbut Dixons and Armstrongs'!" Gray smiled. "True words."

"I just mourn that today we have peace. My blood cries out for a good fight."

"Brave words. But don't you worry, we can always find a fight or two." Gray stroked his beard. "I wager that sooner or later those bickering fools down south will come up here to the borders. They always do. And when they do, they'll need us. And we'll be obliged to don steel bonnet and ride to their aid."

"For a price!"

"Always for a price, lad. Always."

***

April, 1644.
The town of Selby, North Yorkshire.

"I don't care for this, sir," Barret said as they rode through the streets. "You know the townsfolk hate us." He rested his caliver uneasily on his knee, staring at the shuttered windows. This part of town seemed deserted. But things weren't always what they seemed, were they?

"Hate?" Lord General Fairfax glanced at his aide. "I suppose they do. The defeated rarely love the conqueror. Not at first."

"Not ever."

"Nonsense. Only heaven is eternal. What you speak of is the hatred of a servant to the switch. The base may hate correction, but they know their place. They'll abide. For men like them, fear is stronger than hatred."

"Isn't that what the Royalists say about us? Base men without the courage to stand for themselves and what they believe?"

"They most certainly do. But I know that this morning, there's a thousand-odd fleeing Royalists who might say otherwise."

Barret clapped his breastplate. "Yes, sir!" If he had anything else to say, it was lost as his horse screamed and reared, a dagger sticking out of its side.

Fairfax drew his sword as Barret's horse galloped away with him.

"I thought I might take the great General Fairfax prisoner," a throaty alto voice said. "In case you're wondering why I don't just shoot you out of hand."

Fairfax spun his horse about to face his attacker and paused. He'd seen stranger things in his day, but not recently.

A middle-aged woman dressed in the latest male fashions was sitting on a prancing black stallion, holding a sword in one hand and a snaphaunce pistol in the other. Her broad brimmed hat was festooned with a full ostrich's worth of feathers and she was dripping with enough lace to make Prince Rupert feel underdressed. For all that, she was travel stained with the rugged features of a seasoned rider. There was no danger of her being crowned Queen of the May.

Not that it mattered, of course. All the beauty in the world would be secondary to the small issue of that pistol aimed at his chest.

"Fair sloppy bit of business for such a famed general," the woman said. "Alone in a hostile town with a guard who can't even control his horse."

"You did stab it, my lady." Best keep it light. Her willingness to chatter was a good sign. One never knew when a chance would present itself.

"I had no idea that cavalry horses never risked the slightest cut in battle. How gallant of your enemies to show them such kindness." The woman reined her horse in with her sword hand. The pistol never wavered.

Recognition dawned. There really could be only one woman in the world like that.

"You're Moll Cutpurse, aren't you?" Fairfax said.

"That's what the old broadside called me, I'm told." She shrugged. "What was it? 'That Roaring Girl who dresses like a man, smokes like a chimney, curses like a soldier, rides like the devil, but bears grudges like a woman.' The woodcut wasn't all that flattering, but

can't beat the publicity. If they hadn't written it, I'd have had to hire someone to."

"You left out whoring."

"Whore mongering, my dear general who will be handing over his saddlebags in just a moment. Like you, I leave the lifting of pikes to my subordinates."

Fairfax slowly opened the bags. "No money here for you, just paperwork. I've nearly a pound in my purse, though. Call that fair and you'll be on your way?"

Moll barked a hoarse laugh. "You think I rode all the way to Yorkshire for a pound? You do mistake me for one of my girls. No, my dear general, I didn't get to where I am by only taking money from clients. I take something far more valuable."

"The purity of their immortal soul?"

"Please. Save it for the unwashed Puritan boys from Essex. Information, sir. That's what brought me to where I am today. I steal secrets from bedrooms, and like today, I can also steal them in the open. Your bags please."

Fairfax nodded. Grabbing the saddlebags, he swung them over his pommel, covering his holster for the second needed to pull his own pistol out. He tossed the bags at her and fired.

Blood streamed across the flanks of Moll's horse as it bucked wildly. Somehow, she remained seated. Grinning like the madwoman she was, she cut down at Fairfax while her horse spun. Sparks arced off his blade as he parried.

Suddenly, Cutpurse's horse leapt sideways, crashing into Fairfax. His own mount bit at the other's rump without effect. Cutpurse fired at point blank range as he tried to punch her in the face with his sword guard.

Pain lanced through his arm. Belying the claims of

his tailor, the buff leather did little to stop the pistol ball. Weak from shock, he tumbled backwards out of his saddle.

Cutpurse swung out of her saddle onto the General's horse. She kicked his former mount's sides and jumped over him. But he was out of shots and too weak to swing his sword. He dragged himself across the cobblestones towards the saddlebags.

As he reached for them, there was the clatter of hooves behind him. Cutpurse trotted easily by, plucking the saddle bags off the ground with her sword. She winked at him and doffed her cap.

"I'll give his Royal Highness your regards, sir!" Then she was gone. On his horse, damnation take her.

No doubt, it probably would. But that did him little good today, did it?

***

May 28, 1644.
A Peel Tower on the Scottish Border.

"Winged the old boy yourself, did you? I admit to being impressed." Lord Gray, son of Stephen, cleaned his fingernails with his dirk, then resumed tapping on the table. Across from him sat Moll Cutpurse in a sack dress that wouldn't have looked out of place on a shopkeeper's wife. But few shopkeepers' wives smoked pipes so openly. And fewer still would slouch so insouciantly in the presence of the lord of the manor.

"Stole his horse, too." Moll took a long draw on her pipe. The smoke curled out of her nostrils and rose slowly in a wide wreath around her, glowing softly by the light of the torches arranged along the stone walls

of the tower's dining hall. "Good thing. My own had a dicky stifle. Not sure he would have lasted out the ensuing chase."

"All very adventurous, of course. That leaves the little matter of the Parliamentarian troop that is no doubt chasing this dashing young lady up to the wild north for vengeance."

Moll laughed, coughing into a handkerchief. "Young lady? I'd think you were trying to flatter. But I've as much interest in your charms as Fairfax has in revenge. Both of us take a more practical view of things."

"Two of a kind. Surprised he didn't propose."

"Wouldn't be the first match of Puritan and whoremonger, but we were too busy trying to kill each other. But as I was saying, the lad has enough on his mind, what with Rupert marching on York."

"Tell me again why I'm listening to all this? If you want sanctuary, best find yourself a church."

"Because His Majesty needs you."

"So he sent a crazed old woman to ask for this help." Lord Gray stood up. "If you'll excuse me, I've things to do."

"At least I'm back to being an old woman." Moll motioned at Gray to sit down. "And old women are ignored. In a dress, I'm yet another goodwife that can pass unnoticed. It's for that reason that a crazed old maid is sitting here in front of you rather than some plucky cavalier you might attend to better. But whatever your contempt for the messenger, it might do you well to harken to the message."

"If you think to plead the Royalist cause, be assured that I care not a damn for you and your precious lace swathed loyalists." Gray held a hand up. "Mind you,

the same can be said for my thoughts on our Roundhead and Covenanter friends. Mad, all of you. Oh, I fancy a fight the same as any man. But when one starts believing in causes, that's when things get dangerous."

"Surely you realize we'll pay you and your family."

"Of course. Right after His Majesty discharges his debts to every other man, woman and well-bred dog who is owed something. I imagine that we borderers will be as easy to ignore as we always have been. But ignored or not, we don't work for free."

Moll leaned across the table. "That's what we're offering."

"Unpaid work? I'll give you a few marks there for honesty."

"No, you fool. A promise to ignore you."

Gray opened the door to the main hall. "We've always been ignored."

"Word is that Old James had different ideas."

"His ideas died with him."

Moll stood up and walked over, leaning easily against the wall. Her black eyes glittered in the torchlight.

"Listen to me well, sir," she said. "Charles has been busy, 'tis true. But after a war is when ledgers get balanced. And you may well want to be in the column without obligations."

Gray glared. "I wonder what Parliament might think."

"You say you fear men who believe in causes? Even more you should fear men who believe God Himself has given them cause."

Gray stared into her eyes, but if he saw any answers there, he didn't show it.

Outside, there was the sound of gunfire.

"Damn you!" Gray shouted. "Brought them along, did you?"

"Who?" Moll said with irritated bewilderment. "I like to know what I'm accused—"

"Whoever that is, that's who. Damn me for a fool to sit here listening to a whore prattle."

Three men in helmets and jacks ran down the hallway towards them.

"Don't try anything," Gray said to Cutpurse, his hand on his sword.

"Sir!" cried one of the men. "It's the Dixons, I think. Must have been waiting in the forest. We're cut off."

Gray nodded. "Well, not as if we haven't rode out a siege before. Well then, let's see what they're up to, eh? Lead the way." He paused and pointed at one of them, an awkward lad with downy cheeks. "Watch this lady, will you, Tom? Think she might be a spy."

"That I am," Cutpurse said. "But one indifferent to the feuds of fools. Do you really think I'm here to tattle on you to another family? I can't even tell Scot from Englishman up here."

"Silence!" Gray gestured to Tom, who hefted the billhook he was carrying in what he presumably thought was a menacing manner. "Do watch her closely. She's liable to make a run for it."

"In this dress?" Moll held it out in a mock curtsey. "Have you ever tried to run with a corset squeezing your groceries?"

Gray turned on his heels. The two other soldiers followed him as he loped down the hallway towards the stairs to the roof.

After they disappeared, Moll turned to Tom, fanning herself.

"No funny business, ma'am," the boy said.

"Son, I am sixty come next May. Are you truly that worried?"

Tom looked embarrassed. "Well...Lord Gray..."

"Is under a fair bit of stress. Well, despite what he thinks, I'm innocent enough. Still, can't blame the fellow for being cautious. Here I will stay. Under your watchful eye, of course."

"I appreciate that, ma'am." He put the billhook down and leaned on it.

"Tom, is it? Tom, if you don't mind, all this excitement finds me in need of a chamberpot."

Tom looked even more embarrassed. "I think there's one under the table, ma'am."

Moll curtseyed. "Thank you, my boy." She stared at him for a moment, then coughed.

"Oh! Sorry, ma'am." He turned about.

One of the keep's cannons fired on the roof above them. When Tom's ears stopped ringing, he felt the cold steel of a knife at his throat.

"You really should have patted me down, my boy," Moll said from behind him. "Oh please, don't so much as twitch your nose. Gray was right. I am very dangerous. You wouldn't be the first I've killed, but I admit I'll regret it if you make me. Do we have an understanding?"

Tom nodded slowly, tears of shame coursing down his cheeks.

A few minutes later, Moll was nattily dressed in jack and breeches, leaving a disconsolate Tom behind her, bound and gagged with the fabric of Moll's dress, the corset serving as a straitjacket. She felt sorry for the boy. Who knew if he'd ever live this down? Then again, at least he'd live.

***

Moll stayed inside the tower as she worked her way through the milling chaos of the siege. A few musketeers crouched by window slits, occasionally taking a pot shot or two. Moll doubted very much that they were doing any good. Whoever their friends were outside, they were hardly going to call things off and head home because of a few shots whistling by, not even if they connected. But Moll had long ago learned that men had a strange need to participate when battle was joined. She didn't share that affliction, of course. Her only need right now was to find a hiding place.

For the most part, everyone ignored her, busy as they were with the business of killing and trying not to be killed. Occasionally, some self-important old gaffer would snap at her to "hop to" and "shake a leg". But none of them had been specific about what exactly they needed that non-descript "boy" to do. They just wanted her do it more and do it faster.

As far as Moll was concerned, that would involve trotting quickly along so that none got a good look at her. Eventually, she found the kitchen larder. Hoisting a bag of flour onto her shoulders, she stepped out into the kitchen and walked with purpose towards the cellar door. None of the scullery maids gave her so much as a second glance. No doubt, they imagined Moll knew what she was supposed to be doing. Which was true enough.

Someone had left a few lamps lit in the cellar. Moll paused at the base of the stairs, peering about at the stacks of supplies. Where she stood was mostly filled with foodstuffs and hanging dried meats, but at the other end of the room she could see weapons racks and

crates of ammunition. She'd best find a place to sequester herself before whoever lit those lamps came back down for more supplies. By the sound of it, they were using their fair share of powder and shot upstairs.

She cut down a sausage for later and crept along behind a row of powder kegs. She heard a quiet footstep and froze. Carefully peering around a keg, she saw a maid of perhaps twenty years at the rear of the room, unlocking a metal door set in the wall.

Of course. No proper border tower would be complete without a secret tunnel. Not only that, she'd managed to run into someone who shared Moll's ambitions of escape. The day was looking up.

The door at the top of the stairs creaked open. The girl stopped what she was doing and darted for cover. Cover which happened to be the self-same row of kegs Moll was hiding behind.

Moll put her finger to her lips. "Don't worry, my dear," she whispered. "I won't tell on you."

"Wait a half," the girl whispered back. "You're a woman, aren't you?"

"I've been accused of such, yes," Moll said. "And like you, a woman trying her level best to sneak away from this madhouse." She extended a hand. "Mary, at your service."

The girl clasped Moll's hand to her breast. "Nell. A blessing to meet you, Mary. But you mistake my intent. I'm here for love."

Moll pulled her hand away. "Sake of Our Savior, tell me you're jesting."

"I most certainly am not! I would not risk all for anything less than true love!"

"Let me guess, you fancy a lad in a rival family but your wicked father and clan disapprove. So, your

young man told you of the coming siege and told you to meet him secretly while the battle raged."

"And we'll be able to escape to Newcastle and a make a life for ourselves there in the city. How did you know?"

Moll sighed. "Girl, I first saw that play when I was not yet your age. The world isn't a stage, no matter what you've heard. He's using you to—"

She was cut short by the sound of the men coming down the stairs. Nell started crawling back towards the door to the tunnel, key in hand.

"Wait!" hissed Moll, grabbing the girl by the leg. Nell rewarded her by stabbing her hand with a kitchen knife.

Moll grunted in pain, stifling an oath as Nell quickly unlocked the tunnel door.

"You there!" a man yelled from the stairs. "Show yourself!"

Five armed men came running down the stairs, guns in hand. They probably wouldn't shoot her, but one never knew. Clutching her hand, she rolled into the darkness behind a shelf of preserves.

The tunnel door flew open the moment Nell turned the handle. The girl was knocked aside as a score of men stormed from the tunnel into the room. Moll wondered if any of them were Nell's would be beau.

The Dixons lost their interest in Moll as the newcomers fired at them. The room filled with gunpowder smoke and the clash of swords and armor.

Moll crept back to the row of powder kegs. Thankfully, most of the fighting seemed to be over by the stairs now. It appeared the Grays were losing, what with being outnumbered four to one and all. Time to leave.

Nell lay in a crumbled heap in front of the tunnel entrance.

"Girl!" Moll said, "Wake up!"

"Leave me be," Nell said, sniffing.

"No time for this nonsense. Grab a lamp and follow me." Moll paused. "Look, I'll find you work in London. I do that for country lasses all the time."

"Really?"

"You won't want for the love of men, that's for certain," Moll said truthfully. "Now be a good girl and help me escape."

Nell nodded. The fighting men ignored her completely as she pulled a lamp down and handed it to Moll.

Moll patted Nell on the head as she joined the girl in the tunnel.

"Tell me, lass," Moll said. "Have you ever heard of Guy Fawkes?"

Nell knitted her brow. "Yes, of course."

"Even traitors have good ideas at times. Best run."

Moll tossed the lamp into the room. It shattered on the floor near where she'd been hiding. Flaming oil spread across the flagstones, pooling around the powder kegs.

Nell was long gone by the time Moll reached the end of the tunnel. Nursing her hand as she hid behind a tree, she was beginning to wonder if the soldiers in the cellar had put the fire out. She stopped wondering when flame shot out the tunnel mouth, accompanied by the satisfying thump of an explosion in the distance.

***

May 29, 1644.
On the road to York.

"They're really to be married?" Moll drew her horse up alongside her escort. It was good to be on horseback again, even if it was a scraggly little border mare.

"That's what the boy says," the old man said. He doffed his steel cap and held it over his heart. True love, it seems. Or at least true lust."

"Pity, I could have used her," Moll said. "That level of foolish innocence would fetch a fair price back in London. At least for the week or so before it disappeared like hoarfrost in the morning sun."

"Speaking of one's price…"

"You are a direct man," Moll said. "I appreciate that." She turned her horse to face the burning ruins of the tower. "You lost a fair number of men winning the day, though. How much do you truly have to offer?"

Lord Dixon put his cap back on. "Our young couple isn't the only pair that is willing to let bygones go. I was paid to lay siege to the Grays. Nothing was said about not recruiting the survivors. Oh, we'll have a duel or two on our hands no doubt. But when the smoke clears, you'll have two hundred horse ready to ride with your prince."

"And what of their loyalty?"

"The greatest loyalty a man can have, my lady."

"Which is?"

"To themselves. But what do you care? A musket ball or lance pierces the same, no matter its owner's thoughts. Aye, we'll shed blood for you. So long as we receive that promise to be let alone in the days that follow."

"You really dream of peace?"

"Did I say that? I said I dream of being ignored. Not the same thing at all."

"I think I like you, sir," Moll said, reining her horse back to the road.

"Will I see you at the fray?"

"An old woman like me?" Moll laughed. "I've some important knitting to attend to."

She managed a canter out of her mare and rode off towards the front of the troop column. Then she kept going. No one tried to stop her. Not that anyone could have.

***

July 2, 1644.
The Battle of Marston Moor.

Cromwell shouted hard at his men as they rode out to meet the charging Royalist cavalry. "We've the hand of God pushing us forward! Do not disappoint Him!"

A ragged cheer erupted amongst the Ironside cavalry surrounding him. They were good men, all, not at all like the base lot he'd started the war with. Brave to a man, but he reckoned himself the bravest of them all. He had to. To think less of himself would invite failure.

It would have been even. It should have been. In another world, the Ironsides would have broken Rupert's line eventually. Cromwell would have led them to victory at only the cost of a minor wound to his throat.

But in this world, he had to reckon with Rupert bringing along an additional two hundred of what was reckoned to be the finest light horsemen in the world. For all their lack of discipline, the reivers knew their

trade. And part and parcel of that trade was a distinct lack of mercy. General Cromwell would not live to see the sunset.

The regicidal Protectorate of England was dead before it was born.

***

IN ACTUAL HISTORY

The Pacification of the Border began in late 1605 under James the First of England. The various reiver families had held the borderlands between England and Scotland under their thumb since the thirteenth century, raiding, feuding and sometimes hiring out as mercenaries when the mood took them. But this chaos had no place in James' vision of a unified England and Scotland.

The Gunpowder Plot was discovered the night before King James was supposed to attend the opening of the House of Lords. A day later, a single spark, and eleven year old Henry would have found himself king.

Marston Moor was the largest battle ever fought on English soil and turning point in the first English Civil War. Closely fought, it was only when Cromwell's forces broke Rupert's charge that the tide of battle turned in Parliament's favor.

Mary Frith, aka "Moll Cutpurse" was a real person whose exploits were the subject of book and stage, most famously recounted in the 1611 play "The Roaring Girl." Born sometime in the 1580s, she was fond of wearing men's clothes and in general doing whatever she liked. And yes, she is said to have robbed and shot Fairfax.

ABOUT DAVID PARISH-WHITTAKER

A winner of the Writers of the Future contest, David Parish-Whittaker writes for the steampunk series Space 1889 and the upcoming game Dragon Assault by Symbiant Studios. His short fiction has also appeared in Every Day Fiction. He also writes videogame review and analysis for Bag of Games. By day, he's a captain for a national airline. In previous incarnations, he has been a naval flight officer on the carrier based Viking jet, traffic watch pilot and aerobatic instructor. He lives in San Diego with his dog Molly and his horse Rocinante. He likes to play harp, screw around with small planes and joust.

DEFEAT OF THE INVINCIBLE

By Janice Gable Bashman

St. Petersburg, Russia, October 1817

Viktor Belov entered the office inside military headquarters and snapped to attention, shoulders back, hand at his cap. The bear of a man behind the desk slammed down his papers and looked up at him with disgust.

"You Belov?" The man's booming voice echoed off the plaster walls.

Viktor's insides shriveled up like raisins. "Precisely so, Your High Nobility." He could hear fear in his voice and hoped the officer hadn't heard it too.

"Take a seat."

Viktor glanced at the French flag hanging on the wall then strode to the chair and lowered himself onto the hard wood, feet flat against the floor, hands in his lap, eyes straight ahead and fixed on the officer, waiting for him to speak.

But he said nothing. He just stared hard at Viktor.

Viktor didn't squirm; he'd been trained to remain in position for long periods of time awaiting the enemy. One slight move at the wrong moment and he'd be killed. But this was no ordinary enemy.

This was Polkovnik Luc Durand.

Durand had no mercy for those who crossed him. He'd tortured, imprisoned, and exiled those who spoke ill of Napoleon or supported the Czar.

Viktor's orders had told him to report to this room. To meet with Durand. At exactly 1400 hours.

Durand cleared his throat. "On what date did Napoleon conquer St. Petersburg?" His voice was as cold as the massive stone fireplace behind him.

"September 27, 1812."

"What's the eastern border of Napoleon's Russian territory?"

Viktor's stomach twisted. Why was Durand asking these questions? They were the same questions on the recent officer's exam Viktor had taken. Had he answered them wrong? Maybe Durand thought he'd cheated. Viktor took a deep breath, blew it out, and said, "The eastern border of French Russia is the Ural Mountains."

Durand nodded. "And what happened to Czar Alexander after Napoleon conquered Russia?"

That was an easy one. "He died," Viktor said with certainty, although he knew the Czar was alive.

Durand leaned across his desk. "Everyone knows he's in exile in eastern Russia, yet you answered that he died."

Viktor's mouth went dry. He forced himself not to break eye contact with Durand. "Precisely so, Your High Nobility."

"Because?"

"Because that's the correct answer according to Emperor Napoleon, and therefore it's the correct answer on the test," Viktor said, wondering where Durand was going with this.

"So, would you say some of these questions are pretty ridiculous?"

Durand's question caught Viktor off guard. He wasn't sure how to respond. If he said yes, Durand might get angry. And if he said no, he might get angry too. He shifted slightly in his seat. "I am not able to know."

"Good," Durand said. "Any word from your brother?"

Viktor's eyes widened. How did Durand know about Isaak? "Not in the last three months," he said, making sure to keep his voice steady.

"My contact informs me he's still in prison, but holding his own."

As the news sunk in, Viktor forced back a smile. He'd assumed Isaak had succumbed to the cold or malnourishment after being imprisoned for so long. "That's very good to hear," he said.

Durand rose. He towered over Viktor. His massive shoulders were almost as wide as those of two men and he looked like he could snap an iron bar in half with his bare hands. "I imagine you'd do anything to set him free and to avenge the death of your mama and sestra."

Viktor clenched his hands into fists. Just thinking about his mother and sister made him want to kill someone. "Precisely so," he said.

"Even if it meant betraying Emperor Napoleon?"

Viktor stiffened. He couldn't tell the truth. If he said yes, he'd be killed for sure. "Not so, no, Your High Nobility." The quavering in his voice gave away his lie.

Durand leaned over and starred Viktor in the eyes. "Just as I thought. A potential traitor in our own midst." His voice was harsh.

Viktor flinched and pressed his shoulders back into the chair as if it could protect him somehow. "I'm not…I'm not a traitor." He expected Durand to grab him by the throat and strangle him. Or worse, throw him in jail for the rest of his life. But he didn't.

Durand flashed Viktor a smile and backed off. Then Durand said, "Western and eastern Russia need to be united as they once were under the leadership of the Czar. And Napoleon and the leaders of his puppet states need to be vanquished. I've been watching you for some time now and believe you have what it takes to play a major role in this movement."

Viktor nodded. Was this another test? "How do I know you're not trying to trick me into saying the wrong thing?"

Durand sat on the edge of the desk. "You don't. But I believe you're friends with Boris Federov, am I correct?"

Viktor had no doubt Durand already knew the answer. "Precisely so."

"And you'd trust him with your life?"

"I would," Viktor said. They'd fought together and Boris had taken a bullet for him that cost Boris his arm.

Durand waved someone into the room. Viktor turned and saw Boris. He couldn't believe it.

"I've been working underground with Durand for some time now," Boris said as he took a seat next to Viktor.

"Doing what?" Viktor asked.

"To oust Napoleon and put the Czar back in power, unite Russia, and return the wealth back to the state where it belongs," Boris said proudly.

Viktor looked from Boris to Durand and back again.

"I know that's what you want too," Boris said. "You can't help your mama and sestra, but it's not late to save your brother Isaak, or our country. We need your help. And we need it now."

Viktor swallowed the lump in his throat. He'd been dreaming of a united Russia ever since Napoleon conquered western Russia and replaced the Russian nobles with French officers. He'd give anything, including his life, to put the Czar back into power and to save his brother. Boris added, "Defeating Napoleon's great army will be difficult and dangerous. And if we fail, there will be no second chance. Death will be served upon us and those we love."

"I understand," Viktor said. "Sacrifice is the honor of all who serve."

"Indeed," Boris said.

Durand reached into a wooden box on the side of his desk and withdrew three cigars. "My real name's Julian Thompson. I'm actually English."

"You're a spy?" Viktor said. "But how?"

"I infiltrated the system years ago and worked my way into command. Yes, I do Napoleon's bidding, and I know I have a reputation for being cruel, but it's for the greater good. If I didn't do my job, I would have been ousted a long time ago."

It made sense to Viktor. If Durand had intended to hurt him, he would have done it already, and he wouldn't have brought Boris here to witness it. "So what do you want from me?"

Durand handed a cigar to Viktor and another to Boris. Viktor ran the cigar under his nose; the pungent tobacco was like a welcome friend.

After they lit their cigars, Durand took a slow puff, savoring the smoke. He blew it out and said, "I'm placing you in charge of the Port of St. Petersburg." Then he told him the rest of the plan.

The Port of St. Petersburg, June 1818

Viktor stood on the wharf in front of the Rendsure. This was the ship he'd been waiting for. Built in England, the three-masted clipper was made for speed and was capable of travelling 150 nautical miles a day. Forged papers and a blue, white, and red tricolor pennant flying from the main top gallant mast marked it as French, making it a brilliantly disguised vessel.

Yelling and banging and laughter and men shuffling freight across the deck drowned out the lapping water. In the distance, Viktor spied four inbound trade ships. At the western end of the port, two clippers were offloading cargo, and a Russian ship was headed down the Neva River to the Baltic Sea.

"Be careful," a man yelled.

Viktor turned toward the Rendsure where muscled dockers transferred large casks of wine from the ship to the wharf. From the distance, it was impossible to tell which casks were filled with wine and which ones contained smuggled gunpowder. The ship's cargo clerk checked the goods against the captain's manifest as they were unloaded. Although the cargo clerk and the crew were Englishman, they all played their roles as French crew to maintain their cover.

If their actions were discovered, they'd be hanged.

And it would be Viktor's fault.

He was supposed to protect these men by ensuring that each detail of the plan was carried out with perfect

execution. The men had wives and children waiting for them back home who loved and counted on them. Despite the risk, the men had willingly sacrificed everything to ally with Russia and help stage a resistance. Viktor couldn't let them down.

"It's slipping," a man yelled, drawing Viktor's attention back to the ship where three men struggled to hold onto a cask.

The two dockers holding the back of the cask lowered their end to relieve the burden on the docker in front.

But it was too late.

The docker in front lost his grip and the cask spilled from his hands.

The other dockers tried to steady it, but the weight was too much.

The cask fell.

Viktor gasped. What if the cask was filled with gunpowder?—at least half were.

The cask crashed onto the deck, a loud thud echoed across the wharf, and the hoops holding the barrel together burst.

Viktor couldn't bear to look but kept his eyes fixed on the barrel anyway.

The barrel split open.

And red wine spilled across the deck.

Viktor let go of the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and sighed with relief.

The captain, whose slight build and coal-colored hair reminded Viktor of his brother, yelled at the dockers who had dropped the barrels. The dockers wiped their hands on their wine-splashed pants and got right back to work.

Viktor thought about seeing Isaak again. Isaak had

just turned twenty-three when Napoleon's army captured him. Viktor had gotten word about the battle and the near annihilation of his brother's company from the only other survivor, who somehow managed to escape the assault, evade the troops, and make his way to the rear. Had the soldier tried to save Isaak? Or had he only thought about himself? Viktor never dared to ask. Just like he never dared to ask Durand if Isaak had been tortured in jail. He shuddered at the thought.

It took another two hours to finish unloading the ship. Then the casks—along with boxes of soap and boxes of wheat—hiding buck and ball, pistols, muskets, and Baker rifles—made their way to Warehouse Thirty-five where the inspector was waiting.

Now came the tricky part.

"Karev." Viktor waved over one of his officers patrolling the wharf.

Karev ran to Viktor and stood before him at attention. "Your Nobility?"

"Keep an eye on things here. I want to check on that last shipment."

"I understand," Karev said as he spread his legs and crossed his hands behind his back.

Viktor headed over to the warehouse where the wooden double doors were open. The inspector was inside, comparing the imported goods to the amount noted on the manifest. Once he confirmed that everything was accounted for, he'd start inspecting the goods. Viktor fingered his pocket watch and scanned the area for his signal man. They didn't have much time.

But he wasn't there.

Hands jangling, Victor prayed the signal man had already raced off to notify the men. He was supposed

to wait until Viktor arrived at the warehouse and began puffing on his cigar; but maybe, after what had happened with the cask, the signal man realized that by waiting it would be too late. That he had to distract the inspector now. Viktor hoped so, because if that wasn't what happened…he shivered just thinking about it.

Viktor steeled himself and stepped through the warehouse doors. "How do you do?" he called.

The inspector jotted down something and then looked up at Viktor. He had a gray mustache and a beard that reached to his chest. "Good afternoon."

Viktor approached the inspector and shook his hand. "Everything as it appears to be?" Viktor had to ask or the inspector might get suspicious.

The inspector nodded. "Thus far."

"Good," Viktor said, eyeing the cargo and wondering which containers held the smuggled goods. Although he couldn't see the slight notches in the wood marking the boxes and casks they had used to stash the contraband, his men would have no trouble identifying them when the time came, and the inspector would never think anything of the markings, even if he noticed them.

Viktor turned his attention outside.

Still no signal man.

And still no diversion.

Panic gripped Viktor. What if something had gone wrong? What if the men were waiting for a signal that wasn't coming? And what if the inspector opened that first box or cask and found something other than wine or soap or wheat? He had to do something—anything—to stop that from happening.

Years of military training kicked in. Viktor steadied his nerves, assessed the situation, and considered his

options. He could step outside, pretending one of his men had called him, and then tell the inspector he had received bad news to get him away from the warehouse—an injury to a family member, perhaps. Or, he could call the inspector off and assign him to another, more pressing shipment, one that had to be inspected and delivered on a tight deadline, even though there wasn't one at the moment. Reinforcing his urgent need with "a bonus from the shipper" would give the order more credibility. Either one should work.

Thirty more seconds. That's all the time he could spare. If the diversion didn't happen by then, he'd have to put his plan in motion. The inspector was nearing the end of the boxes, counting out loud as his finger moved through the air, pointing from one box to the next. After that, he only had the casks left to count and that wouldn't take long.

Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four. It was almost time. And Viktor was ready.

Boom!

Viktor jumped. The inspector screamed. The building shook.

Victor raced out of the warehouse.

The air tasted of gunpowder. Pillars of fire bellowed toward the sky. Dogs barked like crazy. Two horses tied to posts kicked and reared, fighting to break free. Dockers rushed toward the end of the wharf where the massive explosion had occurred. Merchants stood dazed near their wares.

"We need all hands to put out the fire," he called to the inspector, who now stood by his side. "Come on."

They dashed down the wharf together, arms pumping, boots pounding wood.

Viktor didn't dare look back. Not even for an instant. If the inspector picked up on it and decided to look too, he'd see Viktor's men stealing the cargo from the warehouse. They'd been waiting, just like Viktor, for the signal to make their move.

When he reached the fire—a crumbling single story, wood-framed building that years ago had housed the dock master—scorching heat punched Viktor. Almost immediately sweat covered his skin, and his eyes, nose, and throat burned from the smoke. Squinting, he grabbed two buckets and handed one to the inspector. "Get in the line," he yelled over the commotion and then joined his men in the bucket brigade. Water sloshed from the buckets as they were passed from hand to hand. Another group of his men used hand-pumped engines to throw additional water on the fire.

As the raging flames blazed, Viktor had doubts as to whether they'd be able to contain it. His men had assured him the explosion would be controlled, but this was bigger than he'd expected. If it spread, the whole wharf could go up in flames.

And so could the city.

More and more men joined the fight. Viktor didn't recognize most of them but was thankful for the help. But despite the bucket brigade and the hand pumps, it just wasn't enough. The fire spit embers that flamed new but smaller fires along the wharf.

Now Viktor wished they had come up with another plan. One that wasn't so dangerous. If they didn't contain the fire soon…

A blood-curdling scream ripped through air.

Victor spun toward the noise.

A man was engulfed in flames. He ran haphazardly, arms thrashing, crying out from the pain.

Three men tackled him to the ground. Others doused him with water. Several ripped off their shirts and beat at the man to smother the fire.

Viktor pleaded to himself. *Please. Please. Please, put it out.*

A few minutes later, the man's agonizing screams turned silent.

Several of the men helping him trudged back to the fire, shoulders hunched over.

Viktor hung his head. The thought of the fire killing someone was too much to bear. Sure there were casualties in war, but this wasn't what he had planned.

"You okay?" the inspector asked as he handed Victor a bucket.

"I feel sorry for his family."

"You cannot be blamed. You did your best to put out the fire."

Viktor nodded. Then he spied a horse-drawn fire pump arriving at the scene. The leather hose was rolled out and the men manned the pumps. Water rushed onto the fire. The flames fought back. One minute it looked like the fire was winning; the next the water.

The wind gusted. A billow of smoke enveloped Viktor. He coughed and coughed—he could barely catch his breath—but he kept the buckets moving along the line.

They fought the fire into the night. Men loyal to Napoleon worked alongside those Viktor knew were rebels. Finally, the fire started to extinguish. The yelling settled down, but the men didn't stop working until every last ember had died.

Viktor's thoughts turned to the contraband. Hopefully the boxes and the casks were long gone, because once the inspector realized the net goods didn't match

the manifest, he'd also realize the explosion had been planned and report the theft to the authorities.

***

Four Days Later

Viktor folded the *Russky Invalid* in half and tucked the newspaper under his arm as he watched the activity on the wharf: men yelled back and forth to one another as they worked, merchants sold their wares, a few stray dogs scavenged for food. A moderate breeze coming off the river cooled the warm air. One inbound clipper was already docked, two others were on the way, and four clippers were scheduled to leave port later that afternoon once they finished loading their goods.

"I'm looking for Belov," a deep voice said from nearby.

A man wearing a dark blue habit vest, white waistcoat, and grey overalls with a crimson stripe down the side of each leg approached Viktor.

"I'm he," Viktor said.

"Major-Colonel Charles Pinault. I gather you've read the front page?" he said eyeing Viktor's newspaper.

"I have."

"So what do you make of it?"

Viktor chose his words carefully. "It's a good thing the men were stopped before the revolt could succeed." He cringed. That was the last thing he'd wanted.

"At great expense to my men," Pinault said. He looked away as if it pained him greatly to say so. "Fifteen died in the skirmish. Eight others were severely wounded. We managed to arrest twenty-two men, but

none of them are talking. And many others got away. I was hoping you might be able to help me."

Viktor's stomach cramped but he showed no fear. "I'm not sure how?"

"French officials are taking this very seriously."

Viktor nodded. Of course they were. The rebels were trying to overthrow Napoleon.

"They're demanding to know how the weapons got into the city," Pinault said. "And if I don't have answers for them soon, well … let's just say it won't be good."

"I understand," Viktor said, "but I'm still not sure what you want from me. I know nothing about the revolt. I'm an officer for God's sake."

"I didn't mean to imply otherwise," Pinault said. "But I understand you had a theft recently?"

"We did, but it was just wine and soap and wheat. If weapons had come into my port, I would most certainly have known about it."

"Not if they were smuggled. Did the inspector check all the goods?"

"Just a sampling, I imagine," Viktor said. "No reason to do otherwise."

"So you don't know if all the cargo was legitimate?"

"Are you questioning my ability to perform my duties?" Viktor asked. He didn't know what else to do to get the inspector to back off.

"No, of course not. You can't know what's in every single box or cask that comes into this port. I'm just asking if it's possible that the weapons passed through here in that shipment."

"Anything's possible I suppose," Viktor said. If he denied it now, Pinault would know Viktor was lying.

"You mind if I take a look?"

"At what?" Viktor asked, glancing around the wharf. He didn't know what Pinault expected to find since they both knew the weapons were already in the hands of the rebels.

"At the warehouse where the theft occurred."

Viktor pointed down the dock. "Warehouse Thirty-five, but you're not going to find anything, I can assure you that. The cargo moved out on Tuesday. All that's in there now is a shipment of sugar that was put in at port yesterday."

Pinault thought for a moment while staring ahead at a docked ship. "I see then. I'd like to take a look anyway, if you don't mind."

Of course Viktor minded, but he wasn't going to tell that to Pinault. "Whatever your wish Major-Colonel," Viktor said and led the way.

At the warehouse, Pinault stood inside the doors with his hands on his hips. Viktor didn't know what Pinault expected to see other than rows and rows of boxes stacked one on top of the other, but he said nothing and waited for Pinault to speak.

Pinault cleared his throat and turned to Viktor. "My men will be checking the cargo."

"I understand."

"Not just in this warehouse but all of them. The ships coming into port too."

"If you insist," Viktor said, knowing he didn't have any choice in the matter.

"It is my superiors who insist," Pinault said. "And I carry out their wishes on behalf of Emperor Napoleon."

"As do I," Viktor replied.

Pinault stepped outside and Viktor followed, squinting in the bright sunlight. Pinault shoved four fingers into his mouth and whistled loudly. The high-

pitch hurt Viktor's ears. Dozens of men stormed the area from behind two warehouses—they must have been hiding in the shadows waiting for Pinault's signal. The men fanned out across the wharf. Some headed to the warehouses; others to the ships.

Viktor watched their strategic movements. It was obvious that Pinault had planned to inspect everything whether Viktor approved or not. Fortunately, Pinault and his men hadn't shown up earlier.

Viktor was pretty sure they wouldn't find anything.

Still, Viktor worried.

***

Viktor had completed his daily duties as usual, but it was difficult to concentrate knowing Pinault and his men might discover other smuggled weapons Viktor knew nothing about. Thankfully all the goods they inspected matched those on the manifests.

Now that his work day was over and Pinault and his men had left disappointed and empty-handed, Viktor tried to relax, but it seemed impossible. He walked down the crowded street away from the wharf, glancing over his shoulder every thirty seconds or so. After Pinault's surprise visit and his suspicions, Viktor wouldn't be shocked if one of Pinault's men were following him.

Ducking down an alley, Viktor cut through to the main street and slipped between two horse-drawn carriages hitched to posts. He looked around again to ensure he was alone then strolled past Kazan Cathedral. The cathedral with its bell tower above the entrance once housed the icon of Our Lady of Kazan; now it stood as a monument to Napoleon's victory over Russia. After clearing the cathedral, Viktor passed a

crowded saloon—beef stroganoff wafted through the open door—and headed straight for Durand's office.

When Viktor knocked on the door, it swung open on its own. He froze, listening for an intruder but heard nothing. He stepped inside.

Papers were scattered everywhere. Chairs were toppled and broken. An oil painting hung crookedly on the wall. Viktor saw no sign of Durand, so he moved around the desk, just in case Durand was injured and lying on the floor. Thank God he wasn't. But then Viktor spotted a small puddle of blood.

He started to walk away, but then something about the blood drew him back. He looked at it more closely, unsure of why it had commanded his attention until he tilted his head to the side and viewed it from a different angle. Someone had drawn the letters "LR" in the blood. Next to the top of the "R" a line smeared off in trail, as if whoever wrote the letters had been dragged away during the process. Durand must have written them, but what did they mean?

Viktor flipped through some papers but saw nothing mentioning the men working with Durand to stage the resistance, which he figured would be the case. If the intruders had found what they looking for they would have taken it with them. But if that had happened, they would have had no reason to take Durand. They would have killed him right then and there and made it look like a theft to cover their actions. Durand must have hidden the list somewhere else—somewhere safe—which was good for Viktor and the men. But they'd torture Durand until they got the information out of him. Then they'd all be in trouble. At least Durand had bought them some time.

Viktor looked around. He had to get out of there

before someone discovered him. And he had to find Boris Federov. He'd know what to do.

***

Boris' wife showed Viktor into the sitting room where Boris was smoking a pipe in front of a crackling fire. The air smelled sweet like cherries. On the table next to Boris sat a half empty glass and a bottle.

"Do you want a vodka with cayenne pepper?" Boris' wife asked.

"No," Viktor said.

"Thank you, my dear," Boris said to his wife.

She nodded and left the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Sit," Boris said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Viktor settled into a plush green armchair. "No pleasure, I'm afraid." He told Boris about the surprise inspection by the French and the news about Durand.

"I see." Boris tapped out his pipe and rubbed his chin, deep in thought. When he finally spoke he said, "I agree that we have to assume it was Durand's blood, and that they'll torture him to get the information they want."

Viktor swallowed hard. "I forgot to mention…there were letters drawn in the blood. "'LR' and a horizontal line near the top of the 'R'. A message, no doubt, but I have no idea what it means."

Boris crossed his arms. "I'm afraid your suspicions are confirmed. Durand wrote the message. 'LR' stands for Long Reign and I have to assume he started to write the letter 'T' for Czar and was interrupted. It's a message we designed for situations such as these to warn our men when our mission was threatened or compromised."

"So what do we do?" Viktor asked.

Boris stood. "We've no time to waste. We must gather the men tonight."

***

Several hours later, in a barn outside of town that smelled of hay and manure, at least two hundred silent men stood wall to wall. With the doors closed, it had quickly become hot. Viktor's sweaty shirt clung to his skin.

Boris climbed onto a wooden box and stood with his fingers spread across his hips. "The time has come. And we must take action now."

"What about the plan?" someone yelled as loud chatter filled the room.

"Quiet," Boris yelled over the commotion. Once the men gave him their attention again, he said, "Durand has been captured. We can only assume Napoleon and his men already have our names. And if they don't, they will soon. We need to take action now or we'll be ousted and killed. We must free the land from Napoleon's clutches and put the Czar back in power where he belongs."

"Some of our offensive positions aren't in place yet," a tall man near the back said.

Another added, "And our weapons are hidden throughout the city."

"Then we must ready them," Boris said. "By morning. And send word to the thousands of men waiting to revolt that the time has come." He looked over the crowd. "This is our chance to show Napoleon and his men what we're made of, and that Russia is strong and powerful and not one of Napoleon's puppet states."

The men cheered loudly. Their excitement built like a fever, hotter and hotter.

After a few minutes, Boris whistled to gain the men's attention. When they quieted down he said, "Our chance has come to fight. Some of you will survive and others won't. But don't think your sacrifices will go unnoticed. The men, women, and children of this country will forever be in your debt. Each and every one of you is vital to our success. Each and every one of you is important in changing the course of Russia's history." He paused and looked the men closest in the eyes. "This is a battle worth undertaking, a battle worth fighting. And we can't give up no matter the cost. We must prevail." He raised his fist into the air. "Long live Russia!"

"Long live Russia," the men repeated.

"Long reign Czar Alexander!" Viktor yelled.

"Long reign Czar Alexander!" the men yelled.

***

At exactly noon on June 25, 1818 shots rang out across St. Petersburg.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

In 1812, Napoleon sent more than 450,000 soldiers, the largest army in European history, to invade Russia. As Napoleon's troops fought the Russian Army, the Russian troops retreated back to Moscow, burning farmland so Napoleon's troops couldn't use the resources to support themselves. Napoleon expected

that once his troops made it to Moscow, they could spend the winter there, but the Russians evacuated the city and set it on fire. Napoleon's troops were stuck in the cold and forced to retreat to find shelter for the winter. Many troops froze to death on the way or abandoned the army. Others were picked-off by the Russian Calvary and Cossacks. By the time Napoleon's army made it back out of Russian territory, most of the troops had been killed or captured. This was the turning point of the Napoleonic Wars. Ultimately, Napoleon was defeated by the Sixth Coalition (Russia, Prussia, German states, Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), and the French monarchy was restored.

ABOUT JANICE GABLE BASHMAN

Janice Gable Bashman is the Bram Stoker nominated author Of *Wanted Undead Or Alive* (Citadel Press 2010) and *Predator* (YA thriller, Month9Books, coming October 2014). She is managing editor of *The Big Thrill* (International Thriller Writers' magazine). Her short fiction has been published in various anthologies and magazines. She has written for *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market, The Writer, Writer's Digest, Wild River Review,* and many other publications. She is a speaker and workshop leader at writers' conferences, including ThrillerFest, Backspace, Pennwriters, The Write Stuff, Stoker weekend, and others. She is an active member of the Mystery Writers of America, Horror Writers Association, and the International Thriller Writers, where she serves on the board of directors as Vice President, Technology.

RISING SUN

By James Erwin

John Joseph Oda paused beside the dying boy, kneeling. The boy squirmed away, his eyes rolled up, unseeing, unthinking.

"God, the Father of Mercies," whispered Oda in Latin. The boy paused for a moment, listening to Oda's murmured words.

"May God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins."

The boy closed his eyes, sobbing. Good, thought Oda. The boy reached out and Oda took his hand, rushing through the rest of the rites, working urgently against the ebbing life pumping out of the hole in the boy's side. He splashed a bit of wine into the boy's mouth to watch it bubble up in the boy's death rattle.

Oda grasped the hand firmly for a moment and closed the boy's eyes. With a last look, he picked up his musket and trotted forward through the burning streets, toward the sound of screaming.

In the narrow streets of Nagasaki, the fires snapped

and howled, jumping from house to house. Bithell staggered out of a house, framed in the flickering light, clutching his pants with one hand and a bloody sword in the other. He gave Oda a lazy smile and picked up a bulging canvas sack, kicking over a lantern as he left.

"Papists and pagans," chuckled Bithell. "And cowards to boot. I've had a merry time tonight and not so much as a scratch to remember it by tomorrow."

Oda and Bithell walked forward together. The sound of laughing men grew louder, carried on the wind with a sweet smoke that made Oda gag.

Bithell clapped him on the shoulder. "Never used to it, eh?" Malice flickered coldly behind his smile. "Saw you the same way after Manila and Bengal." He stepped in close. "Men are made to burn, Johnny. Women and children and all of us damned souls, born to burn here or somewhere a lot hotter." He snuffled the air obscenely, like a dog after its quarry.

Oda said nothing, his face a mask. Bithell came in closer. "You think you're above this, Johnny? I heard the whispers. You're a king or an emperor or something like that."

"I am no emperor," said Oda simply.

The streets were wider here, and both men saw a pillar of fire glowing over the roofs. As they approached, they heard wooden beams groan and crack, and with a last orange flare, the roof of Nagasaki's temple collapsed. The courtyard came alive with swaying light, and long shadows danced madly, streaming from the feet of a circle of men. Oda and Bithell joined them. Inside the circle, in a ring of swords and pistols, knelt a bloodied man, breathing heavily.

Captain Graves stood over the kneeling man. Graves glanced up at Oda, the bloody handprint on his

shirt, and at Bithell, carrying his sack of loot, and merely shrugged. His opinions of his men's peccadilloes could wait.

"We've been waiting for you, Oda."

"My apologies, Captain. Hedley was killed on the west walls. I attempted to minister to him." That was true, in its way.

"I wasn't waiting for Hedley." Graves turned back to the kneeling man. "Translate. I am Captain George Graves of HMS *Resolute*. We are here to deliver the message that Spain and the United Kingdom are at war."

Oda delivered the message in flawless Castilian Spanish. The kneeling man chuckled ruefully.

"In accordance with the laws of war, we hailed your coastal forts and demanded their surrender. They fired on us, requiring chastisement. We faced opposition upon landing as well, and we have acted since that time in our own defense."

Oda translated, a bit more slowly.

"I hereby take possession of Nagasaki and the Spanish Concession in the name of His Majesty George III. You are my prisoner and will order the immediate surrender of the province and its defenders."

The bloody man rose to his feet, swaying, blood seeping from the bandage over his split forehead. "Don't bother to translate that," the man said in an Irish brogue to Oda. "I must needs accept."

"Irish!" said Graves brightly. "Imagine finding a neighbor so far from home. Delightful. Your name, sir?"

"Brendan O'Reilly."

Graves stepped forward, beaming. He leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. Oda was close enough to catch the murmured words.

"A whiff of treason, good man, finding you in service to Spain." Graves beamed. "Although Oda here is from Edo, originally! Left a cabin boy, been a loyal servant of His Majesty and his Royal Navy all these years."

"I was born in France," said O'Reilly, "and been in Spanish service since I was old enough to carry a sword. I've never set foot in my native land, or sworn loyalty to the king who holds it."

"The king placed over it by the grace of God."

O'Reilly shrugged casually. Graves held out his hand. O'Reilly stared at it numbly for a long moment before grasping it.

"I surrender Nagasaki to you," O'Reilly mumbled, "compelled as I am by strength of arms."

"Thus ends May 10, 1780," pronounced Graves, "and a good day's work is done." The last flames sputtered down to a dull red glow behind him.

***

The next morning, Oda walked along the waterfront. Long lines of peasants stood, passing buckets back and forth, the seawater snaking hand by hand inland toward the last few fires. They parted around Oda, taking careful pain not to touch him, while at the same time giving no indication that they took notice of his presence. He knew what they saw. A Japanese man, growing a ridiculous wispy beard in imitation of the hairy foreigners, his hair tied back in a barbarian's ribbon, wearing a sailor's coarse linens and swaying on land in a white man's leather boots. He looked ridiculous and smelled like rotten milk. He was a stranger in his own land, to his own blood.

He gripped the hilt of his sword, puffing himself up with the cold authority he borrowed from it. He knew it only made him look more absurd, but he let his anger and shame show on his face. If his countrymen would conceal every emotion, let them swallow down unease and fear as well.

Oda stopped outside the city's cathedral. Its stained glass windows were broken, two old women sweeping the remains into a glimmering pile, still beautiful in a shaft of morning light. They had the sense to bow to him, seeing his face. He reddened in shame.

"Grandmothers," he whispered in Japanese, "is the priest within?"

They took a moment to understand him. He spoke with the accent of Edo, and that rusted with years of disuse.

"The priest is dead," one said flatly. "Englishman slit his throat last night and took away the girl he was protecting." She was used to the presence of *gaijin*; she spoke to him as she would to a translator, without respect or tone. She expected him to report to a white man. She gave him no more respect than she would any other implement.

Oda only nodded, his throat tight, and bowed before striding away.

Hernandez was dead. That complicated things.

Oda walked further. He looked around him, at the columns of smoke and the mist-shrouded mountains, at the narrow harbor and the sea beyond, looking wistful and distracted and not at all like he was searching for a white face. He saw nothing, as he expected; he'd roared with the others at the festivities last night but had taken only a few sips of rum. Nearly all the rest would still be unconscious, drink-blind and staggering

at best. Crowder and the others on the *Resolute* would be awake, but they were anchored at another inlet. A couple of other Englishmen would be awake, guarding Graves as he studied the colony's accounts - and Graves would miss Oda's presence. That could not be helped.

Oda walked briskly toward a fishing boat, which swayed at anchor under a fluttering kite, a red carp with a green tail. Alone among the fishing boats, Chinese calligraphy ornamented its hull. It was a strange sight, and surely that is why the other fishermen gave the strange boat a wary distance. The man sitting on its deck was as tan and wiry as any fisherman, but his eyes were cold and pale sword scars marked his torso. His face was broad and his high Chinese cheekbones marked him further as an alien. Like Oda, he did not belong in Japan any more than a white man, and like Oda, he would be invisible to any white man.

Oda approached, studying the fish laid out before the man's boat. Their eyes were clouded and they reeked.

"You are careless with your disguise," remarked Oda in Latin. "White men may not know you or me from any peasant in the street but they know yesterday's fish."

The fisherman nodded grimly. "Hard to get part of today's catch. The people seem distracted for some reason."

Oda poked reluctantly at a fish. "Hernandez is dead."

The fisherman nodded. "He is. Everyone else has fled inland. Kyushu is a large island, and the English have no clues about us." He looked curiously at Oda. "What are your plans?"

"Our squadron has been very busy," said Oda. "We fought the French in India before we got orders to sail for Manila. The Philippines swarm now with English ships, and the Spanish port at Pusan as well. Now Nagasaki."

"And so?"

"Rumors, everywhere we landed, that King George will goad the Dutch into war. Something to do with the Baltic Sea and Russia, ostensibly, but Shikoku and the East Indies are tempting prizes. And if the English take the Cape of Good Hope from the Dutch, they can ensure Spain and France won't come back for their lost colonies in Asia."

The fisherman shook his head. "All this for the sake of a few savages in America."

"The British are not fighting for the Indians," said Oda, "but to enforce their will on the white colonists trying to shake them off."

The fisherman stretched his legs. "Those are the savages I referred to." He tilted his head. "So then. Your plans?"

"Two more ships will arrive soon to join *Resolute*. With them and the squadron at harbor in Edo, the English will be able to take Shikoku from the Dutch. Edo, Shikoku, Kyushu, Pusan - the court in Kyoto will be encircled and friendless."

"Japan is very large. The English will have only a handful of men, tied down consolidating their rule in just a few ports."

"The daimyos will turn. The galleons we seized at Manila were full of gold and silver. Enough to buy the warlords in the short term. In the long term, the English can seize the Imperial estates and divide them up. The Emperor will beseech the English to prop up his

throne. He will bribe them to occupy Kyoto before the daimyos realize they could be done with him with a day's work."

The fisherman raised an eyebrow. Oda nodded.

"We have only the briefest sliver of time. A week, perhaps two. After that, Japan is England's. They will control the seas, and with Spanish treasure and the daimyos' support, they will have thousands of men, enough to seize the Dutch Indies. India is falling into their hands. China, then, and even if the rabble in America win their war the English will return with all the world at their back to retake their huts."

The fisherman stood. "So we must act now. I will alert the others to meet us tonight at the safe house."

Oda nodded. "And we must gain the help of the Dutch. Then strike at Edo before the English there can rally."

The fisherman shook his head. "Much to do. Many to convince."

Oda hefted a single stinking fish, handing the fisherman a coin. "I am compelled. It's my ancestor's unfinished work."

***

Oda returned to the governor's palace around noon, munching absently on a bun he'd bought from one of the few merchants open for business. A few acolytes were making a hash of the funeral mass in the courtyard before the cathedral. A smaller crowd was gathered before the smoldering ruins of the old Shinto temple, holding their own funeral rites. Oda bowed respectfully for both, and was ignored both times except by soot-streaked children.

Bithell was pissing in the ruins, grinning at the steam that geysered up from the embers. He nodded at Oda.

"They're ignoring us. I wonder how long they'd stand there quietly if I get out my steel." He gestured lewdly at a woman, his pants still undone. "My *other* steel!" he roared. He grinned at Oda, his eyes bloodshot. "Shall we teach them a lesson, eh? Show them what happens when they fail to respect the servants of the governor and the King of England?" He leaned in. "You'd be at my back, Johnny."

"Always."

Bithell grunted and did up his pants. "The Captain has asked after you," he said mildly. "I had to admit I'd no idea where you'd wandered off to."

Oda made a quiet, interested noise.

"Seemed a bit of a puzzle to me, it did." Bithell hopped down from the charred timber he'd been perched on. He glanced at the bad fish in Oda's hand. "You've a habit of poking around, every port we call at. The Wharf Rat, we call you. Always the first to shimmy down the anchor rope, to find a quiet corner."

Oda took a single step backward, his sword hand relaxed and hovering in the air, just outside the area where he would seem to be drawing his steel. Bithell had his hands on his hips, and he was in a fighter's stance now, his bouncing balance disguised behind a drunkard's sway. His bloodshot eyes were sharp and focused.

"Thinking is not what I'm best at, Johnny, and the Lord knows surely that's not why the King of England pays me my gold. But I do dabble in it now and then. And I think that I'm going to march you in to see the Captain and you'll come quietly. Or you won't. Either way, this day will end with my sword in your neck."

"You have the stomach for this sort of work?" asked Oda quietly.

Bithell grinned. "You should know that by now, Johnny."

"Perhaps," said Oda, and he whipped up the bad fish, plunging his fingers into it. An obscene filth popped out, spattering across Bithell's face. Bithell gasped and retched, staggering backward as he fumbled for his sword. In silence, the Shinto worshipers swept out of the courtyard. Oda drew his sword and leapt.

Bithell brought up his sword, snarling even as more vomit spouted from his mouth and nostrils. He swung wildly and Oda stepped back, raising his sword. Bithell lunged, careful not to leave Oda an opening. He had a cat's agility, even at his worst, and Oda was hard-pressed to retreat over the rubble with one eye on the advancing Englishman. Oda found purchase on a rafter, balanced precariously, and scooted backward. The wood swung up as Bithell approached, and the Englishman's calf sizzled as the impact knocked the char off the glowing interior of the wood.

Oda swung as Bithell toppled, knocking the big man onto his back. He swung again and again, blind with rage. Bithell parried desperately, his eyes wild. Oda slashed a red ribbon into Bithell's side, glancing off a rib. The point of his sword cut deeply into Bithell's left cheek. Oda brought his sword up again. In a slow, lazy arc, he angled the sword, seeing the parry. The world was silent and still. In his mind's eye, he pictured his sword sliding along Bithell's, into the big man's throat, silencing him and his mad thoughts and his leering boasts. He looked and saw the resignation in Bithell's eyes. Bithell was going to die.

A ball ripped past, bringing Oda out of his reverie. He looked up to see Captain Graves pointing at him and four Englishmen raising their muskets. He pointed his sword at Bithell, hatred flashing in his eyes, and Oda ran.

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As Oda ran, the crack of musket fire rippled through the streets behind him. There were more screams, and the wails of children. There would be more fire, more death. Oda stopped, his fists clenched. He could not run now, not with Graves waiting for the attack and the innocent dying for his mistakes.

Oda crouched, squatting behind a low wall. He took a few seconds to catch his breath, to plan. He dug his nails into his palms. His plans had come to little so far. He stood and he ran.

He was inland, with the square between him and the waterfront. He had to run around the screams, detouring up and down hills, blurs of movement vanishing at every corner he rounded. At one corner, four men whirled at his approach. A Spanish guardsman, filthy with dirt and sweat, two Japanese converts with long spears, and a Moro warrior with a long curved dagger. The Spaniard pointed a pistol.

"I am Juan José Oda," Oda cried in Spanish, "last of the line of Oda Nobunaga." He stepped forward, his hands open. "I am here to retake this city from the English, to redeem my people, to finish the great work of my ancestor. I will unite Japan, end the long war of the daimyos."

The Spaniard spat. "And why in hell would I fight for Japan?" Oda pointed to his converts, both of whom were bowing to him.

"Because they will," said Oda, "and because by the end of the day I will have a warship. You can be on it or in front on of it."

The Spaniard lifted his pistol. "No one's making me a better offer."

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The small band ran through the streets at a crouch. Twice they heard the distant boom of the *Resolute*'s guns and the reply of a smaller cannon.

"That's Bustillo's gun," the Spaniard remarked. "Dragged it out of the harbor fort and into the woods during the battle."

They were close enough to the waterfront now for Oda to see the *Resolute* at anchor. A boat was coming to shore.

"That will leave only twenty or thirty men aboard that ship," Oda said. He ran his gaze along the rows of fishing boats.

The Spaniard followed his gaze. "You don't mean to take it?"

"Would you prefer to leave it in their hands and wait for more English to come? There's no hiding for you. Not once they finish burning Nagasaki down and buy the daimyos."

The Spaniard cursed and spat, gripping the butt of his pistol. "They've got two gun crews working, and maybe that many men watching the decks. We'll never get there alive."

Oda nodded. "One boat will never make it." He started walking, his sword out. The English boat was just visible now. As it came closer, Oda waved. A man in the bow of the boat waved back. There were eight

men in the boat, all armed to the teeth. Oda grinned. One of them was George Crowder, the *Resolute*'s first mate.

"The Captain's in a hell of a fight up there," Oda shouted as the boat made landfall.

"I thought as much," Crowder replied. "No signals, but I thought he might be low on powder."

"Plenty of powder," said Oda, "don't slow yourself down. Up that hill and round the corner to the west." Crowder nodded and took most of the men. Two of them remained behind, guarding the boat and the keg of gunpowder inside it. Oda brought out his tobacco pouch and both men mumbled thanks. As the two of them fumbled for their pipes, Oda lifted his sword and swung it through one man's neck. The second man drew his sword but Oda had already driven his blade through the man's chest.

Up the hill from the waterfront, there was a sudden eruption of sound. Oda ran toward it, to be met by the Chinese man. Blood spattered his shirt and his smoking matchlock. He was followed by a dozen Japanese men, all of them in the half-nude guise of fishermen with hard faces that betrayed their true profession. He nodded at Oda.

"Good fighting." He looked critically to sea. "You'll need more than one boat."

"I was just thinking the same," said Oda.

The wind was with them, driving steadily from shore, and when Oda and his crew pushed their boat out eight fishing boats were already fanning out, their sails full. The dark bulk of the *Resolute* waited ahead, the afternoon sun hanging above its masts. For long breathless minutes, the *Resolute* was silent and still as they approached. Suddenly, a flash of light appeared in

its side, and the crack of two cannon shots followed. One ball splashed harmlessly nearby, but the second struck home on a fishing boat, a lucky shot that hit squarely at the base of the mast. The steersman's head exploded and his ruined body slid to the listing deck.

Oda pulled at his oar, his shoulders groaning. His boat was the largest and by far the slowest of the makeshift flotilla, and the *Resolute*'s gunners would do their best to sink it. He spared a nervous glance for the powder keg lashed down at the bow. Another volley of cannon fire, and another fishing boat sunk. Oda smiled grimly; whatever one could say about Graves, he had trained an excellent crew.

By the time they were within musket range, three fishing boats had been destroyed and a fourth was drifting out of range of the battle. Oda could hear the crewmen shouting as they rolled the cannons back into position.

"It'll be grapeshot now," grunted the Spaniard, pulling on his oar. As if on cue, the cannons roared and lead shot buzzed and ripped forward. A ball struck one of the converts in the back of his head, and he slumped down in the boat, his last breaths snored out obscenely. The Spaniard took another ball, clutching at the rib that sprouted suddenly from the hole in his side. The Moro knelt over him while Oda and the other convert rowed, trying to keep the boat moving forward.

Oda heard the Englishmen cheering. As two of the fishing boats started to swing around, hoping to surround the ship, the wind died. Left adrift, they were easily shot to pieces. Oda heard loud clangs as swivel guns were mounted on the ship's rails. He looked up and locked eyes with Brown, who gave him a feral grin as he loaded the gun. With a thump, their boat fetched

up against the side of the *Resolute*. Oda knew the ship's hold, having hauled items to and from it a thousand times. He knocked the bung off the keg of gunpowder and grabbed up a torch. The Spaniard snatched the torch, his face pale but determined. Oda nodded at him. The Moro and the convert dove into the sea, and Oda followed a split-second before shot ripped the planking behind him.

Oda swam down and forward, as far down as he could. His ears throbbed, his eyes bulged. The water wrapped itself around his chest like a serpent. As he swam further into the dark, a wave of pressure pushed past him, with a muffled crack. A few seconds later, a second wave slammed into him, pushing air from his mouth. An eardrum burst, and white-hot pain seared through him. It took all his strength not to scream, not to swallow water and start the slow descent into the black depths. He started back up, past the last convert, who was sinking and twitching, black blood curling from his ears and nose and mouth. Too close to the surface, to the blast.

Oda came out of the waves, gasping for breath. The air was black with soot and smoke, the stink of gunpowder mingled with the smell of burned men. Oda coughed and gagged. The same smell, over and over again. A single high, crystal tone screamed in his ruined left ear. He ignored it. The *Resolute* was already sinking, hissing and bubbling as water rushed into the ragged hole in its side. Somehow, the Moro was aboard it, walking nimbly on the rolling wreck, doing terrible work with his dagger as Englishmen tried to clamber out to the sea.

Oda looked around, mindful of the screams and blood and the sharks that had followed the *Resolute* in

hopes of just such a day. He had to get out of the water. The last fishing boat swung past, the Chinese fisherman at its rudder. Oda grabbed a trailing rope and pulled himself aboard. They rode in lazy circles around the bubbling, smoking eddy where the *Resolute* had been, but the Moro never reappeared. Three Englishmen clutched a floating spar. They stared at Oda with silent hatred as they drifted, helpless. Oda and the fisherman swung back around, tacking to shore, as the first sharks splashed through the debris.

On the shore, Oda clutched at his ear. He bowed deeply to the fisherman, who bowed back.

"What is your name?" asked Oda.

The fisherman shrugged. "Unimportant. I shall sail soon for Pusan and then to China. I imagine that your work in Japan is just beginning."

The two men walked forward. The sounds of battle were close now. Graves and his men would be returning soon, to the beach where the other boats were waiting. Bustillo and his holdouts would be returning to rescue the governor, assuming Graves had left O'Reilly alive. He heard masses of men shouting, the city's militia coming out of hiding. With the *Resolute* gone, the balance of power was up for grabs. There would be hard fighting ahead, and English warships still on the way. A handful of men with makeshift spears appeared out of an alley. The Chinese man raised Oda's arm.

"The last son of Oda!" the Chinese man roared. "Destroyer of the English! The rightful Shogun!" The militia cheered for Oda, who inclined his head. One of them held out a spear and a dinged Spanish helmet. He accepted both. He turned, but the fisherman had already disappeared.

He held up his spear. "Two hundred years ago, my

ancestor died in the holy battle to unite Japan. He died in battle, his great task unfinished, his allies Tokugawa and Hideyoshi betrayed and joining him in righteous death. Today, his battle begins again. On the other side of the world, the Americans fight for freedom. We can do no less."

A few more men appeared, all of them armed with the weapons of cooks and farmers. The English were close enough for Oda to make out some of the curses he'd learned in his long exile.

At the head of a dozen peasants, Oda marched forward. "For freedom! For unity! For Japan!" His followers cheered. They marched into battle, their hearts singing, their faces alight with purpose. A shroud of smoke crept over them, but no doubt or fear entered Oda's heart. As Oda caught a glimpse of Bithell's snarling face, he grinned and breathed deeply the terrible scent of war.

IN ACTUAL HISTORY

In our world, the 16th century Japanese noble Oda Nobunaga used his ruthlessness and charisma to seize control of his clan's holdings, to defeat his regional rivals, and finally to seize a third of Japan before his death. His lieutenant Toyotomi Hideyoshi continued his campaigns, and Hideyoshi's successor Tokugawa Ieyasu finally succeeded in unifying Japan. Tokugawa closed Japan to the outside world, ended decades of strife, and created a strong and stable central government that lasted until the forced opening of Japan 300 years later.

All three of these warlords took enormous risks on the battlefield, relying on their personal courage to inspire their soldiers. Against a background of constant

intrigue and civil war, any sign of weakness was a risk more terrible than bullets or arrows. If, as in this world, Oda Nobunaga had been killed in battle, the unification of Japan would have been difficult at best.

In this story I have presented something of a worst-case scenario: strong feudal lords, a weak emperor, and European powers waiting to seize the riches this opportunity presents. Great Britain in this world would have a stronger military presence in the Pacific, one which would expand the fighting of the American Revolution into a new theater.

ABOUT JAMES ERWIN

James Erwin is a father, husband and writer who lives in Des Moines, Iowa. He is the author of two historical encyclopedias and a contributor to a dozen other non-fiction works. His work has been published in *McSweeney's* and *Wired*. Erwin sold the screenplay *Rome Sweet Rome* to Warner Brothers in 2012. He recently finished work on his first novel, *Acadia*. He has been a fan of Paradox games for over a decade, and cut his teeth as a fiction writer in the AAR forums.

ÉCUREUILS

By Aidan Darnell Hailes

The accent of the auto's engine had changed as the air cooled, and Charlotte had noted the change. She noted it because accents had brought her to the automobile in the first place. Most of her life had been defined by accents, and her ear had been trained to distinguish them.

She was hurtling along the autoroute up from Virginia, where the autumn air was still warm and the leaves' colors were not dramatic enough to warrant her sight. But soon she would be in Nouvelle-York and she did not know if she would stop. She hadn't stopped on her way down from Montréal. It had been easier than to sit in the comfortable leather cosseting of her Citroën-Benz, to hear the loud turbocharged whine of its engine as she flew by the cars and camions, and to try and avoid the absorption of the hard reality that was pressing in through the windows. But that was five weeks ago, and her time and money were almost up. If Charlotte didn't see it this time, she never would.

When she had been holed up in the dingy hotel bar in Atlanta on her pass south, she'd lied to herself. She'd sat in the bar fending off looks and passes from man after man, drinking herself closer and closer to the emotional oblivion of finally relenting to one of the passes, telling herself she could go anytime, and that this trip didn't have to mean anything special. It was just Nouvelle-York. People went all the time, it was one of the biggest tourist centres in the world. Nothing to stop her from going in a year, or two, or twenty. She could be eighty and everything that was waiting for her would still be there.

But now, on her return trip, the truth was too apparent to ignore. Pierre had told her before she'd left that she'd feel this way. Of course he was right—Pierre had the annoyingly attractive habit of being right about everything that mattered to Charlotte, even if he was rather terrible at most everything else concerning her. They had been at another bar, this one much nicer, crowded and loud and exclusive in downtown Montréal, where the shots were twenty five dollars each and he'd already bought her three of them when he said, "You'll think of your father. That's what will do it. You'll think of your father and you'll decide to go see it." Except of course he said it in French because he didn't speak English. No one spoke English in Quebec except for Charlotte. Still, an hour before she made it to Virginia this second time, the fuel gauge approaching empty and stressing her out to no end, she had, just as Pierre predicted, thought of her father and realized she needed to go.

He was everything to Charlotte, and, even though he knew it, he did little about it. The statement could apply to Pierre as much as her father. When she was a

child they'd both been there—Pierre at school, defending her when the kids made fun of her accent and the way she pronounced English words; her father at home, sitting her down at night before she went to bed and singing her songs in English, then instructing her to recite them back, demanding they have no trace of French at all. As soon as she could read the folk songs and lullabies turned into Shakespearian soliloquies, passages from the King James Bible, and the poetry of Poe. Her father loved Poe. He would be sitting at the dinner table and suddenly burst into a quote from "Metzengerstein" or "The Raven". The delight on his face when he did so was palpable to little Charlotte. He truly loved the English language, his language. More than he could ever have loved her.

Philadelphia was looming in front of Charlotte as she finally relented and slowed enough to let the automatic top come up. She had, after all, lost all feeling in her face and hands and she was already starting to feel motherly instincts for the possibly-a-baby inside of her. She didn't know if a frozen mother could injure a possibly-baby, but since she knew nothing about possibly-babies at all, she felt it wasn't worth the risk. The possibly-a-baby wasn't the reason she had to make it to Nouvelle-York this time, though. The reason was her career was almost over, and she hadn't saved her money very effectively.

First, the end of her career. The possibly-a-baby in her womb would certainly not help with this problem, but the writing had been on the wall for some time before possibly-a-baby's arrival. She was twenty nine, and despite longer hours in the gym and extra kegel exercises, she knew she would soon stop getting repeat customers. Referrals had been down the last six months

too, but she'd put that off to a general slowdown in the economy, surely not her fault. But she knew those referrals, too, would eventually stop. Men did not pay for sex with old women.

Already she'd experienced it first hand: the realization that she would not be able to charge a man $2000 a night to wine, dine, and seduce her. One of her dates with a new customer prompted her initial discussion with Pierre. She had walked into the restaurant on Rue Saint-Urbain and spotted her mark—a brown suitcase with a blue pin through the strap—and she approached the table. It was the most trivial of looks, but she knew it well enough: disappointment. Her picture—which, she had to admit, was four years old, but she didn't really look that different from four years ago did she?—failed to match what he saw in the harsh, bare lighting of the restaurant. She tried to save the situation with her accent, and quickly worked to determine his type so she could play it for her own, but it didn't work. She caught him looking over her shoulder, towards the restaurant's resident lady, an older woman named Michelle who had taken refuge in the dimmer lighting of the bar section, her back to the restaurant and *her* mark—a red rose stuffed into a black purse no doubt filled with lingerie and sex toys—proclaiming her purpose for everyone to see. Charlotte knew Michelle, and knew she was thirty four years old. In a few years Charlotte would be Michelle—picking up scraps of lonely businessmen in hotels, bars, and restaurants. The only thing that kept the man with the brown suitcase with her that night was a dose of pity. Women in her line of work couldn't rely on pity for long, she knew. She had told Pierre of this incident the next night, and he told

her the truth, that maybe her days of escorting the affluent and romantically dysfunctional were coming to an end.

Second, the sorrowful state of her finances. Despite making $2000 a night, Charlotte's skills did not include financial planning. Foresight, in short, was in short supply. She had never invested in real-estate since her money couldn't really go to a bank, and her $2500 a month apartment downtown was not getting any cheaper. It was getting so bad that the night before she met Pierre, she had looked into the safe in the basement of her building where she kept an emergency pile of $25,000, only to find an I.O.U. she had left herself several months earlier saying "Please fill as soon as possible." She grew depressed, and naturally called Pierre.

"I want to meet for drinks," she implored him.

"When?"

"Now."

"It's one in the morning. Tomorrow."

"Ok," she admitted, forcing her to spend that night drinking alone in her exquisitely expensive, rarely used and barely furnished apartment. This was a bad combination for Charlotte, because when she drank alone she tended to get reflective, and reflection was exactly what she wanted to avoid. Still, drunk reflection beat sober reflection any day, and she drank until she slept trying to get the man with the brown suitcase out of her mind.

Driving through Philadelphia was enough to bring on that sober reflection all over again. Philadelphia wasn't much of a city to most people, but to Charlotte it was a temple. A place where two hundred and twenty years earlier a bunch of men got together and declared,

in English, that all men were created equal. Her father had had her recite that declaration when she was ten years old, every day for a month. By the end she had it memorized—that archaic piece of paper nobody outside of her father and maybe some early-Quebec historian living in California even cared about anymore. But when she read it she felt something like pride. Her father had had her read lots of things out loud to him and she'd hated every minute of it except for that one month when she was ten and she read out loud about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness enough times that eventually she said it as the men who had written had—without any French intermingling at all. It was the one piece of English she had ever read that made her feel something like pride.

When she was in school she'd written a paper about that, comparing the Declaration of Independence to the Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen. Her professor had failed her, and when she began speaking in his office to complain, she saw a look not unlike that of the john with the brown suitcase several years later: a sudden, slight disregard.

Of course it was her accent that gave her away. After that day in the professor's office she worked harder than ever to eliminate it. Altogether it wasn't a horrible accent—completely separate from the joual the working class Montréaler's spat out when they cursed and drank and fucked. But it was not Paris-Montréal French just the same, and she paid dearly for that difference. After she'd graduated she couldn't land a job that her qualifications should have provided for, and in each interview she remembered the moment when she had lost the position. One word, perhaps just a single mispronounced accent or stumbling upon a tongue-

twisting word like *écureuil*, and the look appeared again. She was waitressing tables for minimum wage when she came across Michelle on a date with a crusty Parisian who had no qualms about grabbing the prostitute's ass in public. Charlotte cornered Michelle in the bathroom and asked how to do what she did. Six weeks later she held her first $2000 in her hand.

She turned on the heat as the autoroute began to clog, the beginnings of Nouvelle-York traffic already apparent fifty kilometres out of the city. She queued easily, used to Montreal's traffic—declared the worst in the world by *L'Economiste* just a few years earlier. In Montreal you didn't move in the traffic so much as the traffic happened to congeal towards your eventual destination. The same could be said of her first few clients—slow and clumsy and full of accidents. It wasn't until she let her accent slip out that she found her niche—the exotic Englishwoman with all the refinements and cultural knowledge of the more expensive francophones. In that way her short-term replacement for extra shifts at the restaurant became a career she would never have talked to her father about.

Of course her father never could have seen her crawl escort review sites to thank grateful customers or apply waterproof makeup for those customers who enjoyed making any minority—in this case an ungrateful English bitch—cry so long as she looked good doing it. He had died when she was sixteen and all her rage at his linguistic indoctrination was still composed of childhood fears, teenage angst and her difficulty at getting an "A" in *composition française*. Pierre went with her to the funeral where she cried torrents of mascara and later lost her virginity to him in her little black funeral

dress, hoping to antidote the feelings she neither understood nor could even name.

Before her father died though, in the last weeks as he lost his hair, his strength, and his voice, she sat by his bedside and read to him. Because he'd asked her to. She recited the Declaration to him from memory, and she read him all of The Tempest, even doing little voices for the different characters, and she read him "The Raven" over and over again because he loved it so much. Then she would fall asleep and they'd be holding hands until they woke up together, another day closer to his death and her English lessons still far from complete.

She had been remembering those lessons when she'd been in that bar in Atlanta. She hadn't started drinking because of those lessons but as the night continued and the men piled on one after another, the lessons began to rise up in her memory like one of the slow, patient zombies from the 70s, its face stoic and understanding as it waited for the terror to register in Charlotte's face. So enduring was this zombie-memory that she eventually went all the way back to the folk songs. She hummed them into her beer bottle, feeling the vibrations work their way back up to her brain which rattled them about in the growing pool of alcohol and made them sadder still. She had loved those songs, she realized. But the songs were not the reason she'd started drinking.

The reason she had started drinking was because a ninety-nine cent pregnancy test told her there was possibly-a-baby inside of her. The "possibly" was a necessity, since the ninety-nine cents were not nearly enough of an investment for the maker of the ninety-nine cent

test to declare it as medically valid. Still, one missed period and two blue lines had her thinking that ninety-nine cents or ninety-nine thousand dollars' worth of testing would return the same result. She was possibly-pregnant, and she needed to drink at the thought of this.

What stopped her drinking that night in the hotel in Atlanta was the realization that drinking while pregnant was very bad. She had not thought of that. The thought that she had not thought of that issued an outpour of other thoughts she hadn't thought of. Foremost of these was this: she had no idea how to raise a child. All she had was her father, singing songs and reading Poe.

She was bearing towards Newark on the autoroute and every second sign was for Nouvelle-York and Charlotte began to panic, not sure what she would do. She knew, of course, what she wanted to do. She wanted to call Pierre and listen to his perfect accent, maybe scream at him a bit, and then ask him to drive down and meet her because there was no way she could do this on her own. Pierre would never come though. Pierre was too rich for such a romantic gesture and too pure blooded for much else.

Pierre's father was a professor of law and Pierre's mother was a doctor and both of them ridiculed Charlotte's accent from the very first time they met her. Over the years she had come to see that they regarded her as Pierre's inevitable English fling, and their allowance of her in his life was to enable them to keep her uncomfortable and disgraced enough that she never felt comfortable enough to call Pierre from the road and demand he perform a grand romantic gesture. Such incidents led to marriage, they thought, and if there was one thing professional parents rubbing

shoulders with Montréal's best never allowed, it was grand-children with improper accents. Which was a shame for Charlotte, because she had fallen for Pierre, hard, and had always hoped to marry him.

She could remember the moment she'd fallen for him, and how hard it had been. She'd just started escorting and didn't know who to tell or what to say and they met in Parc Jean-Drapeau. They were sitting on the edge of a stone wall, talking and bullshitting and Pierre was feeding the squirrels.

"The squirrels are so fat," he said, throwing the nuts and watching the squirrels lumber after them.

"I'm an escort," she blurted out as she was prone to do when she was scared.

He stopped, just for a moment, before continuing to throw the nuts for the squirrels. "An expensive one I hope."

She laughed and fell off the wall. Such an easy response, with so much care and compassion his parents had never managed to remove from him, she laughed as she fell in love with him, her body hitting the ground with a thud knowing she could never have him just the same.

As it turned out one of her clients had fallen for her, hard, and that was how she'd wound up in the Citroën-Benz with possibly-a-baby inside of her. She'd seen him first after a friend of her gave him a good reference. He was in the internet business, something to do with using computers to predict the stock market. He was like a lot of her clients: ugly, cocky, and with a level of entitlement she had trouble summarizing. Usually she knew how to handle them, laying on the airs of class, sensuality and English-accent to a degree that there was no mistaking what the relationship was: sex for money. But this one, he was stupider than the rest,

and when he saw her affections, he took them for the real thing. One $2000 date turned into another into another, until he was taking her out almost every night. He showered her with gifts and took her on his private jet to wherever she'd mentioned perhaps, maybe, one day, possibly, wanting to visit. Everywhere except Nouvelle-York.

Charlotte didn't mind because he was steady work and she could sell the jewelry almost as soon as he gave it to her. But then his requests became more specific. He demanded she spend an entire week with him, all day and night. She charged him $40,000 for it and he said yes. She returned from the bathroom one night that week to find him crying. He thought she'd left, wasn't returning, and it had literally broken his heart.

Finally he made the ultimate ask of her. Sex without a condom. That was the working girl's first and last rule, the alpha and omega of letting whoever has enough money fuck you: condoms are a must. STIs are the bigger worry, but Charlotte also happened to be between birth control methods. The answer she should have given was clear. But he said he'd pay $150,000 to feel that close to her. With $150,000 she could comfortably visit New England, all thirteen original colonies. She could see the land of her father and his father. She could maybe, just maybe, find out what her father had had in mind when he got she came home from school and he would make her recite Shakespeare and Franklin and Poe to him without a hint of a French accent. So she said yes, and now that client was possibly-a-father of her possibly-a-baby.

There was another possibly-a-father too, and of course it was Pierre. He'd never paid her for sex of course, mostly because she would have paid him if the

topic had come up, but he had been the one man she'd told not to use a condom. She knew what possibly-a-father john was looking for when he'd paid her $150,000, because she'd wanted the same feeling with possibly-a-father Pierre. It was priceless in a way, as were its consequences.

But $150,000 didn't go quite as far as Charlotte had envisioned. Especially when her ability to control money had not improved, as evidenced by the $70,000 car she purchased first and foremost, and certainly not when, upon arriving in Florida at the end of her trip south, she found herself unable to leave.

It was not just the heat, although it was the first time she had been in such heat in any part of summer. What held her in a $600-a-night hotel in Miami was the presence of the Spanish in the air, spoken on every corner she went to and every shop she bought an unnecessary $400 dress in. After sitting in every café and hearing every scrap of this beautiful, different language she could possibly take in; after mesmerizing at how these people flaunted every effort that had ever been made to take their language away, and indeed reveled in their role as second-class citizens; after burning her skin and her tongue every day for three weeks, she finally turned around and headed north again, determined to make it to Nouvelle-York.

Then, before she knew what she was doing, she was there, on the edge of Manhattan, in *le parc du batterie*, where two thousand English, who had once called themselves Americans, had been slaughtered on September 11—another date forgotten by history textbooks' predilection for the stories of victors, who cared little for the slaughters they committed. The air was freezing: not the thick, snowy cold of Montreal, but a

thin, wet cold borrowed from London. And Charlotte shivered as she walked along the park, thinking of Pierre and the last $25 she'd spent to park her Citroën-Benz and her father, mostly her father and her possibly-a-baby and how hard the world é*curuiel* was to pronounce when in English it wasn't a word at all.

Then she came upon a plaque and she stopped, because someone, evidently, had remembered.

She stood in front of the plaque and read the English:

Here, in 1802, the last English hold on the New World was lost.

Admiral Louis Martin continued the work of Montcalm, Morriseau, and Tibery.

Nouveau France stretched from Arctic to Gulf, in one unbroken stream of coast.

And the English songs fell silent.

There was no marking to tell Charlotte who had written the plaque, but she knew the diction, the sway and the timbre in how the lines fell together. They were as she would have written it, as her father would have, as possibly-a-baby inevitably would. And she cried as she realized her father had not loved her any less than the language, he had loved them equally, because in her he had been trying to preserve the language. She cried as she saw that every time he had risen up and demanded the right pronunciation he had meant it to preserve her strength just as much as that of the language. She was the language to her father, and he loved them together as one. Each word she had spoken to him at his bedside had been fractions of her soul, winding about his ears and sending him on in peace. She cried.

It was a good cry. Long and cold and wet as the London rain that had given birth to it so long ago.

IN ACTUAL HISTORY

The Battle of the Plains of Abraham is one of Canada's few contributions to colonial history. While the English were victorious and essentially ended France's ability to colonize North America, a reversal of this outcome, say a complete French victory, might have proved enough to reverse that colonial path as well. If modern-day Canada had remained French, there is a good chance Louis XVI would not have supported the American Revolution, and perhaps paved the way for Napoleon to order the annexation of those same colonies during his impressive run of victories in the early 1800's.

This story imagines one modern-day woman's interaction with that history. She experiences it the same way many Americans and Canadians do: through monuments; through pilgrimages; through stories told by their parents and grandparents; and the scars, memories, and invisible ties of their personal stories.

ABOUT AIDAN DARNELL HAILES

Aidan Darnell Hailes scribbles things from his home in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He also flies to other places in the world when he has the money to do so, and is known to bust out a pretty great rendition of "Ice Ice Baby" at weddings and funerals.

Aidan Darnell Hailes is one of the three winners of the Paradox Short Story Contest 2014.

ENGLISH ACHILLES

By Jordan Ellinger

I asked myself after the battle of Borodino how one disposes of seventy thousand bodies. Although the Russians had lost as many men as I had, their answer to that question was simply to withdraw to Moscow and let the soldiers of the British Army deal with the dead.

I sat in a wooden throne that had been transported from London and placed in a command tent that overlooked the remains of the city. Much of it had been leveled by artillery fire and smoke from several small fires blotted out the night sky.

Another man stood at the end of a large table upon which lay a dozen maps and wooden pawns that represented the disposition of various army units. His name was Lord Willoughby, and he was possessed of a body to match his intellect—thin, dull, and of a sickly color. A man-about-court, the most distressing thing for him about a long campaign was that his meticulously styled beard must surely be out of fashion by now.

"We need to press the attack," he said emphatically. "We should order the Army to pursue the Russians into Moscow and bring the city down on top of them."

The man was theoretically in charge of our forces, but only because the British never really trusted a Corsican to lead their Russian campaign. Despite this, the King could not deny my success in Austria, and later Italy, and their compromise was to assign Willoughby to oversee my operations.

"And if we burn the city how will we feed our men?" I asked, indicating with a wave the fine wines and cheeses that had been laid out on a nearby side table. The alcohol was Prussian and the cheese had been pillaged from Smolensk. We'd been feeding the army from captured supplies, but the Russians had begun salting the fields and setting fire to their storehouses as they retreated. "Though we have fewer mouths to feed than we did yesterday, the food barges only travel so fast."

"Nevertheless," he continued as if he hadn't heard me, "if we allow the Russians time to fortify their position we will lose this whole campaign."

"True," I acknowledged. "That is why I intend to retreat."

Willoughby's mouth opened and then closed again. He was used to my rather unorthodox suggestions, but I could read his thoughts clearly as they flashed across his face. We'd just lost thousands of men, and yet won a major battle. Why should we retreat now?

"I won't allow it." His fist slammed down on the table causing the pawns to jump into the air and overturn. "Don't forget who is in control here. One word from me to my officers and you'll hang for treason."

I realized that I was drumming against the table with

my fingertips. Once, his threat might have frightened me, but not now. I nodded to an aide stationed near the entrance, and he nodded back before ducking outside the tent.

"Where is he going?" asked Willoughby suspiciously.

"Have you ever heard of a man called the English Achilles?" I asked.

He glared back at me, but at last allowed me to avoid his question. "Every Englishman remembers John Talbot. If he had not beaten Jean Bureau at the battle of Castillon, well, I hesitate to say it, but we might all be speaking French right now. You, General Bonaparte, might even be leading a French army into Russia instead of commanding His Majesty's forces, as preposterous as that may sound." He crossed his arms over his breastplate. "However I fail to see how this has any bearing on the present situation."

Several sharp comments sprang to mind about his lack of vision which I quickly suppressed. Instead, I forged onwards. "French tutors teach the story differently than they do in Britain. Allow me to indulge myself a little and tell you the story the way I heard it as a child. Perhaps by the end of my tale you will find yourself illuminated."

Willoughby scratched his beard and glanced at the tent flap as if deciding whether or not to ignore my request. But I'd just won a major battle, and I believe he felt I was owed a few hours of his time.

"Perhaps," I said before he could change his mind, "because he has a French name, English stories tend to omit the contributions of Sir Pierre de Montferrand, but it is due to him, and him alone, that the British won that battle all those years ago."

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Our hero was strictly a mercenary when his story begins. He went wherever there was battle, and in the year of our Lord 1453, battle came to one small town on the outskirts of the French province of Bordeaux called Castillon-sur-Dordogne. Two men fought for it—John Talbot, a general who'd lost his previous battle and sworn in penance to never again wear armour in battle against the French. The other was the brilliant French engineer named Jean Bureau, who'd invented a new form of gunpowder that allowed his guns to shoot further than any English artillery piece.

Talbot's scouts found Sir Montferrand encamped on a dusty plain in the middle of a valley sixty miles outside of Castillon. A small campfire ringed in stones still smoked from last night's dinner and a horse eyed the English soldiers balefully from a nearby picket. An empty wine bottle had been smashed against the rocks, and the flap of a tent that had been patched many times danced in the wind.

The scout who found him waited for several minutes before he realized that its occupant hadn't heard the pounding of his horse's hooves as he'd galloped up. When he dismounted and used his sword to lift the flap, the first thing he saw was the tip of a sabre. When his eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom, he could see that the weapon's owner was a hard looking man with a nose like a falcon's beak and dirty hair. His doublet might have marked him as an officer of some unfamiliar military, but it was torn and faded.

"English or French?" Montferrand asked. When the scout responded the former, he grunted. "Take me to Talbot then."

John Talbot was a tall man with greying hair and a well-kept beard. He wore no armour, as he had promised the French King, and his orange-and-green striped doublet and hose marked him as a nobleman of impeccable taste. He'd outdistanced his army, and clumps of soldiers were strung out behind him all the way to Bordeaux. He would never have been caught in a command tent like the one in which you now find yourself, Lord Willoughby. Instead, he stood on a small hillock that afforded a good view of the surrounding terrain and barked orders to his commanders over maps that the wind threatened to carry away.

Martin Esclarmonde, mayor of Bordeaux, stood with Talbot on the hillock. He wore chain armour over studded leather that had been reworked several times to accommodate his expanding bulk, and he considered himself a fighting man. He sneered when the scout explained to him that Montferrand was a mercenary offering his services to the army. "I think we have enough men to take Castillon without having to recruit thieves and murderers, don't we?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but that is an interesting turn of phrase, isn't it?" asked Montferrand, a strange light dancing in his eyes. "How many soldiers are 'enough'? One more than your opponent? Surely not. A hundred more? A thousand? Perhaps ten men to his one? Darius III certainly thought that was enough when he faced down Alexander the Great, but we know the result of that battle. So if the leader of one of the mightiest empires ever to grace our world didn't know, perhaps you, the mayor of a smallish town on the outskirts of a backwater French province can illuminate us all?"

Esclarmonde blanched and his hand fell to the pommel of his sword, but his stuttered retort was silenced by a glare from Talbot.

"Well said," the English commander acknowledged. "You are certainly an educated, if ill-mannered, man. I don't believe we've had the pleasure?"

"My name is not as important as my blade which, I might add, is for hire."

Talbot surveyed this dirty, deeply tanned man who'd obviously spent many weeks sleeping out of doors and saw more than what stood before him. "Pay him whatever he asks," he told an aide. And then added, "Provided it's reasonable."

Despite Talbot's more than generous offer, Montferrand was a cautious man. So cautious, in fact, that he decided the very next time he was assigned to scouting duty that he would see if Jean Bureau might offer or even exceed the sum that Talbot had promised.

Castillon was a small city on the banks of the Dordogne, strategic in that it was the only crossing for many miles in either direction. The French commander, Jean Bureau, was an engineer first and a commander second, though he had already won more than his share of battles. He'd placed the city under siege, and his army had spent much of the last few weeks erecting huge earthworks reinforced by tree trunks around his emplacement of cannon, such that they were well-protected from any attack.

Armies are interested only in other armies. Montferrand was able to ride unchallenged right to the outskirts of the French encampment, and when he identified himself in their own tongue as an English soldier with information to trade he was granted an audience with the commander himself.

Now I have previously told you that Bureau was in charge of the French army, but this is not true. The French were commanded by committee, but Bureau's

was by far the keenest mind in the bunch. He was a small man with nimble fingers that were always stained black with iron-gall ink from his obsessive scribblings. He kept a mirror nearby with which he could check his face and clothing for stains, for he was as vain as he was intelligent. Unlike most men of that period, he wore no beard at all and shaved several times a day with a sharp blade and scented soap. He was obsessed with cleanliness and so it was that when he met Montferrand, who had not bothered to wash off road dust for several days, he disliked him immediately.

"I have no use for English mercenaries, even those who speak French as well as you do," he said with a sneer. "I know exactly where Talbot's army is and I know exactly how and when he will attack. The man is nearing seventy years of age, and his tactics are well-known amongst the French."

Montferrand looked around at the opulent surroundings of the command tent and removed his riding gloves, folding them over one arm. He had been allowed to keep his sword, but only because two of the largest Frenchmen the army had to offer were stationed directly behind him. Bureau himself sat at his desk, a work of art in mahogany with an unscarred finish and feet carved to look like a lion's paws. He still held a quill in one hand and a half-finished drawing lay before him. He winced as dirt from Montferrand's riding gloves landed on one of his silk carpets.

"Certainly you have some task for a man of my special abilities?" asked the mercenary casually. "I am after all the best swordsman in the world."

Bureau's eyebrow rose and he at last put down his pen, but not before casting a pinch of sand onto the drawing before him. "That is quite a claim. I would

love to see a demonstration of your talents. I was once told that it takes much more skill to disarm an opponent than it does to kill him."

He rolled up his drawing with care and slid it into a leather tube, which he placed with several others on a nearby shelf. "What if I ordered Armand and Benoit here to kill you? Could you subdue them both before they ran you through?"

The French soldiers tensed up, but Montferrand merely smiled and inclined his head. "Without killing them?"

"Indeed."

He shrugged and handed his riding gloves to Armand in preparation for the battle, and then in the same motion slugged Benoit across the jaw as hard as he could. All the tension went out of brutish soldier and he collapsed. Armand bellowed in surprise and dropped the gloves, but it was too late. Before Benoit's unconscious body hit the ground, the English mercenary had turned and kneed Armand in the groin and followed it up with head-butt to the forehead. The Frenchman screamed as his legs gave way and he hit the ground hard. One hand grabbed his crotch and the other his nose, which was smearing blood all over the silk carpets.

Bureau had danced back from his desk and made to draw his dagger, but relaxed when he saw that instead of attacking, Montferrand retrieved his riding gloves from where Armand had dropped them. "Well," he said with a cough, and then unaware that he was repeating himself: "Well. That was certainly a...display. But you still haven't drawn your sword!"

Montferrand laughed. "Mr. Bureau, the first thing any swordsman learns is when to draw his blade. As I

am the greatest swordsman in the world I knew immediately that this was not the right occasion to draw mine."

That logic must have appealed to a man as intelligent as Bureau, because Montferrand was immediately commissioned for a tidy sum. His first order was to go to a priory just outside of Libourne and bring back the Lord of Montglat, who had refused a direct order to rejoin the main army. Montglat's refusal put Bureau in a difficult situation—he could not simply execute a noble for insubordination, especially since he was himself a commoner. As an outsider, Montferrand was the perfect candidate to bring the errant noble to heel.

Of course, Montferrand did not go to the priory immediately. Instead, a short detour took him back to the camp of the English army. Because he'd been spotted riding from the direction of the French encampment, he was arrested, his hands were bound together at the wrist and then tied to his saddle, and he was brought immediately into Talbot's presence.

The English commander rode at the head of a small company of about five hundred infantry and another eight hundred mounted archers—not even a third of his army—and the pace he kept threatened to leave even these few men behind him. That fact seemed to be of little concern to him, or to the fat knight Esclarmonde who rode beside him.

The scout brought Montferrand's horse up alongside Talbot's and then, because the mercenary was bound and disarmed, retreated to a discreet distance.

Talbot clutched the reins in one hand and rode with an easy grace. His gaze roamed the surrounding hills as if expecting an ambush, though any enemy would have had to cross a considerable expanse before they were inside

the range of even the most powerful artillery. "My scouts tell me they saw you leave the French encampment around Castillon," he said at last. "Are you aware that espionage is an offense punishable by death?"

"I am," Montferrand acknowledged, "and if Jean Bureau were to become even slightly suspicious I'm sure he would hang me for it."

Esclarmonde snorted in spite of himself, and even the dour John Talbot's lips curved up into a smile. "You certainly have more *puissance* than any man I've met," he admitted.

"Balls, you mean, your lordship," said Esclarmonde. "With respect."

"Indeed, to use a more colloquial term, you have balls, De Montferrand."

"Thank you, your Lordship. And I am pleased to report that my efforts have yielded some fruit. I have information that might help you deal the French a major blow before your armies even meet."

"Do you?" Finally Talbot turned to look at Montferrand and he slowed his horse until he rode beside the English mercenary. "What is it?"

Montferrand said nothing. He merely lifted his bound hands until the rope jerked taut. A perceptive man, Talbot drew a small silver knife from his belt and cut him free.

"Better," said the mercenary. "I would be glad to share the information I got from Bureau but, if you'll recall, I was hired as a soldier, and not as a spy. The latter occupation carries with it considerable risk, a risk that certainly merits additional pay."

Air exploded out of Esclarmonde's lungs. "Does your audacity know no bounds, man? This is the English Achilles you're speaking to, not some common hog merchant to be bartered with at your pleasure!"

"Pay the man," said Talbot with a shrug. "If his information proves to be less than useful we can retrieve the gold later from his corpse."

After catching the bag of gold Esclarmonde threw at him, Montferrand explained about the lightly defended priory. It was only a slight diversion, but a victory there would rob Bureau of both a contingent of archers and a strategic location from which to attack the surrounding countryside. Talbot did indeed judge the information to be useful enough to merit the gold he'd paid, and Montferrand was allowed to keep breathing.

The priory sat on a small hill surrounded by pine and spruce trees. It sported a single tower in the gothic style and large, arched windows which had the advantage of allowing Montglat's archers plenty of room to shoot. The French had hacked apart pews and used the wood to barricade themselves inside as best as they could, and also reinforced the thick wooden door, but they were dramatically outnumbered.

Talbot's strategy was simple. While his archers kept the French pinned down, he had his infantry cut down a large spruce to use as a battering ram and marched them right to the front door. Each man held a thick wooden shield overhead to shield both himself and the ramsmen from French arrows, but the English archers exacted such a toll that they need not have bothered.

When the fighting was at its most desperate, Montferrand charged his steed alongside the priory and stood up in the saddle, arms outstretched. Windows passed by in a blur, but somehow he managed to leap from his horse and catch onto a sill. He hauled himself up gracefully as his horse charged on beneath him, put his back against the side of the window, and then

kicked at the wooden barricade until the cheaply forged nails gave out. Wooden planks tumbled inwards and he followed with his sword drawn.

Most of the French archers had gone to reinforce the main door and the mercenary was able to cut his way through the few who remained to Montglat. The Frenchman wore a red silk hat with no brim and his face was pinched into a permanent sneer that only disappeared when Montferrand, in a fantastic display of swordplay, cut down the last of his bodyguards and put his sword to the noble's throat. The last casualty of the battle was a young man barely of fighting age who failed to hear the order to surrender and was peppered by English arrows as he stood in the doorway of the priory.

When the surviving French soldiers had thrown down their weapons, John Talbot and Sir Esclarmonde entered at the head of their army, only to discover Montferrand already at the altar.

"He's got the devil's own luck, your Lordship," cursed Esclarmonde when he saw the mercenary had robbed them of their victory. "I'm halfway inclined to drown him as a witch."

"Before today," said Talbot wearily. "I would have said I was impossible to surprise and yet somehow you have managed the feat twice in the same day."

"Then allow me to do so a third time and ensure my place in history," said Montferrand. He'd tied Montglat's arms behind his back with altar cloth and kicked the man's knees out from under him so that he knelt before Talbot as he entered. Now he grabbed the noble roughly by his bindings and hauled him to his feet. "Allow me to take Lord Montglat back to Bureau's army," he said in English, "and I will hand you

another victory before the sun sets tomorrow. All that I ask is that you wait until you receive my signal before you attack."

Esclarmonde's fist slammed down into his mailed palm. "Don't trust him, your Lordship. This is some kind of trick."

Talbot looked Montferrand up and down and once again saw something more than the blood-spattered warrior who stood before him. "Where's the risk?" he asked of Esclarmonde. "We already have the priory and Bureau knows we're coming. Even if our new friend betrays us, all he could hope to gain for the French is a minor noble with no soldiers. Besides, I happen to know that Lord Montglat and Jean Bureau hate each other. It is probably to our advantage to return him to the French." He turned back to the mercenary. "What signal should we await?"

"You will know it when you see it," was all the reply Montferrand offered.

And so it was that he returned for a second time to Jean Bureau. He rode without haste on one of the main roads and was accosted by a group of French soldiers who broke off from the army as soon as Montglat's heraldry was identified.

This time, instead of being brought right to Jean Bureau, he was bound and taken to a supply tent near the center of the encampment where he was thrown to the ground. Two very large French soldiers soon arrived whom De Montferrand recognized as Benoit and Armand. They were men who were accustomed to speaking with their fists, and they had a long conversation with him regarding their prior treatment. They also liberated him of the payment he'd so far received from both the English and the French, and it was perhaps

this action more than any other that decided the outcome of the battle that was to come.

When at last he was brought before Jean Bureau, one eye was swollen shut and he'd lost a portion of a front tooth. He walked with a limp and winced when Benoit put a hand on his right side to guide him to Bureau's desk.

"Do you greet all of your favored officers with a beating?" he asked of the French commander.

Bureau, who was once again seated at his desk, laced his fingers together and then opened and closed his eyes slowly. "I…I think you'll have to explain that remark," he said, bemused.

"Against great odds I went to the priory and brought Lord Montglat back alive and unharmed, exactly as you asked."

Bureau looked up sharply at Benoit and then at Armand. Then he scowled at Montferrand. "You led the attack *against* the priory. You *captured* Lord Montglat and brought him back here to...well I don't know exactly what you hoped to accomplish, which is the reason you're still alive."

"I have not asked for a ransom, nor have I English soldiers at my back. The truth, plain and simple, was that I was not paid to save the priory, nor was I paid to bring back Montglat's archers. I was paid only for the Lord, and the Lord I have brought you."

For perhaps the first time in his life, Jean Bureau found himself at a loss for words. "Well, yes, but—"

"Further," he said, "I can win this battle for you. A service, I might add, that is not covered by our previous arrangement." Montferrand crossed his arms and grinned despite his injuries, radiating enough confidence that Benoit cast a worried glance at Armand.

"You…," Bureau trailed off, searching for words. Finally he threw his arms up in the air. "Fine. Fine." He leaned back in his chair. "I give up. How exactly do you believe you can beat one of the finest military commanders in English history without any men?"

"I never said I could do it without any men. I need two soldiers." Montferrand smiled evilly at Armand and Benoit. "These two. And a cannon."

"I'm not going to give you a cannon," said Bureau, "unless you tell me your plan. *And* I think it stands a chance of working."

Montferrand approached the desk and planted both knuckles on the rich mahogany. A drop of blood from his scalp dripped onto one of Bureau's papers, which caused the latter to grimace and attempt to rescue his drawing.

"My plan," said Montferrand, relishing in Bureau's discomfort, "is simple. John Talbot's forces are spread out all the way from here to Bordeaux. If he waits for them to regroup, then he might very well charge your forces and overrun your position with sheer numbers no matter how fortified you are. Especially if he receives reinforcements from Calais." As he pushed himself off from the desk, he twisted his hand, leaving a bloody smear on the paper. "The trick, therefore, is to goad him into attacking right away, and to do that, I need two men and a cannon."

Bureau stared dejectedly at his ruined drawing, reluctantly folded the paper, taking care not to touch the blood stains, and handed it to Armand. "Fine."

"But…but sir?" asked Benoit.

"What?" asked Bureau sharply, before seeming to reconsider. "No. You're right to question me. But, honestly, where's the risk? What kind of damage can

he possibly do with two soldiers and a single cannon? If, on the other hand, his plan works, we will have saved the lives of hundreds of soldiers and Bordeaux itself will be ripe for the taking. France will once again belong to the French."

Only twenty minutes later, Montferrand found himself, along with his two favorite Frenchmen, amidst Bureau's prized artillery. The French had nearly thirty guns, and hundreds of cannon balls were stacked in several pyramids nearby. Gascony, as you might know, experiences unpredictable weather, and thus most of the powder was kept in small cloth bags which were in turn shielded from a potential downpour by a large canvas strung over one part of the camp.

It was obvious to the master gunner that Montferrand had some experience with artillery, because he surveyed them with a practiced eye and selected from among them a small but serviceable piece. Even though Bureau had granted him some degree of freedom, Benoit and Armand stood close at hand. This was, after all, the very heart of the French army, and Montferrand could not be given any opportunity to sabotage it.

Several soldiers loaded powder and shot onto a mule, while another was provided to pull the cannon itself. The long barrel rested between two wagon wheels, and the whole assembly was pulled backwards to avoid any possibility of dirt or mud getting inside the barrel and spoiling a shot. The mules travelled slowly, and if Talbot and his men came upon them prematurely, the master gunner advised them to leave the beasts and run for their lives.

It took them some time to prepare for the journey and by the time they left camp the sun was only a few

hours from the horizon. Montferrand rode at the head of their group, followed closely by Benoit, who left Armand to guide the mules. The giant earthworks that shielded the guns from attack rose hard to their right, but it wasn't until they'd left it behind that Armand first spoke. "We should be turning west about now, shouldn't we?" he asked.

"Not quite," was all the response he got from the English mercenary.

"No, really," said Armand after a time. "The English army is that way."

Benoit pulled on his reins, provoking a whuffle of protest from his horse. "He's right. We turn here."

Montferrand sighed and dismounted, then walked back to the two French soldiers, indicating that they should also dismount. He beckoned them closer and then spoke in hushed tones. "We're going straight, because if we turn, then I'll no longer be able to see that."

The two Frenchmen looked where he pointed, back towards the artillery emplacement. At its center, still clearly visible in the fading light, was the canvas that covered the gunpowder cache. Benoit caught on first and drew his blade, followed closely by Armand. Montferrand drew his almost casually, and it was as if he'd never really been injured at all.

"Now," he said, "we'll see what we shall see."

Benoit went right while Armand took the left. Montferrand kept his sword trained on Benoit, but watched Armand from the corner of his eye. All sound faded except for the shuffling of boots on dusty grass and the tight breathing of three warriors as they circled each other.

The action, when it came, was lightning quick, for Montferrand had told both the English and the French

that he was the greatest swordsman in the world and, perhaps, he had not lied. He leapt aside from Benoit's thrust, but instead of a riposte, he stabbed at Armand with perfect precision, cutting off the thumb and forefinger of his sword arm and the other's weapon clattered to the ground. In a continuation of the same blow, his blade swept through the air so fast it was merely the suggestion of movement, and the flat of the weapon caught Benoit behind the ear, dropping him to the ground.

He left them kneeling where they were for just a moment to make his point before he ran them through and retrieved his gold from inside their armor. Next, he caught the reins of one of the mules and carried a bag of powder from its saddlebags to the barrel of the cannon, which he then tamped down with the tamping iron.

In the camp behind him, some sharp-eyed sentry had noticed the commotion, for Montferrand was no more hidden from their eyes than a cow grazing in a field, and not much further away. Men shouted and several leapt onto their horses, whipping them desperately as the mercenary calmly loaded a cannon ball and lit the fuse.

Thunder cracked and dust leapt into the air around the barrel of the gun as it rocked back on its wheels. There was a moment of calm before the red hot steel ball it had fired ignited the cannon shot and a huge column of flame erupted skyward. The men on horses were thrown forwards as their steeds appeared to trip and fall nose down, and then man and beast were hurled into the air like ragdolls as the shockwave hit them. Only Bureau's precious earthworks protected the rest of the army, but the losses suffered by the French artillery that day were total.

Talbot, knowing that the conflagration was the signal Montferrand had promised, chose that moment to attack and, even with the fractional army he had in his possession, easily swept through the disorganized ranks of the French.

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It was then that I heard a signal of my own outside the tent, one Willoughby seemed not to notice. When he realized I was finished my tale, he scowled suddenly, remembering where he was.

"Well of course the British stories neglect any mention of Montferrand," he said with righteous indignation. "The man was a shiftless mercenary who did everything he could for money or revenge. If those two French brutes hadn't stolen from him, he might have simply left and let Bureau win the war."

Two soldiers slipped into the command tent and stood a few steps behind the British noble.

"Nevertheless, we French remember him, not for who he was or why he fought." I rose, and though Willoughby stood nearly a foot taller than I did, he took a step back. "We remember him for *how* he fought. He used trickery to play two of history's most famous commanders off against each other. He was everyone's friend to their face, but in the end, he answered only to himself." I glanced at the soldiers. "Seize him."

Willoughby shouted and fell back. There was a short struggle on the floor, but the general was old and too many nights of playing politics in court rather than fighting on the battlefield had made him soft. I waited until my men had dragged him back to his knees before I spoke again. "Because you British omitted him from

your stories you didn't learn the lessons he had to teach. While we've been speaking the French and Prussian troops under my command have rounded up your officers at gunpoint. You wondered before why the Russians had retreated so easily. They did so, because I asked them to."

My last words to him before I had him join his men in the stockades were an echo of those spoken many centuries before by Jean Bureau at the gates of Castillon. "France belongs to the French. *Aujourd'hui et toujours*."

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

The English Achilles takes place at two different points in history. The Battle of Castillon was fought at the very end of the Hundred Years war, which was really a series of wars fought by the British and French for control of the European mainland. Historically, the British lost the battle, and that defeat was said to have contributed to madness of Henry VI which in turn led to the War of the Roses and the loss of most English territory in France. Had the British persevered, England might not have become mired in bloody civil war and gone on to dominate the French on the continent. Instead of leading the Grande Armee into Russia, Napoleon might have become a pawn of British overlords, which is where we join him in his tent right at the brink of another of history's turning points.

ABOUT JORDAN ELLINGER

Jordan Ellinger has been called a "standout" in a starred review in Publishers Weekly. He is a member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association (SFWA), is a first place winner of Writers of the Future, a graduate of the prestigious Clarion West writers workshop, an award-winning screenplay writer, and author of more than twenty works of fiction, including popular series and media tie-ins such as *Warhammer* and *Fireborn*). He has collaborated with internationally best-selling authors like Mike Resnick and Steven Savile (with whom he co-authored *Martyrs*, a military thriller). He is executive producer of *Hide and Create*, a weekly podcast on writing that he co-hosts with a panel of authors and editors, and is a professional editor, having worked as Executive Editor at Every Day Publishing and on the Animism Transmedia Campaign. His film, *Tender Threads*, won the jury prize at Bloodshots Canada and was screened by master of horror, George A. Romero. He is experienced both in programming and writing games (including RPG's) with focus on Artificial Intelligence systems, and has shipped games for publishers such as THQ and EA.

THE GREAT WORK

By Felix Cook

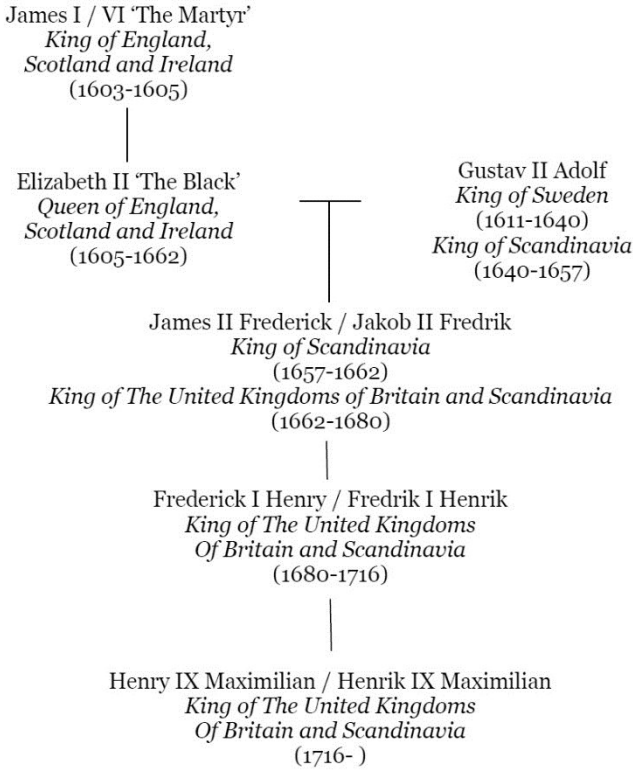
London, 1721

Tomorrow the King would open Parliament.

Sir Christopher Wren, ancient and ferocious, faced down his apprentice architects like an Olympian sage. The Master of Works for the King of the United Kingdoms of Britain and Scandinavia was nearing ninety, but he spoke with the fervor of a younger man. In the chambers of the New Palace of Westminster, his life's work rose around him.

"Our Sovereign Lord King Henry Maximilian comes tomorrow to tour his palace, the first monarch to set foot in Westminster since the Martyr King himself," Sir Christopher thundered. "I do not need to tell you that your godly duty to your country and your King is to ensure we are without fault. To erase, forever, the stain on England made by Guy Fawkes and his traitorous band…"

The Royal Line of Stuart-Vasa



James Bonney had stopped listening. He was staring instead at a frieze above Sir Christopher's head. It depicted the marriage of Elizabeth II: Elizabeth the Black, raised to the throne after the Gunpowder Massacre as the only surviving child of the Martyr King James. Her husband was Gustav Adolf of Sweden, father of the present dynasty. For a woman just married, James thought she looked notably unhappy. History had it that Queen Elizabeth wore widow's

weeds every day of her life after her parents and brothers were killed. Hence the moniker: Elizabeth the Black.

Fawkes' plot had been to elevate her as a Catholic monarch, but in the aftermath of the outrage, the Protestants had still proved stronger. Once the conspirators were all hung and quartered, the nobles had installed the girl as their puppet instead. Queen since the age of nine, pushed and pulled for her advisors' advantage, married off to a soldierly Swede who'd used the wealth of England to build his new kingdom of Scandinavia, living forever in the shadow of Guy Fawkes. James thought that the artist had well captured her desolateness. It was an irony that she now stared down on a building she would have hated; after the Gunpowder Massacre, she'd held court in Norwich for the rest of her life.

Sir Christopher had finished speaking, and now the apprentices talked amongst themselves while they waited for Wren and the master architects to file out. Richard Hughes, James' closest companion since he'd come from Oxford to join the Great Work, bounded up the benches toward him.

"I have some pies and ale for our luncheon, Jamie," Richard exclaimed.

"London pies?" James asked skeptically. All manner of things were in them, but rarely meat.

"Recommended by a fellow I know on Wren's Sanitation Committee," Richard assured him. He was vivacious and dark-haired, with intelligence that almost reached his assessment of it. The son of wealthy Bristol people, he made James' modest life as the scion of country farmers in Warwickshire seem unbearably dull. In the starchy atmosphere of Wren's Great Work, they had become close allies.

Richard was doing an impression of Wren on the subject of the Sanitation Committees. "The bedrock of our greatness is in Protestant industry: the honest provision of nourishment for the people, and the nourishment of their souls with the word of God," he lectured in a shrill and not-inaccurate facsimile of the man himself. James had to elbow him into silence, feigning disapproval as the other apprentices turned with scolding gazes. Inwardly, he was glad to see Richard in high-spirits. He'd been unusually withdrawn, morose even, as the royal visit had approached. Distracted. James had assumed that his master architect had been laying on work in expectation of the King's arrival.

"Where shall we eat?" he asked.

"Have you any sisters, Jamie? If I married one we could always have such engaging conversations." They were lying on the cool marble floor of the Robing Room, the remains of their luncheon scattered around them. In the vast warren of Wren's New Palace of Westminster, it was always easy to slip away and find an empty chamber. The sounds of construction were far-off. One day, people as lowly as they would be barred from this room: from the elegant sweep of its windows, or the radiant blue of its arching ceiling, but for now they occupied it as if they were King Henry Maximilian himself.

James grinned his apology, though the subject didn't really make him feel much like smiling.

"Only a brother."

"You're lucky," Richard told him. "I've only sisters—four - and I'm the eldest." "Maybe I should take one of yours," James suggested.

"Too late," he chuckled. "They're already taken."

James rolled onto his stomach to better interrogate

his friend on this rich and previously untapped subject. There'd been no previous hint of siblings, let alone sisters. James was still of an age where any connected female was of interest.

"Beauties?" he asked, perhaps more eagerly than he'd meant to.

Richard shrugged, playing along. "I couldn't tell you…they're my sisters." "But they all found husbands…"

"I suppose."

"Then they must have good characters," James pressed.

"Undoubtedly," Richard ventured with a teasing air. Whether he was mocking James for his interest, or his sisters for their qualities, remained unclear. "They're all very boring. Sometimes people take that for good character."

James was slightly taken aback. He didn't think he'd ever heard anyone disparage their relatives so openly. His mother occasionally had ungentle words about her cousins in Ashley, but they were barely family, and, famously vexing besides. More than that, she always renounced any bitterness after a while. Richard seemed genuinely scornful of his sisters for the crime of normalcy and James found his affection, usually so loyal, momentarily dimmed. Maybe he was just provincial, but he found something ungallant about it. He sat up, uncomfortable with the easy association of their posture now. Maybe Richard was still acting strangely after all.

Richard read his movement. The November sunlight poured through Wren's great windows, casting the other man's face with stark shadows and putting a proud jut into his features. James considered that maybe it was always there.

"You're thinking badly of me," Richard accused mildly, looking up from the floor with an air of gracious toleration. James fiddled with the grease paper that had wrapped his pie, simultaneously annoyed and embarrassed by his annoyance. "You should speak more warmly of your family," he muttered.

"They're fine people," Richard said dismissively. "They just lack...thoughtfulness."

"I don't think I'm terribly thoughtful compared to you," James replied, casually vocalizing a long-hidden fear. His fingers had knocked a fragment of piecrust from the paper to the floor, and he leant and retrieved it carefully. For a man in his ninth decade, Sir Christopher had an infamously sharp eye for error. Apprentices had been dismissed for less than crumbs on the marble.

"Of course you are," Richard insisted. "You're here, aren't you? At the Great Work. Everyone knows you're the leading apprentice; your drafts are far better than mine."

James knew it was flattery; the plainly apparent truth was that Richard was the favorite. Not for his penmanship and plotters' eye, of which James' certainly were superior, but his manner. Companions were more easily made with wit than drawings, and James found he didn't resent it. It made Richard's insistence of friendship with him even stranger and simultaneously enjoyable.

"What about your brother?" Richard asked, swigging the dregs of his ale. "Is he thoughtful?" He'd adopted the word as one of his private euphemisms, an inside joke to be deployed as covert criticism and assessment. James didn't smile though. In fact, the warmth went from his face like a cloud covering the light.

"He was," he said. His tone made Richard prop himself up on his elbows.

"And now he's dull?" his friend asked amusedly.

James delivered the news, as he always did, with a half-grimace of apology. "He died." The stone cavern of the robing room mulled the echo, considering the concept, accepted it into silence.

Richard lay back down with a sigh. "I'm a fool, Jamie. Forgive me."

James absolved him quietly, clarifying automatically: "He died in the war."

"Which war?" Richard said with an air of weary interest. With their wide-ranging possessions, the United Kingdoms were usually at war somewhere. James regretted bringing it up. It would've been easy to say that Andrew was alive, living the prosperous gentleman farmer's life he'd always been supposed to. Rearing horses and pigs, master of tenants, entertainer to those dull, good people from the drawing rooms of their childhood: pastors, aunts, and well-meaning, wide-eyed girls. Maybe married to one.

"The war in Ireland," James said, referring to the insurrection of some years before. Ireland was the festering wound of the Gunpowder Massacre, a ruin of a place since Elizabeth the Black and her churchly regents had imposed Protestantism by fire and sword. Neither kindness nor cruelty had tamed it when dispensed from her successors' hands. When they banished the Catholic clergy on pain of death, they smuggled them in from the Continent. When they forced the children to English school to learn the Book of Common Prayer, their parents hid them and kept them illiterate. When they tore down their churches and shrines, they held their masses in the woods and the fields. And

for every plantation made and Protestant settled, the wild and craggy places of the country bred rebels, uniting in each generation to ally themselves with the schemes of whatever Catholic prince would try the odds. The place was a hole, a Hades, into which soldiers marched and treasure was deposited never to return. Only the fear of France or Spain kept the United Kingdom's holding it at all. James saw Andrew in his mind's eye, tall and splendid in his officer's coat. He imagined the shiny buttons of his boyhood fascination rusting in some bog.

Richard made a noise in the back of his throat. "If that's what you call a war." James blinked, unhearing him for a second before his anger swelled. The arrogance of him! He knew Richard treated him like a sidekick most of the time, but in his private way, he knew he'd used him as well. What was he to James but his brother's cheap replacement? A shadow of his wit and remnant of his brilliance, a walking reminder of what it felt like to be in Andrew's company.

With this private secret, he could forgive his Richard for his haughtiness, his posturing, his foolish, radical opinions. His stumbling back to the lodgings drunk and James making up excuses for the master architects the next day, or when he copied James' problems and borrowed his drafts.

"You talk too much about things you know nothing about," James told him sharply. Richard looked taken aback. Neither of them could recall a time James had spoken so heatedly to him before. He'd expected Richard to laugh him off or belittle him, but he seemed to sense he'd gone too far.

"Forget I said anything," Richard attempted quietly, but something about his easy assumption incensed

James further. He wouldn't treat him like some other foolish apprentice to be flattered by his attention, some rustic idiot to receive his wisdom. They were equals here, and he'd treat him as such. He'd apologize, this time, and more than that he'd take back what he'd implied about Andrew.

"Sit up," he demanded. Reluctantly, Richard complied. "And take that back."

"I'm sure your brother served well," Richard dodged, not willing to concede the point. "But the campaign…"

"Forget your damn politics."

Richard scoffed. "Here? In the Parliament? It's no war to burn women and children from their homes for being Catholics."

James's face reddened. "Andrew didn't do that."

"That's what soldiers in Ireland do!" Richard retorted.

"The French landed mercenaries at Castlebar!" James exclaimed. "He died for King, and

Country!" His own angry voice echoed around the chamber, dissipating into silence.

"Well, I hope when you meet the King tomorrow, you'll think him worthy of the sacrifice." Richard lay back down again, frowning up at Wren's blue-gilded ceiling. James stared at him stretched out there, feeling the thud of his heart in his chest. If this had been an argument, he wasn't sure who'd won.

"Why do you think they rebuilt this place?" Richard asked eventually.

James continued to stare at him before opening his mouth. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Why build a Parliament, for a Parliament that doesn't meet?"

James shrugged.

"It used to," Richard continued.

"Guy Fawkes blew it up," James reminded him.

Richard clicked his tongue, like James was missing his point, but didn't share what that point might be. "You know, King Frederick, Henry's father, dissolved the parliaments in Scandinavia. Said he'd rule alone. The enlightened despot. Here, he didn't even need to. We already did it for him." Richard's eyes scanned the marble, Wren's gracious lines. "All this effort, and all this beauty, for a palace for applause." He tilted his chin to look at James. "I'm…I'm very weary, James."

James didn't want to listen to one of his rants, and certainly not his self-pity. "You should watch what you say," he warned him coldly. "You'd be in trouble if someone of station heard you." "And you'd report me?" Richard asked. James didn't answer.

"There was a time on this island," Richard sighed, "When a man could say what he wanted."

Somehow, the massive chamber had become too small for both of them. James needed to leave. He stood up abruptly. "No. There wasn't."

"I've offended you," Richard said. "I apologize." James turned on his heel. Somehow, Richard had made it seem the opposite.

James didn't see Richard for the rest of the day. He returned to his master's chamber. It was a long room with bright windows overlooking the water, and what it would be when the Palace was completed James did not know. Somewhere too grand for him, no doubt. For now, it was an empty, well-lit space for the architects to work. It smelled of stone dust and draughtsman's ink; the metrical scratching of the apprentices' quills at their drawing boards and the rhythms of ham-

mers and chisels nearby played a symphony to unending construction. Stooped beneath an ostentatious wig, Sir Francis Reddon beckoned him over.

"Victualed to your satisfaction, Bonney?" the master architect inquired. "Yes, Sir Francis," James replied smartly.

"A full stomach is the foundation of Christian virtue," Reddon nodded absent-mindedly, beginning to hunt around the papers of his desk with chalk-stained hands. Whatever task he had he'd laid aside for James specifically. Lesser apprentices stared jealously at his back, but James didn't care. His confrontation with Richard had put him in a pugilistic mood.

Reddon found the paper. James recognized it as a design for carvings for the Queen's Chamber. "But then, they say, blessed are the poor and hungry." He handed James the master copy. He looked at him with his shrewd eyes. "30 copies, I think, Mr. Bonney," the master architect instructed.

James carefully took the paper. Reddon's design was geometric, his drawing sublimely precise for his geriatric appearance. He wasn't the master for nothing. James fastened the original to his board and dipped his quill, beginning to trace the outline of the form. His copies would go to the carvers and masons who'd translate the pattern to the Palace walls. Precision was everything, and his arm made broad sweeps, his wrist loosening for Reddon's curves and dips. He made a few embellishments he knew the old man wouldn't mind: a leaf here, a suggestion of foliage, so that Reddon's sinuous curves became vines and creepers, petrified in marble. The light started to dim by the twentieth copy, and by the thirtieth the candles in the chandeliers were all but burned out. Most of the other apprentices

had gone already, and Sir Francis to his house and bed. James laid down his quill and stretched his aching fingers, admiring his last duplicate and allowing the shining ink to dry. He gathered up his thirty and returned them to Reddon's desk. Usually, Richard and he would walk to the apprentices' lodging but not tonight, it seemed. The gentle therapy of repetitive work made James feel that maybe he'd spoken harshly to the other apprentice. For his faults, he was still the best friend James ever had. He made a quiet pledge to reconcile with him when he arrived back at the lodgings.

The place to appreciate Wren's genius was from the water. They lodged the apprentice architects across the Thames in Lambeth, necessitating two trips a day on the rickety old horse ferry. James didn't have a natural affinity for the water: the way the ferry ducked and weaved amid the constant passage of barges and all kinds of craft along the busy waterway. Still, he couldn't deny that the view back toward the New Palace from the center of the muddy river was a wonder. Five years spent laboring at the Great Work, and still he couldn't tire of the sight of it at the falling of the evening. It rose in the sky like the moon's dominion over midnight; commanding the water and the city, towering white into the heavens, declaiming its own perfection. The alabaster terraces and ranks of shining windows gleamed in the sunset; the lesser towers wreathed in silver ribbons of smoke from the chimneys of the city, and crowning it all, the arcing glory of the dome, still half wrapped in scaffolding, curving its way to God. At the very apex, they had raised a golden figure: a statue of the Martyr King James, felled on this spot by the Gunpowder Treason and reborn in metal. He burned in the dying light, surveying the Kingdom,

the first and last to see each day's sun. James could stare at it forever.

The boat continued its sloshing, rocking progress across the stinking river, and no one but James marked the last glints of light leaving the King's statue, the orb of the sun sinking behind the great bulk of the dome. He was pinned between the arguing bosoms of two portly fishwives and a trio of travelers with Viking complexions. Scandinavians. It was the mark of sophistication to speak both the King's tongues, but their Swedish was too accented for James' weak scholarship to decode. Instead, he focused his attention on an academic looking youth, a clerk perhaps, or a deacon at the Archbishop's Palace. He was oblivious to the rocking of the little boat, engrossed in one of the lurid pamphlets now popular in London and trying to straighten it against the gusting river wind. The smell of sewage and fish rose up. They'd reached the other side and the green, slime-coated feet of the waterfront buildings. Barely more than a marsh at the time of the Gunpowder Massacre, Lambeth had swelled with an influx of refugees from ruined Westminster, and was now a swarming district of tall houses and wharves cantilevered over the water. "Lambeth, gentlefolk, Lambeth!" The burly ferryman cried, bumping his craft up against the jetty and instigating a new wave of jostling to depart. James readied his elbows and fought his way up to dry land.

The apprentices were quartered at a lodge-house on Norseman's Row, one of Lambeth's more respectable streets. So called because some sixty years before this was the way James II Frederick (who the Nordics called Jakob) had processed to be crowned as the first joint-king of the realms of Britain and Scandinavia. A

little down the Lambeth hill, the Chapel of the King marked the point he'd stopped at the shore to pay his homage to the great ruin at Westminster, and gaze upon where his mother's parents and brothers were murdered. Technically, the apprentices were there by royal appointment, which made the place sound grander than it was, but James found it comfortable, and after the provincial claustrophobia of his youth, Lambeth with all its chaotic closeness seemed like a new life.

He let himself into his rooms, which Richard usually took at liberty to loll around in as he wished, but saw no sign of him. He went across the hall and knocked on Richard's door, but heard no answer.

"Mr. Hughes?" he called. Silence. Richard rarely sulked, so James accepted that he must be out somewhere and returned to his room to eat a simple supper of cheese and bread. He read for a while, and sketched until the hour became concerning. Maybe he really had wounded Richard today. It was so uncommon for them to argue that it occurred to James he wouldn't know how to recognize it. He thought of how Richard had been recently, melancholic and distracted. Thoughtful, not in his usual peacock way, but introspective. Political. James rarely thought on political matters. His upbringing had been conservative, and he'd never warmed to the radical undergraduates he'd encountered at Oxford. God and the King. The King and God. Even the loss of his brother hadn't shaken that certainty. He remembered Richard's strong reaction to his talk of Ireland. Maybe his pretensions to radicalism were less affectation than James had thought. Maybe Richard was a Catholic.

James was shocked by the thought and his mouth

went dry at the memory of a thousand childhood stories of Catholic villainy, from Guy Fawkes up. He had to stand and get a drink from his pitcher. He'd seen a Catholic once, when he was a boy, set upon by a mob. He remembered the screeched obscenities, the stench of the pelted refuse, the man's pitiful sounds as the townsfolk rained blows down on him. The grip of his father's hand on his shoulder, holding him back, but not turning him away. The man was a spy, they said, a papist agent for France or Spain. They'd heard him muttering incantations in Latin. James remembered the skeletal lengths of the accusers' fingers. Eventually men from the militia had come and dragged the Catholic away to an unknown fate.

His thoughts ended with a hammering at his door.

"Thank God," he murmured, crossing quickly and throwing open the portal to reveal a young woman with a drunk leant-up against her. James had taken off his outer coat and wig and blushed at the impropriety.

"Madam, I—"

A groan from the drunk revealed that it was, in fact, Richard.

"Beggin' yor pardon, sir, but 'e said this were 'is 'ouse," the girl told him.

"Uh, well, yes Madam," James replied, still shocked by her sudden appearance. He'd seen plenty of alley girls since coming to London, but never shared a social conversation. She looked at him like he'd gone dumb.

"Could I bring 'im in?" she asked, "He's orfully 'eavy."

"Forgive me," James babbled. She was only slight, it was a wonder she'd got Richard this far.

He had to stoop to help her maneuver the drunken

man through the room where they dumped him unceremoniously into one of the chairs by the small fireplace.

"God bless us," the girl exclaimed. In the light of the fire, he could see she was pretty, with tightly curled auburn hair and small, delicate features. Her skin was smooth and fine, unmarked by pox or ailments, and when she smiled her teeth were crooked but in good order. James realized he was assessing her like one of his family's horses back in Warwickshire, and felt himself blushing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been alone in a room with a woman.

"I hope you're not over-exerted, Madam?" he asked to cover the awkward pause now Richard was settled.

"I wish yer wouldn't call me Madam, sir. Sounds awful old. Me name's Jane Dabney." "James Bonney, Miss Dabney."

She smiled again. "Pleased ter make your acquaintance, Mr Bonney." She seemed to be waiting for something. Richard was restored a little by the fire and pulled on James' sleeve. He leant down.

"Pay the poor girl," Richard murmured drunkenly into his ear, stinking of gin. James straightened up abruptly, his face feeling scorching now. Miss Dabney giggled a little.

"Yes," James blurted out. "One moment, please."

He went to where his coat was lying and hunted around for his money pouch, withdrawing what he hoped was an appropriate amount of coin, and turning back to Miss Dabney only to find she'd slunk up close behind him, close enough for him to smell the floral waft of her perfume. He saw her watchful eyes were green. James pressed the metal into her small, hot

hand, the face of King Henry Maximilian frowning disapprovingly up at him from the coins as he did so.

"Miss Dabney," he said, for no particular reason other than hoping it would conclude their transaction.

"Thank yer, sir," Miss Dabney replied. She looked him up and down. "Unless there's anfink else for yer?"

James coughed abruptly. "No," he rasped, once he regained his throat. "I mean no thank you."

Miss Dabney smiled over at Richard.

"I 'ope 'e's all right. He's always good ter us girls. A gentle. There ain't many about," she said as she turned away toward the door.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," James said earnestly, following her. She looked back at him and giggled again.

"Yer are proper." She paused in the doorway as she wrapped her shawl. "Say, is it true?" she asked. "You two work on the New Parliament?"

"Yes," James smiled slightly, proud and pleased with the idea of being impressive.

"Imagine that," she murmured. "Seein' the King. Well, goodnight, Mr. Bonney."

"Goodnight, Miss Dabney." He closed the door behind her, listening to her steps on the landing, surrounded by the fading scent of her perfume.

Richard coughed, awake again it seemed. James went over to him.

"I want that coin back," he started to tease, but, abruptly, Richard grabbed his arm. "You have to forgive me," Richard hissed.

"It's just a few coins," James exclaimed.

"No, not for that," Richard asserted. "You have to forgive me. Tomorrow. You have to forgive me."

James shook of his arm, and sat down in the chair beside him.

"You're still drunk," he told him. Richard stared at him with a look of such wild intensity James felt he had to oblige. "All right, I forgive you."

"Thank you, James," he sighed, like a man absolved. "You're a true friend."

James felt tired next to the fire and cradled by his chair. He closed his eyes and smiled.

"You're still drunk," he murmured.

The autumn morning spilled in the window, cold, bright and insistent. James sat up abruptly, his muscles aching in protest where he'd fallen asleep in the chair. He looked for Richard, but he was gone. He reached for his watch.

"God almighty!" he exclaimed, leaping up. How had that happened? The King would be at the

New Palace in two hours. He dressed in a mad rush, all the while cursing Richard to the devil for not waking him, and flung himself out into the Lambeth rush. By the time he'd sprinted down the hill toward the river he looked like a madman, but he didn't care as he tumbled onto the ferry. It progressed painfully slowly across the water toward the New Palace, already festooned in garlands and royal colors for its special visitor. If he managed to miss the King's tour of his

New Palace of Westminster and the master architects found out, he might as well drown himself in the Thames than show his face again. Finally, he was at the wharf on the other side. Royal guards festooned with the triplicate-crosses of England, Scotland and Scandinavia were posted at every entrance, but his apprentice's apparel saw him through. Gasping, he arrived at the presentation line with only minutes to spare.

"Where've you been?" Posley, another apprentice, hissed at him. "I overslept," James replied.

"Today?!" Posley exclaimed. A furious look from one of the master architects silenced them. James scanned the crowd. Where the devil was Richard?

They were standing in the King's Hall. One day it would be the entryway for the royal family, and here they would come in a kind of rehearsal, led by Sir Christopher Wren himself, touring his Great Work. A vast painting occupied the opposite wall—the 'Apotheosis of King James the Martyr'. King Henry IX Maximilian's great-great-grandfather ascending to heaven from the burning ruins of the old parliament after Guy Fawkes' bomb. He would walk right by it. Where was Richard?

Trumpets announced the royal party, and James straightened up automatically, checking himself. They were coming down the hall now, a far-off sequence of towering wigs escorted by soldiers. There were peers, and bishops, ministers and ambassadors. Sir Christopher, splendid in a new coat, and finally Henry IX Maximilian, by the Grace of God, King of the United Kingdoms of Britain and Scandinavia, Protector of the Protestant Faithful. Shorter than James had expected, packed into his courtly attire like a tiger in a cage. An angular-faced warrior, flaxen-haired and wigless. They were pausing to be shown the obedient ranks of apprentices and the great painting. James saw Sir Christopher had said something to the Queen that made her laugh. Suddenly, in the corner of his eye, Richard was there.

Richard. Richard, not where he was supposed to be. Richard pushing his way to the front of the apprentices, something in his hand. They said he cried something out—quite what it was, they'd debate for years—but James never heard it. Richard was looking him

straight in the eye. A woman screamed as he raised his flintlock, maybe the Queen herself, and James thought of Miss Dabney. The heat of her palm as she took his coins. There was noise all around but everything moved in a strange, slow tumble. The King was stepping in front of the Queen and Sir Christopher Wren fell to his marble floor.

Forgive me.

Richard fired.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

In reality, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was a famous failure. An outbreak of plague in London delayed the opening of Parliament long enough for the conspirators to be betrayed. Those who survived capture were all hung, drawn and quartered. James I's promising son Prince Henry pre-deceased him, leaving the throne to the ill-suited Charles. Charles I's obstinate autocracy sparked the English Civil War and resulted in his own execution in 1649. The monarchy would eventually be restored, but the principle of parliamentary supremacy was established, helping Britain's development into a constitutional monarchy and avoiding European-style absolutism and revolution.

Elizabeth Stuart briefly became Queen of Bohemia by marriage, but died an obscure relation in the court of her nephew, Charles II of England. Gustav II Adolf, who really was one of her marriage candidates, is remembered as one of the great Kings of Sweden and a

famous military commander of the Thirty Years War. His death at the Battle of Lützen in 1632 cut short any further ambitions. No leader ever succeeded in uniting the disparate crowns of Scandinavia (much less with those of Britain).

Sir Christopher Wren was one of the great polymaths of his era and England's greatest architect. His crowning achievement was the reconstruction of St Paul's Cathedral after the Great Fire of London in 1666. He died in 1723.

ABOUT FELIX COOK

Felix Cook was born in the United Kingdom, but now lives most of his life in the United States. He has enjoyed the study of History ever since a childhood visit to Dover Castle saw him being locked in the stocks and pelted with wet sponges. A chance encounter in an airport bookshop saw that interest expanded to alternate history writing as well. His first Paradox game was Europa Universalis II, and he's been hopelessly addicted ever since. Felix Cook is one of the three winners of the Paradox Short Story Contest 2014.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

By Raymond Benson

The Year 1589

In Response to the Declaration by
THE LORD MAYOR OF LONDON
That Prohibits Lord Strange's Men
From Performing in the City...

The Troupe Herewith Announce a
PERFORMANCE OF

"THY KNAVE'S DOG"

TODAY
14 November 1589
After NOON at
Cross Keys Inn
Gracechurch Street

The handbill was quickly printed just in time for an after dinner, mid-day performance. Although the actors and acrobats had not expected much of a crowd, the courtyard was full. It had been only in the last fifteen years or so that permanent professional playhouses had become fashionable; but "Inn-yards," as they were called, often substituted for venues when standing theatres were not available to the various troupes of players operating in and around London. The Cross Keys courtyard, with its surrounding balconies and open space in the center, was especially conducive to erecting a simple stage at one side and allowing room for over a hundred public souls to stand, sit on the ground, or occupy the few benches. The after-performance festivities often continued into the evening, with the players and their patrons remaining on the premises to fill their bellies with manchet and pottage, and to become inebriated on the Inn's bitter—but potent—brew. It didn't hurt that strolling minstrels also took up residence in the yard shortly after the performance ended and played lively sets with a lute, drum, and recorder until the festivities died down in the early hours of the morning.

It was during the supper hour, already past sundown, when Thomas Pope grew weary of holding court over the drunken revelry in the yard. Being the most recent ad hoc leader of Lord Strange's Men, Pope had written, staged, and starred in that afternoon's entertainment, *Thy Knave's Dog*. Also featured in the cast were such actors, popular with the public, as William Kempe and Richard Burbage. Each man had been vying for power within the troupe of players, but it was Pope who was the boss—*that* week.

"Fine performance today, Thomas!"

The words slurred next to Pope's left ear. He turned to behold one of the up-and-coming new actors in the troupe, a man by the name of George Bryan, who held up his newly-filled tankard of ale, expecting a friendly acknowledgement from the playwright-of-the-day. Pope winced at the man's breath and simply said, "Thank you, George. You were fine as well."

Bryan awkwardly lowered his drink when he didn't get the response from Pope that he had expected. After a hiccup, he said, "I thought so, too. We were very lucky that the Inn could accommodate us today. Is the Lord Mayor mad? Does he not see that the public love the theatre? One would think that he has no appreciation for art and poetry. Who elected him anyway?"

Good John, an obese actor who specialized in comic roles, overheard the question and answered, "The dung sweepers, most likely!" This was followed by belly laughs all around.

Pope wasn't amused. He had been in a foul temper ever since the mayor had made his decree. Pope was sick and tired of the way actors were treated by the so-called city authorities. To them, the various acting troupes—Lord Strange's Men, Queen Elizabeth's Men, the Admiral's Men, Sussex's Men, Pembroke's Men—provided nothing but a breeding ground for crime and civic disturbance. Thank the Lord that clearer minds prevailed in most parts. The more cultured and educated nobility, such as the Lord Chamberlain, supported the theatre. The former Lord, Thomas Radclyffe, the Third Earl of Sussex, had found that acting troupes were an inexpensive and easily obtainable source for entertaining Queen and Court, and the policy had continued with the new Lord, Henry Carey, the First Baron of Hunsdon. As a result, several

standing playhouses were built in London, such as the Theatre, the Curtain, the Rose, and the Swan. However, the nobility was always at odds with the Lord Mayor and his minions over the value of staging plays for the common man.

Bryan leaned in close to Pope and spoke softly. "Pray, Thomas, dost thou think I might have a larger role in the next play? The laughs I received today were loud and boisterous, were they not? I am improving, is it not so?"

Pope hated it when troupe members prostrated themselves in such a humiliating way in order to gain favor. "Perhaps, George, perhaps. We'll have to find the right part for thee, of course. Now be a good lad and fetch me some wine, would you? I'm sick of this piss that Poole calls ale."

"It will be my pleasure, sir!" The young man scurried away, nearly knocking over one of the torches that illuminated one end of the courtyard.

The proprietor of the Inn, Henry Poole, had no problem with the arrangement of having a group of players use his yard—he poured more ale in one afternoon than he normally would in a fortnight. In many cases, the few rooms at the Inn would be booked by the players themselves, who might become so drunk that they were unable to leave until the following day. At least the audience had come to the Inn after all and the troupe had earned a pretty penny. Pope was thankful that Lord Strange's Men could now afford to pay its members and work on mounting the next production. It was just that he felt humiliated for having to play Inn-yards or public halls. The company was better than that. Pope felt his work belonged only on the professional stage, and he had become spoiled playing the

official venues. Oh, to have a real theatre of his own! That would solve everything. For that to occur, however, Pope would need better patronage than Ferdinando Stanley, otherwise known as Lord Strange.

And he would need better material, too. Plays that transcended the works of the more popular playwrights of the day—men like Christopher Marlowe or Thomas Kyd. Pope had been toiling for years to come up with something *brilliant*, but to date, his output was nothing more than the light bawdy fare such as *Thy Knave's Dog*, which he knew would never even be published in quarto.

Pope sighed and scanned the area. The minstrels had gone through their complete repertoire at least twice and showed no signs of tiring. Richard Burbage was busy entertaining a wench and a crone at the same time—the former was at least ten years younger than he, and the other was perhaps ten years older! Knowing Burbage, Pope figured the actor would have both of them in his bed before the night ended. Lucky Pip had already passed out on a table. Hal Smith, the youngest and prettiest lad of the troupe—he always played female characters on stage—was occupied with two boys from the audience. It was likely they had sexual tastes similar to Hal's. Pope grimaced, but there was nothing he could do about that. The theatre attracted the fringe of society—artists and creative people—and that included the eccentric and sometimes perverse.

Then there was the new actor that had recently joined the troupe. William was his name, but beyond that Pope knew nothing about him. He appeared to be in his mid- to late-twenties. William had portrayed a small role in the play and had shown some talent. Pope studied him. The man sat alone, scribbling on paper

with a quill, and displayed no interest in the carousing. The new player must have felt eyes upon him, for he looked up. William nodded at Pope, and then he hesitantly stood and approached. "God ye good den," he said.

"How now?" Pope acknowledged. "Art thou enjoying thyself?"

"Oh, aye, aye."

"William, 'tis it not?"

"Aye. William Shakespeare. My friends all call me Will."

"Didst thou enjoy our performance today?"

"Indeed. The audience was a good one. I hope I played the part to thy satisfaction."

"Fair enough, fair enough. From where dost thou hail?"

"Stratford-upon-Avon. Perhaps thou hast seen my work with other companies? I was in Pembroke's Men for a few months."

"Alas, nay." Pope jerked his head toward the paper and quill back at the table. "What is it thou art so busy writing?"

Shakespeare cast his eyes down and smiled. "Oh, 'tis a play I am working on."

"A play?"

"Aye, my lord. I have written several plays."

Pope leaned forward. "Are they any good?"

The man shrugged. "I think so."

"Wouldst thou care to let me read them?"

"I would be so honored, sir. I do believe our troupe could make good use of them."

"Well, then, let us see if thou hath ability. When can I have them?"

"Why, tonight, if thou art so inclined. I have them

in my traveling bag. I am staying here at the Inn tonight and perhaps longer. I have no wish to go home to wife and children just yet."

"I, too, am staying the night. Why not bring the manuscripts to my room in, say, an hour? Just ask Poole which one is mine."

"I would be delighted, my lord."

Shakespeare took his leave and went back to the table. Pope was certain that the man's work would be terrible. No one could write as good a play as Marlowe or Kyd, although Pope had done his best to mimic them. But it wouldn't hurt to have a look at Shakespeare's drivel. Perhaps there might be an idea or two that could be stolen and worked into Pope's own work.

George Bryan returned with a jug of wine. "Poole said this is a gift for thee. His business tripled today."

"Grammercy, George. I think I shall take it to my room and nurse it until the wee hours of the morning. Anon."

Pope ignored Bryan's "Fare thee well," and went inside the Inn. He had had enough of the minstrels playing yet another rendition of Henry VIII's "Pastime with Good Company."

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Shakespeare delivered the manuscripts as promised. At first Pope was not impressed with the titles. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. *The Taming of the Shrew*. A massive history trilogy entitled *Henry VI*. *Titus Andronicus*. *Richard III*. There were others, works-in-progress, including a romantic tragedy about two teenage lovers and a fantasy involving fairies and a man who turns into a donkey. Shakespeare had attempted to sit with Pope and

offered to read the plays to him, but Pope promptly kicked the writer out of his room, saying, "I prefer to read alone. Out upon it!"

"Prithee, when shall I return?" Shakespeare asked.

"How long shalt thou be at the Inn?"

"As long as thou needest me to be here."

"Come see me after supper on the morrow. I should have made some progress by then."

Pope scanned the first few pages of *Gentlemen* and found it intriguing enough to read the entire thing before the stressful events of the day, the food and drink, and plain fatigue overwhelmed him. He slept through the cock crowing the next morning but awoke excited and curious about the other volumes Shakespeare had penned. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* was a lively comedy but not particularly spectacular. The playwright had said it was his first play and therefore not as good as the others. Pope continued with *Titus Andronicus,* a bloody revenge tragedy that definitely held promise—audiences devoured violence on stage. By the middle of the day, Pope had read *The Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy that made the director laugh aloud, and *Richard III*, which he thought contained a career-making lead role for himself. The three parts of *Henry VI* were uneven, but the middle third was indeed brilliant. By suppertime, he had finished the early drafts of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both of which convinced Pope that William Shakespeare was a great talent, perhaps even better than the clever Marlowe.

Pope held the title page of one of the more recent works, *The Merchant of Venice*. It proudly proclaimed that it was written by "William Shakespeare," signed in the author's scribbling hand.

What if it read "by Thomas Pope*" instead?*

God in Heaven! he thought. Could it be possible...? Might he take Shakespeare's material and make it his own? Surely the plays were good enough to be remembered. He could go down in history as a playwright as talented as Marlowe.

The manager's mind reeled. There was someone he needed to see, and quickly. He splashed water from the basin onto his face, slapped his cheeks, and attempted to smooth his hair. His face in the glass resembled something from hell, but it didn't matter. He was presentable enough. No need to shave the stubble that had grown overnight.

After carefully tucking his money pouch under the waist of his pantaloons, Pope left the room and went downstairs to the Inn's common space. Supper was already in progress. He didn't want to run into Shakespeare too soon, so Pope peered around the edge of the staircase and into the area before nonchalantly strolling in. Several of the troupe members sat at tables, eating the day's fare, which appeared to be rabbit. The thought made Pope's mouth water, but he had a task to do first. There was no sign of Shakespeare, but the man Pope really wanted to see sat alone against the back wall—the scary-looking fellow that was as big as a boulder and had the muscles of an ox. And a horribly mutilated face.

Patrick Ha'penny was nicknamed as such because he had a ha'penny of a brain. He was slow and simple-minded, to be sure, but Thomas Pope had discovered what Patrick's strengths really were and had put him to good use. On the stage, Patrick sometimes played soldiers or citizens that had no lines; as long as he wasn't given much to do, he looked great. Off stage, though, the man could be a very intimidating person. Patrick's

primary job with Lord Strange's Men was to oversee security at the troupe's performances. No one wanted to scuffle with Patrick, and the brute swiftly ended with one blow of his rock-like fist any fight that might arise. Sometimes the man didn't know his own might. Rumors hinted that Patrick was wanted for murder somewhere in Scotland. Everyone in the company avoided him. They pretended he wasn't there, and that was a good thing—for Pope.

The director went over and sat at Patrick's table. "Good E'en, Patrick," he said. "How dost thou fare?" The big man blinked in surprise. The *master* was talking to *him*? "Thou hath been doing a fine job, Patrick, I want thee to know it."

Patrick grunted, "Uhhh..."

"We did well yesterday. Thou didst play thy part in our success."

"Uhhh... *Thank. You.*" Patrick's speech was garbled due to the disfigurement that rendered his appearance so frightening.

Pope brought his voice down to a whisper. "Patrick, I know thou canst do other types of jobs. How would you like to earn a pound?"

Again, the blinking. "*Pound?*"

"Aye. A whole pound."

Patrick's eyes grew wide and he nodded furiously. "*What. I. Do?*"

"Do you know our new member, William? William Shakespeare?"

The brow over Patrick's cloudy eyes wrinkled.

"He played the shopkeeper in *Thy Knave's Dog.*"

Patrick blinked again and then he nodded. "*Aye.*"

"Tonight, William and I will have supper together.

When he goes to the privy, I do not desire him to return. Dost thou understand?"

Patrick stared, expressionless. Several moments passed before whatever thought processes the man possessed began to churn. Eventually, his eyes turned as cold as ice and he nodded to Pope. His sick, lopsided grin conveyed that he was willing to do as he was asked.

Underneath the table, Pope handed Patrick a small pouch full of coins. Then he stood and crossed the floor to the table where Richard Burbage and two other actors sat. That weekend, the players were eating better than they had in a long time.

"Thomas!" Burbage blurted, his mouth full of food. "Sit down and join us!"

"How is the rabbit?" Pope asked.

"Now by my faith, it is succulent indeed. Wilst thou not join us?"

"Later, my friends. I am meeting someone...oh, there he be." William Shakespeare appeared from upstairs, spotted Pope, and gave a little wave. "I beg your pardon, sirs." Pope bowed to his friends with a flourish and then went to greet the playwright and shake his hand. "Good day, William."

"God ye good den, Thomas. Shall we find a table?"

The two men moved to an empty spot near the arched entrance to the kitchen. Pope caught Patrick's eye across the room as they sat. The big man gave a nearly imperceptible nod. At the same time, the lovely plump woman of the Inn whirled out from under the arch and approached them. "Good E'en, Master Pope," she said. "How can I serve thee, gentlemen?" Pope slapped the woman's behind and she emitted a playful yelp. "Master Pope! Zounds!"

He laughed and said, "Ah, Katherine Poole, why did

ye marry that fool Henry? Thou couldst have had *me*, and you'd be the wife of a famous play-writer and manager."

"And not a bad actor, too," Shakespeare added cheerily.

"Let us run away like the two young lovers in a play I read today," Pope said.

"Afraid I am that *young* is not a word to describe me," Mrs. Poole answered with feigned annoyance.

Henry Poole stuck his head around the corner. "Art thou making love to my wife again, Thomas Pope? Am I to take the carving knife and show thee how skilled I am with it?"

Pope laughed heartily and said, "Do not worry, good Henry. I shall leave plenty of our company's money with you this weekend. That should make up for my indiscretions."

"Aye, that it would," Henry said as he rubbed his chin and nodded. "Go ahead, take her."

"Why, husband!" the woman cried in mock indignity. She slapped him on the shoulder and he retreated to the kitchen, bursting his large belly with laughter. Mrs. Poole turned back to the table. "Now if ye *gentlemen* would like something now?"

"A jug of your best wine, Katherine," Pope said. "Put it on my bill."

"Thank you, Thomas," Shakespeare said. "I rarely can afford good wine."

"It is my treat, good man. I have something to say to thee and I would like to be well-flushed with the grape first."

Within seconds, the jug and two goblets were in front of them. Pope poured and the two men drank.

Pope dispensed second helpings and then said, "William, the plays thou wrote are very, very good."

Shakespeare placed a hand over his heart. "Master Pope, I am flattered and honored."

"Much better than the rubbish coming from our friend Marlowe these days. I must ask—who has seen these plays?"

"No one but thee. Thou art the first person besides myself to set eyes upon them."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"Thy wife? She hast not read them?"

"Nay. My wife doth not show much interest in my work."

"And dost thy wife—or anyone—know that thou hast come here with the intention of showing thy plays to me?"

"Nay. I must confess. It took me quite some time to build my courage enough to let thou read them."

Pope picked up his wine goblet. "Let us drink."

And they did. The two men talked of big plans. Of forming a more solid company of players with royal patronage. Of building their own playhouse. Of co-leading the troupe as Manager and Writer, respectively. As the evening went on, the wine continued to flow. Both men became very intoxicated, and Pope attempted to keep his wits about him. At one point, he begged pardon to his guest so that he might run to the privy. Pope stood and made his way out the side door to the small shed behind the Inn. The jake, or outdoor latrine, was unoccupied. He went inside, did his business into the closestool, fastened his pantaloons, and went back to the Inn. If all went according to plan, then William Shakespeare would soon need to heed the call

of nature as well. Pope entered the building, brushed past Patrick Ha'penny and, as he did so, gave a surreptitious squeeze to the man's shoulder. Then he swaggered across the room back to his table.

"That was refreshing!" Pope said. "Now I can drink more wine!"

Both men laughed, more nectar of the grape was poured, and they drank... but then nothing happened. That was to have been Shakespeare's cue to also attend to the privy.

"Thou surest can hold thy water, sir!" Pope said.

"Oh, I have no problem with that. I am quite healthy... *down there*... if thou glean what I mean." Shakespeare winked and jerked his head at Cecily, one of the wenches who worked in the Inn. At the moment her round behind was to them as she leaned over to wipe a recently vacated table. Again the men chuckled knowingly. Even more wine was poured and Pope began to wonder if he would need to go to the privy *again* before Shakespeare had to. And what if the playwright never went? What would happen then?

"So tell me," Shakespeare said, "which of my plays didst thou like best?" His words were beginning to slur.

"Oh, definitely the romantic tragedy of the two children in love. With a little more work, that might be a great play."

Shakespeare nodded. "Aye, that is a first draft. But which one dost thou think will be our next production?"

Pope merely grinned and poured yet another serving for the man. "Drink up, sir. I am going to order another jug of wine when we are done with this one!"

And he did. Much to Pope's annoyance, Shakespeare matched him goblet by goblet and not once did

he move to use the privy. Pope, however, found himself fighting the need once again. It was no use. He forced himself to stand and then stumble across the room to the door. Outside the air had become brisk, but the director was sufficiently numb to the cold. He managed to do his business in the privy without having an embarrassing accident, and then Pope drifted back to the warmth of the Inn. The room spun, and he teetered into Patrick Ha'penny as he passed.

"Sorry, Patrick," Pope mumbled. "I lost my..."

Patrick grunted and helped Pope upright. The director propelled himself forward until he landed back at his table. Shakespeare still sat there, drinking yet another goblet.

"I am so drunk I do not think I can stand again," Pope said.

Shakespeare laughed. "And what a pleasure it is, am I not right?" He downed the drink and then stood. "I suppose I must visit the privy now, too. My bladder may be strong, but it is only so big."

Finally!

"I beg your pardon," he said with a slight bow, and then he walked evenly out of the Inn.

Pope was unable to hold his head up any longer. As his forehead dropped to the tabletop, his last clear memory before passing out was the sight of Patrick Ha'penny standing and following Shakespeare outside. No one else in the room noticed.

***

"Master Pope! Master Pope! Wake up!" It was Katherine Poole, shouting in his ear. He felt her hands shake his shoulder. "Please, Master Pope!"

"*What?*" he snapped, upset at being jostled from a beautiful, mindless slumber.

"Murder, Master Pope, murder, outside in the jake!"

Then he heard Richard Burbage's distinct voice. "Thomas, wake up. Something has happened."

Pope forced his head up and squinted at them. "I beg thy pardon, I must have had too much to—what didst thou say?"

"One of our players is dead," Burbage said. "I did not know him. The new fellow from Stratford-upon-Avon."

"His name was William something," George Bryan added. Several men stood around the table.

Pope rubbed his eyes and focused more clearly on the news. "Tell me again?"

"William, the new man," Burbage repeated. "He was strangled to death outside in the jake. Someone took the man's money."

"Verily!" Pope spat, trying to stand. He did so, but he wavered a bit and steadied himself by grabbing Burbage's shoulder. "Who could have done this foul deed?"

"Poole sent for the constable. The villain was probably a street ruffian. They are all over the city these days."

Pope's eyes scanned the room. Everything was as he remembered it from only minutes earlier, except that many of the Inn's patrons had vacated their tables and were standing about in and outside the building, jabbering about the incident.

One person still sat at his table, seemingly oblivious to what was going on. Patrick Ha'penny was too busy devouring a meal he had just bought with the money

Pope had given him—and still no one else paid any attention to the man. He would forever remain invisible.

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The Year 2014

The National Theatre
South Bank
Presents

"ROMEO AND JULIET"
By Thomas Pope

MATINEE TODAY 3:00pm

Propmaster Nicholas Blanchett folded his arms as the motley touring group of American teenagers gathered around in the theatre green room backstage. He didn't mind speaking to visiting assemblies as long as the students behaved. Blanchett found that the unruly ones were often Americans, although recently there had been some English boys in a tour group to whom he would have liked to administer a beating. It was too bad that caning had gone out of style in the British private school system. At least *these* American boys and girls were well behaved.

The National Theatre—the *Royal* National Theatre—had employed Blanchett over forty-five years earlier. He had served in all the technical areas of productions—lighting, scene building, costumes, prop making—and eventually reached the position of senior propmaster. Now that Blanchett was in his seventies, his duties had been downgraded to tour guide, theatre

historian, and library curator. He enjoyed these tasks and was happy to perform them until his death or when he was forced to retire. Blanchett missed working on the productions, though, but younger and more energetic staff now took care of all that.

The visitors were from New York City, approximately thirty kids between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. It was a school trip for drama students from some specialized American arts school. They were accompanied by three adult teacher-chaperones, and they were all very impressed to be in one of the theatres in the famous complex. Usually Blanchett would first conduct a tour of the building, and this was followed by the matinee performance of a play. The tour always ended in the green room.

"You now have an hour before the play begins," Blanchett told his guests. "I hope you enjoyed today's tour. I'm sure you'll all want to grab a bite to eat and use the loo before the play, so I'm going to send you up to the café, and then you can join the rest of the audience coming to see the performance in the lobby. Are there any questions?" One of the teachers, a thin, redheaded woman with glasses, meekly raised her hand. "Yes?"

"I was wondering if you could give the students any background to the play we're seeing today?" the woman asked.

"Certainly." Blanchett cleared his throat. "Not much is known about *Romeo and Juliet* or its author, Thomas Pope. Being students of drama, I'm sure you all know that the age of Elizabethan drama did not produce many memorable works. Only a handful of playwrights are known today. The theatre *was* popular in the late fifteen-hundreds and early sixteen-hundreds,

when most of London's professional playhouses were first built, but not many manuscripts survive from that time. The major playwrights were Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, Francis Beaumont, um, oh, John Fletcher, Thomas Kyd, and let's see, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Webster, and, um, Francis Bacon, and Thomas Pope, who is said to be the author of this afternoon's play. Of the works by any of these writers, *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the pieces most produced in our day and time. You may know a few others that Pope wrote—*The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard III*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*?"

Most of the students nodded their heads. One of the other teachers offered, "We did a production of Pope's *Titus Andronicus* last year."

"Did you now?" Blanchett asked, feigning respect.

One boy of sixteen raised his hand. The stagemanager raised his eyebrows at him and the kid spoke. "It's generally acknowledged that these plays by Thomas Pope are among the better ones to come out of this period—but he just wrote a few. Why? Did he also write a bunch of plays that flopped?"

"If he did, they didn't survive," Blanchett answered. "When Thomas Pope began writing plays, which we believe was around Fifteen-Ninety or thereabouts, he produced a handful that are considered very good—as good if not better than his competitors' works at the time—but for some reason he lost the muse. From what we know of Pope's life, he managed one or two troupes of players—Lord Strange's Men was one—and he also acted. Maybe he became too busy with other duties to continue writing. Perhaps what he wrote was rubbish and he couldn't top his earlier works. Who knows?"

The woman raised her hand again and Blanchett gestured for her to speak. "I did my thesis on Thomas Pope, so I'm very interested to see your production today. I've never seen a good production of *Romeo and Juliet*. What do you think of the theory that the play was partly written by Pope but finished by someone else who was less talented? Other scholars have concluded there are two different writing styles going on in it."

"I know, and I agree with you," Blanchett said. "Most studies of Pope recognize that he wrote six or seven solid works, and two or three more that felt unfinished or re-written by others. No one knows who his co-writer or writers were, I'm afraid."

"There's one theory that Pope died in a plague outbreak, the short one that hit London between Nineteen-Ninety-Two and Nineteen-Ninety-Four, and that's why he didn't write any more plays."

"Actually, Thomas Pope died in Sixteen-Oh-Three, we know that for a fact. But you're right about the plague. There was no theatre produced in London during those two years for fear that the gathering of civilians would spread the disease. Whatever, the reason, it's just a shame that we have no *great* English playwrights until the Restoration and later. Over in Spain you had Lope de Vega and Calderon de la Barca and those fellows, but here not one playwright stood out during the Renaissance."

"I agree," the woman said. "In my thesis I made the point that if Pope had continued to write as he had, then he might have become one of the greatest playwrights who ever lived."

Blanchett looked at her and smiled, and then, doing his best to resist sarcasm, said, "But he didn't, did he." He then sniffed and announced, "Now everyone, it's

time to go upstairs to the lobby and let our cast and crew get ready for the show. Thank you for coming today and I hope you enjoy Thomas Pope's *Romeo and Juliet*."

The touring group enthusiastically applauded and then joined the throngs attending the afternoon's performance. The tour of the National Theatre was a highlight of their trip abroad.

It was too bad the play wasn't very good.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

The birth date of William Shakespeare is unknown. We do know that he was baptized in 1564 and lived in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, until he made his way to London with a handful of early plays and a desire to work with a group of actors, or "players." By 1589, it is believed that Shakespeare was in the city and working with a number of troupes such as Pembroke's Men and Lord Strange's Men. It wasn't until 1592 that any of Shakespeare's plays were known to be performed in and around London. Thus, it is not unreasonable to believe that the playwright had been working on several manuscripts prior to that year. The nobility and royalty particularly liked the theatre, and these patrons supported the troupes of players and eventually built standing theatres in the city. However, the Lord Mayor and other city officials looked down upon actors and the theatre, and in 1589 decreed that players could not operate within the city limits. Thus, the troupes resorted to playing in Inn-yards (courtyards) until the ban was lifted. The Cross Keys Inn was a real place where

such performances occurred. Between 1592 and 1594, all theatre was prohibited due to a resurgence of the plague, and it was feared that a gathering of the public would spread the disease. Starting in 1594, Shakespeare's plays were performed solely by Lord Chamberlain's Men, of which he was a member. William Shakespeare died in 1616 and is recognized today as the world's foremost playwright. Note that in Elizabethan times, "dinner" meant "lunch," while "supper" was what is known as "dinner" today.

ABOUT RAYMOND BENSON

Raymond Benson is the author of over thirty published titles. He is most well-known for being the third—and first American—author to be commissioned by the Ian Fleming Estate to write James Bond novels. His six original 007 books and three film novelizations were originally published between 1997 and 2002. His most recent series features the character The Black Stiletto, a female vigilante working in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Four books in the saga have been published so far—*The Black Stiletto*; *The Black Stiletto: Black & White*; *The Black Stiletto: Stars & Stripes*; and *The Black Stiletto: Secrets & Lies*—and the fifth and final installment, *The Black Stiletto: Endings & Beginnings*, will be published November 2014. Raymond is also a film historian and college instructor, stage director, musician, and game designer.

THE EMPEROR OF MOSCOW

By Lee Battersby

We fell upon Moscow like hungry dogs. Three hundred thousand men, blackened by months of snow bite and battle smoke; hungry for rations, clean water and any woman we could find. And when we found them, we guzzled them down, threw them aside, and went hunting for more.

***

We had destroyed the Russian army at Smolensk, sweeping across the Dnieper River on bridges we built under cover of darkness. Pushing through the town in the pre-dawn light, we had engaged the enemy forces while they sat with trousers around their ankles and their morning shit still warm in their bellies. That would have been enough for most of us. We were exhausted, bloodied and starving. Our supply lines had

been uncertain for weeks. Now here we were, in an unscarred city with stores large enough to keep us fed and warm for months. But the Little Corporal had other plans. We barely stopped long enough to fill our canteens before he was forming us up again in the city square, striding up and down a platform erected for the purpose, calling on our honour and urging us on to one last, glorious push.

We groused, and moaned. We were, after all, Les Grognards, the old guard, the ones who had a voice. But he stared down at us with a grin on his face, and raised his arms to the thousands who stood behind us.

"You hear?" he cried. "The grumblers are happy! They allow us to share in their joy. And if *they* can be so cheerful, how can we simple soldiers do other than join them in their happiness? Stride onwards, my friends, and let us give our grumblers the blissful death they so desire!"

So he made us laugh, and laughed with us, and he had us again, the bastard. We would march for him, and fight for him, and die for him, and we all knew it. And so we trudged on, through snow-lost terrain that we crushed beneath our boots, and villages we treated the same way. When we came upon the remaining Russian troops outside the village of Borodino we smashed through their unprepared central lines like lions through paper walls, and gorged ourselves on mayhem and murder. This was not the pretty warfare of my youth, with armies formed up in quadrants and battalions, and the order of proceedings known to all. This was a new kind of conflict, where Generals slogged through the mud next to their subordinates, and where the press of bodies and screams of hatred waited for no orders. This was the war of the desperate, the filthy,

the hateful. We were its masters. We bared our teeth at Russian throats, and drove ourselves like bayonets through any armour that dared oppose us. And our Emperor was amongst his troops, no noble diplomat jousting words with perfumed monarchs but a screaming, slavering animal with sword and unsheathed claws like the rest of us, slashing his way forward inch by muddy inch alongside the men who worshipped him. He killed Kutuzov, the Russian General, himself, scrambling through a protective cordon to drive the point of his sword underneath the older man's jaw so that the point snapped off inside his skull. I was next to him when it happened. I saw the blood in his eyes. They were mirrors to my own. We stormed through the Russian positions until not an enemy breath was heard, and the surviving Russian Generals came in from their wings to kneel in the snow before our Emperor and beg him to bring it to an end.

We looked over their heads, past the field of dead men, and saw the road to Moscow open. And our roar shook the walls of the world.

Moscow was unprotected, and unprepared. Nothing would stop us.

***

News travels faster than armies. With the Russian forces destroyed, time was now our enemy. If the Czar and his ministers were to hear of our victory before we could surround them, they would desert Moscow and all we would gain was an empty City. Walls and windows were merely possessions. To win his war, our master needed to capture *people*. But if we could get there first, while the shifty Byzantine and his lapdogs

still believed themselves protected by the corpses that lay under our feet, we could seize the city, its populace *and* its government. The Czar would have no time to flee to the capital. He would be trapped, and the soul of Russia with him. The country would be ours: not just its body but its heart and head as well. Once again we formed up, and this time we needed no impassioned speeches to drive us onwards. We smelled victory. He simply pointed us in the right direction and loosed our leash.

A good army, and we were the best army in the world, might march thirty miles in a day, provided the ground was clear, and the weather fine, and it was well-rested and without hunger or thirst. In the filth of a Russian winter: starving; parched; beset by illness and injury, a lesser army would be lucky to make five or ten through the drifts that sunk us hip-deep in bitter, clinging cold. But we were Napoleon's lions. We made fifteen on the first day, almost twenty on the second. News might travel fast, but it needs messengers to carry it. We left no-one alive to precede us, and by the time the citizens of Moscow realised that the wave of soldiers approaching its walls was not Kutzov's army coming home in joyous victory, we had them surrounded, and escape was impossible.

We brought forward the bodies of their Generals, and laid them before the city gates, just outside the range of the rifles lining the tops of the walls. The Czar Alexander himself rode with the party that sallied out to collect them. Napoleon was waiting. They spoke, and Alexander wheeled away, and our Little Corporal came back towards us, smiling a wolf smile.

"Prepare the siege," he shouted, and his Generals strode away to their regiments to issue orders. The

countryside would be scavenged to within inches of ruin. Farms would be seized, farmers turned out or enslaved. Nearby woods would be levelled to feed fires, and build encampments. Moscow would be ringed with steel and starvation.

We had seen sieges before. They were ugly, hateful things, but they opened walls like water grinding away a rock. There was only one side to be on: the outside, and that was where we stood. Napoleon turned towards us.

"My Grognards," he said. "My immortals."

We stiffened, drew ourselves further to attention. He swept us with his gaze: such a small man, surrounded by his grizzled timber, not one of us less than six feet in height, each bearing the scars of service, of age, and of loyalty. I saw his arm twitch, the hand tucked inside his coat to hide the damage that frostbite had caused. Another reason why we loved him: if we were scarred by our years of war, then so was he. Perhaps he saw my stare, because he turned his eyes upon me.

"You, there."

"Sir!"

"I know you, do I not?"

My chest expanded until I felt my ribs creak.

"Toupin, sir."

"Ah, of course." He nodded. "You were with me at Marengo, yes?"

I gaped. It had been twelve years since the Battle of Marengo. A different country, different enemies, more than fifty thousand men on the battlefield. But he knew my face. I had loved my Emperor for twelve years. I loved him all the more now.

"Sir!"

"A fine day, Toupin. A fine day. You remember how we made Melas run, Toupin?"

I smiled a soldier's smile. "Like a rabbit towards its hole, my Emperor."

He laughed at that, a lion's bark that echoed across the frozen ground. "A rabbit! Yes, Toupin, yes! A rabbit." He shook his head, chuckled to himself, then raised his eyes to me once more, all mirth gone, only business upon his face." Fetch me nine men, Toupin. You at their head. I have work for you."

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

Then he was gone, into the tent that had been erected for him, its canvasses flapping in the wind that battered us from all sides. And I turned away, to be surrounded by my troop mates, and deal with their demands for inclusion as best I could.

***

A siege is a war of attrition. Each side bets its resources and will against that of the other. It is a game of mathematics, of stacking numbers gained against those lost, and tallying the costs in weeks, days, and hours. It is also a war against the weather. In summer we could wait for Moscow's food and water to run out, for disease and civil unrest to act against the populace. Eventually, the people would defeat themselves. But in winter we were at the mercy of the same forces: food was not plentiful, disease and injury were not only hurried on by the cold but caused by it, and months of inaction would destroy morale more quickly than any battle. We might have the Muscovites cornered, but this was a trap that could destroy us both. We needed a second

assault, a way to breach the walls. Nobody was Napoleon's equal when it came to the secret battles hidden within the heart of all conflict. Nobody saw more deeply under the skin of war. And while we may have won the surface battles, he was already thinking of those beneath, and how they may be won.

There were a quarter of a million people living in Moscow. Not all of them were Russian.

"Frenchmen, Toupin," he exclaimed when I took my little troop to see him. "There are Frenchmen in the City. Hiding, I'll wager. Sealed inside houses, or businesses, or crouched in dark corners. Anywhere they can escape the attentions of the locals." He waved his hands at the stone walls outside his tent. "The hungrier they get, the angrier they'll become. And when they can't strike at us, they'll find the next best thing."

I frowned, taking in his meaning. "You want to rescue them, sir?"

"Better." He allowed us a thin smile. "An army cannot breach those walls with anything less than bombardments and siege engines. But a single man, or two or three, might find a way. No wall is airtight, Toupin. Find me a way in, and find me a Frenchman."

So we set to work. Ten soldiers, men of rifle and shot, of bayonets and charges. Now we became engineers and spies, negotiators and surveyors. Endlessly prowling our lines, talking to anyone with an experience beyond soldiering, pulling men out of their regiments to sneak forward under the cover of night. Probing and prodding and scraping away at the walls of the city, scratching away at its surface while the Russians shot at our exposed heads and our soldiers returned fire, not caring whether we were under the line of their aim. We picked and poked and pried and pestered, working our way right round the city

and back again, like fleas vainly looking for blood on the carcass of some long-dead animal. And finally, after a week, we found what we were looking for: an old drainage hole, three-quarters buried beneath generations of silt and shit, home to wiry bushes that camouflaged it from the outside world. But we were the most devout gleaners, my hand-picked crew and I. Slowly we dug the hole out, working carefully to keep the surrounding snow drifts and vegetation in place so that our efforts could go unobserved. Three terror-filled nights with files and hasps, rubbing away at the rotten bars that gridded the hole, saw us through. It only remained for somebody fearless to wriggle down the pitch black, winding pipe, praying with every inch gained that he would not find sharpened bayonets waiting at the far end, or the pipe would not narrow and trap him forever. Evade all that, we hoped, and he would be inside the City.

There was one man bolder than any other, and nobody had the courage to deny him. Nobody but a grumbler. He came to the site in the early hours, before dawn began to stain the horizon, stripped of his ornate uniform and medals. He was small without them, diminished, as there was only an ordinary man hiding beneath the fabric of the Emperor's clothes. When I refused to let him kneel down and slide into the hole, he very quietly, and with great care, exploded.

"I am your Emperor. You will do as I command."

"You *are* my Emperor. And you are also commander to this entire army. What will half a million men do if you are captured in there, or worse, killed?"

His finger was a tiny, yellowed bayonet, stabbing into my chest as he enunciated every word. "I will not suffer myself to be ordered about. You will obey me or you will be dealt with."

Even kneeling, as we were, I towered over him. I was unmoved.

"I have sworn to protect you, and protect you I shall, even to my death. That was my oath. Even if my death is at your hand, I will protect you."

He glared from me, to the hole I blocked, and back.

"And what will you do," he asked slowly, "if I gain entrance, hm? Follow me to make sure I *stay* protected?"

I stared at him for long seconds. There was only one answer I could give, and he knew it.

"Yes," I said, and squared my shoulders. I had only one form of resistance left. "*If* you gain entrance."

He smiled up at me, and held out his hand. Someone filled it with two daggers. He tucked one into his waistcoat, and placed the other on the ground at his knee, hilt towards me.

"Stand aside, Toupin."

I looked at the knife in his hand. I could pick mine up, and he might consider that treason, or he might consider it I sign that I intended to follow him. Or I could leave it where it lay, and he would definitely consider it betrayal, at the very least. He saw that I understood the trap that he had laid, and let his hands rest on his legs. Eventually, I dropped my head, and shuffled to the side. He grinned, and dove into the hole.

"Come on, then."

Sighing, I picked up my dagger and followed him.

We emerged into a world on the edge of ruin. After two weeks under siege, Moscow was beginning to turn upon itself. Supplies were still plentiful: a city of 250 000 people has stores that can survive a winter with minimal replenishment, and drinking water was as close as a scooped handful of the snow that blanketed

every surface. But being trapped, no matter how little that entrapment changed everyday life, works strange magics upon a city's soul. Walls that once offered protection now loomed over everyone's line of sight like the silent bars of a cage. Guards who were once the pride of the populace were now a reminder of impotence and empty faith. Meals, entertainments, family, all the things that once livened the existence of Moscow's citizens were now traitors to survival, sucking away precious food and fuel and energy. In the early days, before the food runs out and starvation makes mad men of everyone, it is not the presence of the siege that gnaws holes in a person's mind. It is the fear of not knowing when it will end, and the sure knowledge that neither surrender nor victory is a guarantee against slow, terrible death.

We crawled out of the drain, smeared head to toe in filth, and found ourselves at the rear of an alleyway piled high with broken furniture, smashed bottles, and household garbage. We bent to rub snow over our faces and through our hair in an effort to clean ourselves as best we could, and surveyed our meagre surroundings.

"Public services," Napoleon noted. "Always the first thing to fall away."

He was right. We had seen it before. I had entered enough cities after sieges had done their work not to be surprised. Duty rang strongly in many sectors of public life, but rarely in civil administrators. Soldiers were tied to their posts by a love of country greater than any distraction, but civilians were weakened by thoughts of home, and family, and possessions. When faced with losing such things, civilians deserted their

posts to a man. Better to be a soldier, and die for honour, than hide with children and feel your heart sicken inside your chest. We slicked down our hair, tried not to sniff the stink on each other, and snuck towards the open end of the alley.

"Where to?" I asked, scanning the street beyond. It was deserted, Muscovites huddling inside their homes to escape the bitter cold of night. The Emperor ducked his head around the corner and surveyed the empty avenue.

"Which way to the centre of the City?"

"That way." I pointed to our right. The street curved away from the wall, following a line of houses down towards a small square, a frozen-over fountain at its centre. Somewhere in the distance would be the great plazas, the golden domes of the Kremlin, and the Czar. But this was a meaner section of the City, filled with grubby grocery stores and chipped cobblestones. Napoleon nodded and stepped out onto the snow-brushed street.

"Let's go."

Cautiously, like cats touring the night, we slipped from street to street, ducking into shadowed doorways to avoid the patrols that slunk past us without so much as glancing from the road beneath their feet. After an hour we had met not a single civilian, and found ourselves at the corner of a much grander boulevard than those we had wandered. The Emperor stood with his chin in his hand, examining first one direction, then the other. I tugged at his sleeve, and he shrugged me off.

"Not now, Toupin."

"Yes, now." I tugged harder, and did not let go when he made to extricate himself. He turned on me.

"What is it?"

"Look."

Over to the east, beyond the crowded lines of roofs, the sky was beginning to lighten.

"Dawn," I said. We stood staring for long moments. I could see calculations skittering across Napoleon's face. Light would mean the resumption of the daily routine, bringing Muscovites out of their houses. It might be easier to locate a Frenchman, and interrogate him to learn how to breach the walls en masse, but two shit-coated strangers who spoke no Russian between them would not evade capture long enough to find one. In the end, he shook his head like a wet dog, and gestured back the way we had come.

"Tomorrow night," he said. "We return then, and make for richer quarters."

We scurried back to our bolt hole, and slithered back to the waiting army. We had invaded Moscow, if only for one night. The next time, we would conquer it.

In the end, we never found a resident Frenchman. His curiosity sated, and his bravado established far enough that the official accounts could be suitably embellished, the Little Corporal retired to his tent and his perfumed bath and let Les Grognards take over the task of slithering through the breach. Without having to bow to his whims we were able to infiltrate the city in military order. We soon located an abandoned warehouse hard up against the wall, from which vantage point we could sally forth each night and observe the guard activity surrounding the nearby gates. Within twenty-four hours we had two dozen men inside the building, and an observation post tucked high on a roof between two chimneys, hidden from view and as warm as it was possible to get in such a city. And three nights

after that, with the rest of our companions forming the sharpened point of the invading spearhead outside, we took our moment.

There is strength in numbers, and there were, perhaps, fifty men within the square before the gate. Our advance cohort may even have taken them: the odds were little worse than two to one and we had the element of surprise. But we had something greater then numbers. We had mystery. So we brought three dress uniforms in through the pipe, and washed and dried them to some semblance of respectability. Dressed as befitted the representative of the greatest army in Europe, I strode into the square with two compatriots by my side. When the shouts of alarm went up and the muskets swung towards us I raised my hands in an amused shrug, and smiled at the terrified faces before me.

"My friends," I said, hoping that someone amongst them spoke French. "Do you really think I'd walk out here like this if you weren't already dead men?"

Perhaps my meaning was clear. Perhaps it was just the sight of three fully armed French soldiers appearing out of the darkness behind them, and the knowledge that the only safe quadrant they had in the world was safe no more. Whatever it was, one of the soldiers immediately sprinted away, and in moments returned with someone whose uniform and bearing marked him out as an officer. He stepped in front of us, and eyed us warily.

"I am Sub-Lieutenant Aptekar," he said in halting French. "Tell me why I should not shoot you down where you stand."

I saluted, and introduced myself. "Sir," I said, show-

ing him all due respect. "There are three hundred thousand troops camped outside your gates. How many do you think are already inside?"

"Don't insult me, soldier." He thrust his face into mine, but I maintained my stance. I was a grumbler, addressing a superior officer and a gentleman. The burden of etiquette lay with him. The power was all mine.

"Sir. I mean no insult, sir. I ask you this one thing." I leaned forward, and murmured so that only he could hear. "Who are you defending with your life, friend? If we have to sneak in, then we will fight from street to street, and it is so hard to tell enemy from civilian under those circumstance. Have you fought in the streets, before, friend? Everybody is an enemy. Men, women, children. Uniforms no longer count. But if we march through the gates, like an army should?" I shrugged. "There are rules to occupation. Rules of honour. An army the surrenders is treated properly, as soldier to soldier."

He hissed. "You expect me to betray my country? You think I will open the gate and let you invade, just because you have the balls to whisper threats of invasion in my ear?"

I straightened, and indicated the men to my side. My meaning was clear. He might be able to see three of us, but who knew how many hundreds of similarly dressed men hid in the dark, waiting to see which way the negotiations went? We grumblers are chosen for our service, our strength, and our height. To hungry men, filthy and cold and desperately frightened, we must have looked like giants. "Sub-Lieutenant Aptekar," I said, with all the sympathy I could muster. "You are *already* invaded."

He stared at us for what felt like the rest of my life.

One word, and I would lie dead upon the cobbles. Finally, he blew out his cheeks.

"I will *not* open those gates," he said, eyeing me. I resisted the temptation to run for the shadows behind. I would not make three steps before I died. I had made my play. I would accept its failure. Before me, Aptekar bit his lower lip, and came to a decision. "But I will not be here when they are opened."

He turned away from us, and yelled something to his men. A brief argument broke out. Angry gestures were exchanged, curses spat in our direction. I understood none of it, but I watched as the Sub-Lieutenant took control of his men, shouting down those who argued and bullying the rest until they lined up before him, and one by one, were dismissed, to go running off into the night. At last, only we three and Aptekar remained. He turned to me.

"Your honour as a soldier."

I matched his gaze.

"My honour as a Frenchman."

"Gah." He spat on the ground at my feet. "We are here because of the honour of Frenchman." And with that he was gone. I eyed my compatriots in silence for long moments. Then, with a whoop, we ran forward and released the gate.

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We formed up in the great square in front of the Kremlin, fifty thousand soldiers in various states of disarray, our blue and white uniforms that had once gleamed so brightly now little more than tattered, patched rags. We stood in silence, partly through discipline, partly through awe at the sight of the great madman's cake of

a building before us, its golden cross staring down like Christ himself was judging our endeavours. Throughout the city another two hundred thousand French soldiers strode along unfamiliar streets, goggling at the bright-painted domes and spires, and the lengths of gilded chains that connected them like some giant, glittering spider web. Faces gawked at us from behind sealed windows, and quickly slipped away whenever we turned our heads. Somewhere amongst them were Aptekar and his men, I knew: hiding; silent; nestling the black sliver of betrayal within their chests. But alive. Moscow was a city of gold and silver, of jewels and exotic mysteries. And now it was French. We had slaked ourselves on Russian wine, and Russian food, and Russian women and now, three days later, we were ready to assume ownership.

At the head of the steps stood a single, small figure, resplendent in full uniform and hat, his hand tucked inside his waistcoat to hide his frost bite. As we watched, another figure emerged from the building and walked towards him, footsteps echoing dolefully from the freshly swept stones: a tall, stooped figure without a hat, the thin ring of his hair only serving to emphasis his baldness. The Czar, Alexander, his head bowed in shame and defeat, abandoned by his army, his ministers, and, it seemed as he stood alone before his new Master, all of Russia. He bowed to Napoleon and the Emperor returned the gesture. As we watched, the Czar held out a sheaf of papers. Napoleon accepted them. Alexander then unbuckled the sword at his side and offered it. Again, it was accepted.

After all the fighting, and death, and desecration, it was over in under a minute. The Czar had surrendered. The Emperor Napoleon, master of half the world, had

added Russia to his collection. He turned away from the defeated prince, and faced us.

"My friends!" he began, holding the sword above his head. And that was all he spoke.

Before we could answer, before we could shatter the sky with our roar, the air was shattered by the echo of a single shot. Men dove to the ground, but I could not. I was watching our Emperor, *my* Emperor. I saw him take a single step backwards. I saw him drop the sword he had fought so hard to possess. I saw him raise a hand to his face, to the dark spot that had blossomed just below his eye. And I saw him fall.

Men were scrambling to their feet, calling out in confusion and terror.

"The Emperor!" someone was screaming. "The Emperor!"

In a moment I found my mind. I swung away from the fallen man before me. He was dead. I knew it without having to run towards him as so many others were doing. I turned in a circle instead, barely registering the knot of men that had swamped the screaming Czar, and who now stood above him, their boots rising and falling, rising and falling. Others were racing towards nearby buildings, throwing themselves at the heavy doors as they tried to break through and wreak havoc beyond. Still more were racing towards the entrance to the Kremlin. What they would do once they gained entrance did not bear contemplation. I spun, and kept spinning, looking for the impossible: a sight of one man amidst all the chaos, a single man who did not belong, still holding the gun that had brought down the Emperor.

And then, a hundred feet away or more, I saw a familiar frame slip through the edges of the turmoil and

disappear down a side street. A man I had seen less than half a week before, to whom I had spoken of honour, and the rules of occupation. As I stood, helpless, staring in silent horror, Aptekar disappeared into the endless winding streets and the anonymity of a quarter of a million strangers. And I knew then that the city was lost, and the Empire with it. The Grand Armee was without its God, too far from home. All honour, all hope, was lost.

We fell upon Moscow like hungry dogs. And when we were finished, all that remained were bones.

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IN ACTUAL HISTORY

In September 1812, French and Russian forces clashed at a small village 70 kilometres outside of Moscow. The Battle of Borodino was the bloodiest single-day battle of the Napoleonic forces, with over 70,000 casualties on both sides. It gave the Russian government enough time to evacuate Moscow, so that when the French finally entered the city a week later they found it deserted of all but a few foreign nationals, and the city largely razed and uninhabitable. It was the turning point in both the war and Napoleon's overall fortunes. The cost of the Pyrrhic victory, and the loss of thousands more lives on the dispiriting march back to France, weakened Napoleon's grip on Europe and ultimately cost him the Empire he had built. Not for the last time, spirited Russian defence in the face of overwhelming odds inextricably altered the face of Western European history.

ABOUT LEE BATTERSBY

Lee Battersby is the author of the novels *The Corpse-Rat King* (2012) and *The Marching Dead* (2013) from Angry Books and the collection *Through Soft Air* as well as over 80 stories in Europe, Australia and the USA. Winner of the Aurealis, Australian Shadows and Writers of the Future Awards, he lives in Mandurah, Western Australia with his wife, author Lyn Battersby.

AFTERWORD

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