

SURVIVORS

Genesis of a Hero

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Following the holocaust the men of God were few.
And Peter was numbered amongst their
enemies. ranked high amongst their tormentors.
For had he not cause? Had not God destroyed
his world, his security, and led him to matricide?
His intents and his actions were evil. He was
without heart. without care. without pity. And
he killed men and thought nothing of it. finding
neither pleasure or disgust in the doing of it.
for he was himself as one dead because of his
guilt.

And no man could have looked upon Peter
in those days and said. 'Here is the defender of
hope, of love and of peace, the chosen instrument
of the Lord.'

Yet those years saw the genesis of a hero.

The Book of Peter: Chapter 2. verse 16.

Prologue

It was four hours since Peter Grant had killed his mother.

The boys stopped in a small coppice about six miles inland from the beach, somewhere north of Dover. It had taken just that long before greed to inspect their booty overcame the fear that had sent them careering away from the scene of their crime.

During the journey Peter had said not a word. The others had spilled out their tension in a torrent of words, reliving their heroic exploit second by second in loud voices pitched

high with excited relief. Only the one who had done the killing said nothing, rendered mute by the traumatic shock of seeing his mother for the first time in five years, lying dead at his feet, a gaping bloody hole in her chest, her mouth still open, his name half spoken upon her lips.

He had thought her dead. Everyone said that no two people from the same family had been known to survive the Great Death. But he had never believed that his mother was dead. Not his mother. She was looking for him, and he had looked for her, even when the tears of loss had eased, only to find her in a moment of sudden crisis, an unrecognisable figure running up a beach, aiming a gun at him, intent on killing him until that very last moment when inexplicably she had hesitated, and he had fired.

'Let's have a look, then,' Dennis said.

He and the two other boys piled out of the Range Rover and descended eagerly upon the contents of the trailer, leaving Peter sitting alone in the front passenger seat, clutching his double-barrelled shotgun as if it were a lifeline, knuckles showing white. He heard their voices, but they were diffused, as if through fog and distance, shrill squawks of delight as they turned up treasure in the heavily loaded trailer.

'Bloody petrol,' Dennis said, 'cans of the bloody stuff.'

'Look at this, tinned rood, peas, meat. . .' that was Clive.

'Hey look here,' said Richard. 'Booze, Scotch, would you believe it?'

They scattered the boxes on the floor of the small clearing, rummaging through them like the greedy children they were.

After a while the trailer was empty.

'That's it then,' said Dennis, 'we'll live like Kings on this lot, eh?'

'Yeah, like bloody Kings,' said Clive in eager agreement. 'Sort out some grub then, get a fire started, I'm starving.' Dennis was the biggest of the four boys and their

acknowledged leader. He gave his orders in the certainty they would be obeyed. He went across to the Rover and opened the passenger seat.

'Come on Pete, have a look.'

His voice was almost placatory. He had a new respect for Peter. In the months the boys had been together they had stolen, robbed at knife and gun point, sometimes assaulted their more wilful victims, all in the name of survival, but none of them had actually killed, not until today. And Peter had killed twice, firing accurately and fast, proving himself in action. But the younger boy's silence vaguely puzzled and worried Dennis.

'Coming?' he asked when he received no reply.

Then Peter turned to look at him, fixed him with blank eyes that sent a chill of fear down the older boy's spine.

'No,' Peter said.

Dennis stood irresolute for a moment, unused to having his authority flouted. Then he could no longer face those eyes and he turned away with a shrug.

'Suit yourself,' he said, pretending nonchalance.

Tom Price stayed crouched beside the ramp on the beach long after the boys had fled with the Range Rover and trailer. The blast of the shotgun still sounding in his ears, a fearful cacophony that completely destroyed his limited valour. He was not a man who laid any claim to bravery.

When it was dark he searched the bodies of Phillip Paterson and Abby Grant. He collected two boxes of matches, the shotgun that still lay beside Abby's body and twenty-four

cartridges. There was no food or water. He was already hungry.. The boat that had ferried the others to France and in which Abby Grant had returned to collect Phillip and himself, had drifted out to sea.

Price spent a few minutes looking through the cafe which his party had used as a temporary home and the few adjacent buildings but found nothing of use to him. He began the walk to Dover.

He kept to the rutted and partially overgrown coast road, ready, on the instant to dive for cover. He had no desire to meet those four boys again.

By midnight he was slowing down, heavy-legged from tiredness. He found a derelict barn, made himself a small fire in the centre of the floor and huddled into his clothes beside it; He ate apples taken from a lone tree in a jungle-like garden. They slaked his thirst but the hunger was still a lead weight in his belly.

He was alone again, his hopes of an easier life in the warm Mediterranean sun dashed. Tom Price felt the silence, spiced by country noises, felt the unaccustomed loneliness, felt desperately sorry for himself.

It was that Abby Grant's fault. Her and her high-flying plans. He'd done better on his own, in the first year after the Great Death. He'd had a Rolls Royce then. The rain began. Soft, gentle, persistent, threatening to douse the fire. Tom Price cursed loudly as he dragged burning wood from the fire and re-built it in a corner where a part of the barn roof remained to afford some shelter. He settled down again to pleasure himself in a coloured reminiscence of the past five years. Yes, he'd had a Rolls Royce, and smart clothes, real high class stuff, there for the taking, no-one to deny his right to anything he wanted. Good days, those days when he was on his own. Then he'd had to abandon the Rolls for want of petrol, the clothes had soon deteriorated and become verminous in a nomadic gypsy life and he'd thrown in his lot with Arthur Wormley and his National 'Unity Force. He'd stayed there for that first winter. There were perhaps thirty in that group, well disciplined, organised and quite frighteningly efficient, given the circumstances. But Tom Price was not a man to subject his individuality to the common good. Wormley's communistic regime demanded more of him than he was prepared to give. There had been an unfortunate incident and Tom had taken to the road again in the following spring. The period that followed, seen in rosy retrospect, did not seem, so bad either. He had forgotten the all too frequent hunger and thirst, the shattering loneliness and the cold, cold nights. He remembered only the freedom, the taste of fresh caught fish and rabbit skewered on green sticks over the fire. Then he had made a mistake. Joined up with Abby Grant, Greg Preston and Jenny, Ruth and the others. He had never felt, one of them, it seemed to him that they accepted him with poor grace, taking no account of his true value to them, working him like a dog to grub a living from the soil. But he'd stayed. He supposed it had become a habit. Anyway, what would they have done without him? They'd never have survived. You needed brains to survive, brains and ideas. He was an ideas man, they'd never understood that about him, instead they'd treated him as casual labour. Especially Abby. It had been her crazy idea to uproot them all, resettle in the Mediterranean, Egypt or somewhere. They wouldn't constantly have to fight the climate, work like dogs to live through the winter. They'd be able to build a better life. He'd warned against it but they hadn't listened. So they had packed up and driven down to the south coast. And the gang of boys had found them and followed them. If the only boat they had been able to find intact had been larger, the disaster that followed would never have happened. But Abby had to make two trips across the channel to the French coast, first, taking Greg, Jenny and the

others, then returning for Tom Price and Phillip Patterson who had been left behind to guard the stores. But the boys had attacked as Abby approached the beach on the return journey and now she and Phillip were dead and Tom was alone: It was all Abby Grant's fault; Entirely her fault.

Somehow being able to lay the blame for events so positively on another's shoulders, dead though she was, eased Tom Price's mind. A single split second of time in that final bloody scene on the beach stayed in his mind, worrying him. When she should have fired at the boy who had killed Phillip, Abby hesitated, lowered her gun", started to say something. He could make no sense of it. Price built up his fire and settled down to sleep, taking the nagging problem with him into his dreams. When he woke 'in the cold drizzling dawn, stiff and aching with hunger, the fire damp and dead beside him, he thought he had' the answer. Although not a man of sensitivity, he shuddered at the horror of it. Abby had' recognised her son in that last second. But had he recognised her? Did he know that he had killed down his own mother? If he did, what would that knowledge do to him? What sort of man would he grow up to be? Then the more immediate and pressing problem of his own survival consumed his thoughts. He put away the knowledge of Peter Grant's crime, relegating it for the moment to his memory. One day, who could tell. One day that knowledge might prove useful. He dried his shotgun with the hem of his coat, loaded his meagre possessions into his pockets and set off again towards Dover. He knew there was a group there. Perhaps they would allow him to join for a while, until he got back on his feet. Perhaps they would appreciate him more than Abby Grant had. After all, he had considerable talents to offer, hadn't he? It had stopped raining but there was a heavy morning mist. He was stiff and weary. One of his molar teeth began to ache. The boys had eaten well, gorged themselves on, the stock of stolen food. Peter had sat silently with them at the fire, eaten what was put in front of him, contributed nothing to the brash adolescent gaiety. For their part, the others let him be. He would get over it, this mood. When they started on the whisky Peter left them suddenly, lurching off into the coppice clutching his shotgun to his stomach, doubled over like an old man. In the black loneliness of the small wood he was abruptly and violently sick. He collapsed onto the ground, grinding his face into the mossy

leaf-covered carpet of the wood, and he cried tears of total desolation, cried until he was empty of all emotion, until the cold of the night entered him and took a permanent place in his heart. He lost track of time. It seemed years before the soft, gentle but insistent rain began. Peter made his way back to the encampment, walking slowly on weak legs. The rain had doused the fire. Beside it's ashes was an empty whisky bottle, abandoned amongst the debris of the meal. Dennis, Richard and Clive had thrown the bikes out of the rear of the Range Rover and had bedded down in the space thus created. He could hear one of them snoring. He got into the passenger seat and closed the door against the rain. The others did not stir. Peter was wet and cold and he shivered the night away. He did not sleep. It was full light when Dennis and the other two woke. It had stopped raining. They found that Peter had re-lit the fire. He was sat a few yards from it, cleaning his shotgun. The metal of the double barrels gleamed in the weak, mist-filtered morning sun. Dennis felt bad. His head ached, his mouth was gritty and furred, his stomach churned with what he thought was hunger. He had never been that drunk before. He was edgy, irritable with the world. The other two were in scarcely better condition. Peter did not look up when the others tumbled out of the back of the Range Rover, stretching and coughing. Dennis approached him, irritated at Peter's continued silence. 'Where's bloody breakfast then?' he demanded. Peter said nothing. Dennis picked up the empty whisky bottle and lobbed it at him. It struck Peter lightly on the shoulder and bounced away. 'I'm talking to you, dummy,' Dennis said. Richard and Clive stood apart from the scene; knowing Dennis' temper of old. 'You killed a couple of people, so what? You never going to talk again?' He received no reply. Peter did not even look at him, just sat cuddling the shotgun. Dennis was suddenly tired of the battle. He felt bad. He could sort the kid out later. He turned away with a parting shot. 'Next time take the women alive. We could've all given her one 'fore we killed her. Do you' good, a good blowthrough, make a bloody man of you.' 'Dennis . . .' Peter said. Dennis turned to face him. 'Found your bloody voice, have

you?' he said. Peter moved the shotgun slightly and fired, all in one easy movement. At a range of six feet the pellets blasted a gaping hole in Dennis' upper chest and smashed him backwards off his feet. He landed across the fire. The flames flattened momentarily, then began to lick at his clothing. Following the blast of the shotgun there was silence. Richard and Clive stood staring dumbly at the body of their leader. Peter did not move. Eventually Clive spoke. 'Bloody hell! ...' Peter broke the shotgun, ejecting the spent cartridge. He re-loaded and sat down with the gun pointing towards the ground but generally in the direction of the other two. Surprising how easy it was to kill, after the first time. 'Jesus!' said Richard. They stared at the killer. His dark hair was long and lank, framing a well structured face. There was a smudge of first hair upon his chin and upper lip. His eyes held them, blank unenquiring, cold. 'What' re we going to do?' Richard asked. 'Pull him out of the fire,' Peter ordered. They instinctively obeyed the new leader, then stood by the body, uncertain and afraid. It did not occur to either of them to ask Peter why he had killed Dennis. It was irrelevant. 'I mean, he's dead, what'll we do now?' Richard asked. 'You'll do what I tell you,' Peter said. He was sixteen years of age. It was five years since the Great Death.

Book One

COMPULSION

Chapter One

They buried Dennis in a shallow grave on the outskirts of the wood. Then they had breakfast.

Peter Grant said little, apart from giving instructions for the burial. Clive and Richard ate little but Peter had recovered his, appetite. Still he was' far from the quiet unassuming character they had known. There was an aura of menace about the boy, an animal ferocity in/his silence that formed a tangible barrier between him and the world. And he never put the shotgun down, carried it everywhere with him as if he were a cripple and the gun his only support.

After the D;leal Peter stood up. The other two looked at him, waiting for him to pronounce on the future.

'Tidy up here. Then go back to sleep,' Peter said.

'Hadn't we better move on?' Richard asked, looking with vague guilt in the direction of the grave.

'You're both tired out. Useless. If anything happened

You'd be useless. I'll wake you when I get back.'

'You're going?'

'Where' re you going?' they asked together.

They feared him, but he was now their best hope of survival, a better hope than Dennis had been. Dennis was already history, Peter the vital present. The prospect that he might abandon them was suddenly appalling. He seemed to know what they were thinking.

'I'll be back,' he said, and walked off into the trees.

'What d'we do?' Clive asked when he had gone. He was taller than Richard and Peter but had always been lowest in the pecking order., '

Richard stared ,into space, picking absently at his nose. He felt suddenly very tired.

'Clear up here, then go back to sleep,' he said.

Once clear of the copse, Peter headed for a low kno11" a quarter of a mile away. The sky was heavy with cloud but he sensed that it would not rain that day. The long grass underfoot was soft and springy, still wet from last night's drizzle. When he reached the top of the knoll he climbed the only tree and sat on a low branch, looking out over the countryside. It was still possible to see vaguely the outline of the fields but the hedges had sprawled and the fields themselves were now lost acres of savannah grassland. To his left was the straight scar of the coast road, patched green where vegetation had erupted through the tarmac. A few more years and the roads would disappear. The few houses were identified as irregular mounds of ivy, behind and

bramble, only in the towns and villages were some of the houses still habitable, in the rural areas a dry roof was these days hard to come by and more often than not a dry building was a sign of habitation.

He had left the others because he needed to think. He could no longer drift along, borne by the tides of someone else's inclination. He had to make decisions now.

At first there had been Mr Fielding. When boys started to die and communications ceased and the parents had riot come, Mr Fielding took a group of sixteen boys, those who were not ill, away from the old buildings of the boarding school and into the country. The idea had been to isolate themselves until the epidemic eased. But the epidemic had not eased and seven of the sixteen boys had died in the first week.

Fielding found a farmhouse, buried the only occupant and set up home with his unbalanced group. Food rapidly ran short and they went scavaging in groups, supplementing their diet with rabbits and stray chickens. They lived like this for two years, becoming steadily dirtier and hungrier as they had to forage further and further afield. During that time they saw only the occasional human being and always kept their distance as Fielding was desperately afraid of contamination. Then they had been raided.

There were six men in a jeep, armed with shotguns. They said they were the National Unity Force. They took half of the meagre food stock. That winter Mr Fielding fell ill. He died in the spring.

The boys were as near starving as made no difference. They split naturally into two groups under the leadership of the two oldest boys, left the farmhouse and went their own ways.

Peter's group numbered five. They survived the summer well enough, scavaging, sleeping rough, always merry, but in the autumn one of the boys complained of violent stomach pains. He died a week later. A second boy fell through the decayed roof of an old house they were looting. His leg had a piece of bone sticking through the skin. He screamed all the time and they did not know what to do with him. In the end he became unconscious and they convinced themselves he was dead and went away and left him behind. The three of them joined a small group who had formed a farming commune near Ashford. There were no other children and they were made welcome. The work was heavy but the food vastly better than that to which they had been accustomed. The other two boys rapidly settled in but Peter remained aloof.

He was certain his mother was still alive.

He remained with the group until the following spring.

Then one night he took a rucksack, food, matches, a map and a kitchen knife for defence, and took off to look for his mother. It took him a month to find his old home. Then he discovered it to be a burnt-out ruin. He set out again for the school, hoping to find a message, anything, But the school buildings were empty and overgrown. He found the body of Doctor Emerson, recognisable by the scraps of clothing and the deaf aid. There was no message. He was finally forced to accept the high probability that his mother.. was dead.

Peter wandered away from the school, heading for the south coast, although, if asked why he chose that direction, he could, not have said. He found that foraging for one was easier than he had thought. He became used to a solitary existence, to long dark nights, to distinguishing between human and animal sounds. He noticed that the small groups wearing the armbands of the National Unity Force were becoming more numerous. He stayed away from them as from all other human contact. He wanted nobody. For long hours he practised with the knife. It had a long heavy blade but was by no means ideally balanced. Even so, he soon became adept in its use brining down a chicken on the run and sometimes even a rabbit.

There were not only humans to avoid. There were now loose in the countryside a generation of bulls who had never known captivity, who had a full set of wicked curving horns and a vicious unpredictable temper. There were the packs of wild dogs, hunting again as their ancestors had, and even the tracks of the new wild pigs were definitely to be avoided.

In those months young Peter Grant grew into early manhood. His body began to fill out, become lithe and hard, and he acquired a talent for individual survival. His natural sense became more acute without his being aware of the fact, his reactions became' animal quick and his stamina was out of proportion to his years. Even so, there were still nights when he remembered other times, warm beds, comforting words, loving touches, and salty tears came unbidden through tight closed eyes.

He came upon Dennis, Richard and Clive on a hot day in late summer, drawn by laughter and, splashing sounds

There were three bicycles on the river bank, rucksacks, a bit of clothing and three shotguns. The boys were desporting themselves in the shallow water, chasing and ducking each other; hooting with laughter. Peter had spoken to no-one for six months, nor felt the need to, but now he suddenly wanted to join the fun, strip himself of care for a few moments and join in the joyous abandonment of his unknown contemporaries. He stepped out of cover and the three boys in the water were instantly still. and silent, uncomfortably conscious of their vulnerability.

'What d'you want?' Dennis had called out.

'I'd like to come in for a swim'
'You alone?'
'Yes.'
'Not sick?'
'No.'
'Had it?'
'No, I was never sick.'
'You armed?''
'Just a knife.'

Peter showed his only weapon. Dennis laughed, the other two joined in on cue.
'Cut your nails with it do you?' Dennis asked slightly.
'Shall I show you?' .'
Peter spun on his heel and sent the knife, winging through the air to stick shuddering in a tree fifteen feet away.
Dennis smoothed his wet hair back from his face and spat into the water. . .
'Okay,' he said, 'get your clothes off, you're in.'
And afterwards Peter, had stayed with them, accepting Dennis's leadership because it was easy to do and because he had no plans for the future beyond staying alive.'
They scavenged in the smaller towns, avoided the National Unity Force patrols, stole from small communities and the occasional traveller, sometimes fed well, sometimes went hungry. And Peter tagged along, always with them but never quite one of them. They acquired bicycles and shotguns, living the life of the parasitic brigand, uncaring of others or of the future.
Then they had, chanced upon the group heading for the coast loaded with stores and equipment, too good a target to let pass by. And Peter had done sudden murder on the beach, reacting on the instant, and had stood over the dead body of his mother.
Now he was alone. Alone with Richard and Clive by his killing of Dennis their acknowledged leader. Now he had to make the decisions
The Clouds broke up and a still warm autumn sun filtered through the leaves of the tree, dappling the face of the young man sitting motionless in the lower branches. He remained deep in thought until well into the afternoon, now and then changing position as his muscles became cramped, wrestling with deeper problems than he had ever before faced. He had been living for the day, now he had to plan for the future.
He had quite quickly realised what had to be done, but he had resisted the idea, seeing it as capitulation, as a move born of weakness. When he clambered down from the tree

And began the walk back to the camp site he knew the decision was already made but was not yet prepared to commit himself finally. They had a few weeks grace the food would last that long.

Clive and Richard were sat by the fire, eating from cans warmed in the embers. They stood up in awkward greeting as he approached, uncertain of the mood of their new leader.

'Hullo, Pete,' Clive said tentatively.

'Want some food?' Richard asked.

Peter nodded and sat down beside them. Richard hacked open a tin' of Irish Stew and set it beside the fire to warm~
'See anything?' Clive asked. .

'No.'

'We're all right here for a while then?'

'We move on in the morning.'

'Where to?'

'A quiet spot in the country somewhere.'

'What for?'

'A holiday.'

'Holiday?':

Richard hooked the can out of the fire and pushed it towards Peter with a twig, then handed over a spoon.

'You having a joke with us, Pete?' he asked.

'No.' Peter ate a spoonful of the Irish Stew. Then he said:

'You have the same, this Irish Stew?'

'Yeah,' Clive said, 'not bad, eh?'

'Taste all right to you, did it?'

'Yeah, fine. Why?''

'I think it tastes. . . tinny, sort of metallic.'

'Mine was all right,' Richard said, 'anyway, what's that got to do with a holiday. . . how can we take a holiday? I don't get it.'

'I'll tell you,' Peter said. But he did not speak again until he had finished the food. The others waited impatiently, unhappy in their uncertainty. Peter threw the empty can into the fire and looked up at them. 'How old d'you think that can of stew was?' he asked. .

Richard shrugged. 'Five or six years.'

'At least. It's five years since the Death. We don't know how old it was before then.

Could have been seven or eight years old, that can.'

'So what?' said Clive, 'last for ever canned stuff does.'

'No it doesn't, that's the point. Canned food is past it's best after two years, I read that somewhere. You can eat it after that, it's perfectly okay and if it's stored in perfect conditions it'll be eatable for, well, fifteen maybe twenty years, perhaps more. But the stuff we're getting hold of has had two mild winters,

three cold winters and' some damn hot summers in between. That's not ideal conditions.'

'Well, it's still okay. If 'it wasn't we'd have been ill wouldn't we?' Clive said.

'It's okay now but it's already seven years old. Even supposing we can go on finding tinned food to live on, how long's it going to be before it's useless? I'll tell you, inside a year or two, there'll be none left fit to eat.'

'So we find other stuff.'

'You think we're going to find a load like this every week? We won't. Raiding settlements is risky. Sooner or later we'd get killed. There's fewer people on the roads now and in the winter there's no-one about except the National Unity Force. They raid the settlements for food anyway so there's not much left for the likes of us to pick up.'

'You saying we've had it, Pete?' Richard asked.

'Not yet. We can go on as we are for months, maybe a year or so if we stay out of the way of the N.U.F., but in the end we'd starve. Better to do something about it now than wait for that.'

'Like what. What can we do, join a settlement?'

'We could. If you fancy :working your fingers to the bone all year round then having the N.U.F. take half of-what little you've got.'

'Well we'd do okay,' Richard said. 'Even when this lot's gone we can shoot stuff. There's pigs and chickens and cows about for the taking, we'd be okay.'

'Until the ammunition runs out. What then?'

'Nick some more.'

'There won't be any more. The N.U.F. are taking over. They'll have all the guns, ammunition, petrol and food under their control within a year. What then?'

'Dunno.'

'Right, so we don't have much of a choice. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.'

'What!'

'We join up with the National Unity Force.'

'Sod that Peter! They're like bloody commies, nazis or something.'"

Peter shrugged. 'Okay, so die then.'

'I meat?,' Clive said, 'we'd, have to do what we was told.'

'That's right.'

'You want that?'

'No. But I don't particularly want to die either. Maybe in time things will change, until then they're our best bet.'

'I don't like it,' Richard said.

Peter shrugged.

'We don't have to do it now, do we?' Clive asked, 'I mean, we can, use up the grub we've got, then decide, can't we?'

'Yes! That's why 1 said we'd take a holiday. Enjoy what" we've got until it runs out. After that I'm joining the N.U.F. What you do is up to you.'

'They might not take us,' Richard said.

'They will. They want complete power, that's obvious. They don't want people like us running about armed to the teeth, stealing what we want, doing what we like. They'd rather have us where they can keep an eye on us. They want everybody and everything. They'll take us all right.'

'Suppose we'd get fed,' said Clive dubiously.

'The N.U.F. will eat even if everyone else is starving,' said Peter sardonically, 'you can bet on that.'

'My Dad said never volunteer for nothing,' Richard observed.

'Where is he now?' Peter asked harshly.

Richard looked away. 'Dead, isn't he.'

'Exactly.'

The subject was not raised again. An hour later they \ packed the Range Rover and the trailer and set off on holiday. Tom Price was in poor shape when he reached the barrier across the road on the outskirts of Dover. He had not eaten for two days, he had slept little and badly, and he was desperately tired.

When he saw the men behind the barrier he waved wearily and revealed the shotgun, holding it by the stock with the, muzzle pointing to the ground in what he hoped would be seen as a gesture of friendliness.

They came out to meet him, three men armed with two shotguns and a rifle. The ginger headed man with the hooked nose seemed to be the leader. His greeting was hardly promising.

'Who're you? What d'you want?'

'I'm Tom Price, I want to join you.' He would have been unable to keep the self-pitying whine from his voice even had he deemed, it wise. As things were, subservience seemed the order of the day.

'Where'd you come from?'

They were, covering him with their weapons, openly hostile, faces hard with suspicion.

'Down the coast. I was with a party. We were all going over to France on a boat, see? But they abandoned me, left me behind.. after all I'd done for them too.'

The red-haired man stuck the barrel of his gun into Price's face. Price moved away from it. , 'Here.. steady on, man.'

"You're a liar. You're a N.U.F. spy.'

'What! Me? Never. Look at me, do I look like a spy?'
 'Yes; mate. You look just like a bloody spy.'
 Then Tom Price had a rare flash of genius. He recalled that Greg, Ruth and Bill had spoken to some of the Dover people on the journey down to the coast and had been offered a trip to France, at a price.
 'I can prove it,' he said hastily. 'I can prove I'm telling the truth. We came by here two weeks ago. Some of our group came in here, spoke to some of your people. Two men and a woman, Greg, Bill and Ruth. You offered them a trip over to France.'
 'Not me.'
 'Someone. Whoever it was wanted petrol and food in payment but they didn't trust you, moved on down the coast and found a boat.'
 'There aren't any boats left fit to go to sea in. We collected them all.'
 'This one was on a trailer in front of a house, back in a town.'
 'What town?'
 'I don't know, man. How should I know? It's the truth I tell you. . .'
 'And they left you behind?'
 'They did, the bastards.'
 'Why?'
 A good question. And one that Tom Price had not properly prepared for. But he had a facility with words. He was an accomplished liar, often uncertain himself where his lies, his wild fantasies ended and the truth began. He had already accepted the fabrication of his abandonment as truth and outraged innocence showed in his reply.
 'A mouth too many to feed, boy, that's what it was. That's, what it came to. Different story in the settlement, when they needed me, to bring in the food, manage the crops for them, useful I was then, different story then I can tell you. Live off the land, I can see.'
 'You're a farmer then?'
 'Oh; yes. Farm manager for Lord Glamorgan, I was. Had charge of seven thousand acres. Twenty men under me. Head gamekeeper as well, see. Bred thousands of pheasants and such, like putty in my hands those birds were. Man of nature see, know about those things I do.'
 The men were uncertain. Little as Tom Price looked like an ex-farm manager for a wealthy landowner, he looked and sounded even less like an N.U.F. spy.
 'Come with me,' said the ginger haired man.
 They put him in the back of a small van parked beside the barricade and drove him into the town of Dover, through main streets which had been cleared of abandoned and rusting vehicles just sufficiently to allow passage. Most of the side roads were still blocked and skulls and crossbones were daubed in white paint on the corner buildings, all the warning needed to keep enterprising scavengers away.
 The van stopped in the dock area. He was taken into a tall building overlooking the harbour and locked in a small, bare windowless room. After a while a man unlocked

the door and entered, stood looking at Price. He was in his mid-forties, short and plump, almost completely bald. He had intense blue eyes, the eyes of an interrogator. But he seemed amiable enough.
 'You've had a rough time I hear,' he said as Price scrambled to his feet.
 'Yes, sir. That's true. Thought I'd be welcome here I did, man of my talents and abilities.'
 'You must forgive my men; We've had a lot of trouble from the N.U.F. They'll try to wipe us out one day I expect.'
 'But not yet, eh? You don't expect that yet?' Price enquired anxiously.
 The man smiled briefly: 'No, not yet. We're fairly well dug in here. However, I was referring to your misfortune before you came here. You were abandoned by your group you say?'
 'That's right. . .' Price began to repeat his story but the man cut him short.
 'I heard.' Then he unexpectedly put out his hand. 'My name is Wallace. You could say I'm in charge here.'
 Tom Price stuck out his hand eagerly, unabashed by the fact that it was grimy, the long nails split and broken, packed with dirt. Wallace took it nonetheless. His grip was firm and definite.
 'Tom Price, sir. Pleasure to meet you, sir.'
 'Now, what are we to do with you Tom Price? We have no farms here.'
 'I'm very handy sir, very adaptable, turn my hand to anything I can.'
 'What about fishing?'
 'Ah, fishing,' said Tom, spreading his hands in an expansive gesture, 'second nature to me, fishing. When I was working with Lord Glamorgan. . . called me Tom, he did, "Tom" he'd say to me, "don't know where I'd be without you." Salmon, trout, you name it I've caught it . . . never short of salmon on his Lordship's table I'll tell you. . .'
 'We fish for mackerel mainly,' said Wallace.
 'All fish, isn't it?' said Price, condescendingly.
 'You could say that. Stay here. Someone will show you the messroom and your bed. You'll be allocated to a boat tomorrow morning. In the meantime you look as if you could do with a rest and a meal.'
 Wallace headed for the door.
 'I could, sir, 'starving, I am,' said Price eagerly, rubbing his hands together like a usurer.
 'One other thing. . .' Wallace said, hesitating in the open door.
 'Yes?'
 'We have no time for complicated justice. Life here is too hard, too busy, you understand?'
 'Oh, well, yes of course, I . . .'
 'So if we find that you've lied to us . . . we'll shoot you.'

The boys camped a few hundred yards into the Lyminge Forest within a mile of the Dover to London Road. Peter Grant insisted that they maintained patrols of the area and kept a night watch. They did not use the Range Rover nor did they hunt with the shotguns. Peter had no intention of being captured by the N.U.F. before the holiday was over, it was important that they present themselves as willing recruits when the time came.

They passed their time in contented idleness, eating, sleeping, walking in the forest, chasing wild chickens, throwing stones at the squirrels, wrestling and talking. But they never spoke of the future, that was already decided.

Some two weeks after they arrived, Peter and Richard went out on patrol on foot, having left Clive in the camp to prepare the meal. On the Dover Road they saw the biggest N.U.F. contingent either of them had ever met with. It was an impressive show of force.

The column was led by two men on motorcycles. Behind them was an open Landrover in the back seat of which were two men wearing long overcoats and peaked caps. Following up were seven army trucks and an assortment of other commercial vehicles all packed with men. There must have been two hundred in all. The soldiers wore a motley collection of clothes but all had the red arm bands of the N.U.F. As far as the boys could see they were all armed with rifles and trailed behind the last of the lorries was a four inch field gun.

'Someone's going to cop it,' Richard said.

'Probably those people at Dover,' Peter judged.

'They'll give up won't they? They'll not fight that lot will they?'

Peter shrugged. 'Who knows?'

They waited half an hour after the last vehicle had passed before moving off.

'Reckon I'd get to fire that big gun?' Richard asked as they followed an overgrown hedge along a line of fields.

'If that's your ambition,' Peter said.

'Wouldn't mind. What d'you want to do?'

'In the N.U.F?'

'Yes.'

'Work my way through it and out the other side.'

'Eh?' Richard struggled to catch up with his leader who was striding ahead. 'What d'you mean? I don't understand.'

But Peter did not reply. He did not fully understand himself.

They saw the fire from over a mile away, smoke drifting skywards above a cluster of conifers. They headed for it warily, hugging to the cover of the hedgerow as they approached the farmhouse. Then they heard a single shot, rapidly followed by two more. They cut across a kitchen garden at the side of the house. It was neatly laid out,

weed free and there were still some growing root crops. A woman screamed, desperate and helpless. Peering round the corner of the house they saw a pitiful scene. A storage barn was on fire. A jeep was parked near the building. In front of it were three bodies. One was a man wearing the N.U.F. armband, the second a young man of about twenty, the third a large mongrel dog. They had all died from the same cause, shotguns fired from close range. The dog's head was attached to its body only by bloodied tendons. The N.U.F. man had lost his face, the other man had a gaping hole in his chest.

Two other men wearing N.U.F. armbands were dragging a woman from the house towards the jeep. She was young, perhaps no more than seventeen or eighteen. She fought and kicked and screamed, piercing screams from the depths of her fear. 'Cover me, Rich. I'm going to take them,' Peter said.

Chapter Two

Peter grasped his shotgun in one hand, his knife in the other and slipped round the corner of the house before Richard had time to argue. He ran in a low crouch towards the group, working the knife round so that it was flat in his hand. 'Hi!

At the last moment the men heard him but the knife was already in the air and it took the nearest one cleanly in the neck. He dropped to the ground in a crumpled heap. The!

second man was slow off the mark, stunned by the suddenness of the attack. He released his hold on the woman and began to swing his shotgun round in a painfully slow arc to cover the assailant.

Peter fired from six feet. The blast took the man in the chest and catapulted him backwards, instantly dead. How easy it was to kill. Peter, pulled the knife from the neck of the first man and cleaned it on the corpse's clothes.

The girl sat on the ground with her legs crookedly beneath her, staring at her rescuer with eyes blank from shock. Peter grasped her arm and pulled her to her feet. He did not speak to her, just pushed her ahead of him towards the corner of the house where a highly nervous Richard was waiting.

'Bloody hell, Peter! ...' Richard started to say.

'We'd better keep moving,' Peter said, indicating the way they had come with his shotgun.

'What about the Landrover? Why don't we take that?' Richard asked.

'Leave it as it is. The N.U.F. will think it was a shootout and they all died.'

'But the girl, they'll know she was there.'

'They'll think she ran' off. Come on, get going.'

Afterwards Peter wondered why he had bothered to save the girl. It would have been easier to have left well alone.

They took her back to the campsite and fed her, then put her to bed in the Range Rover.

'What'll we do with her?' Clive asked. 'I drop her off at a settlement as soon as she's recovered,' Peter answered.

Later that evening Peggy told them her story. She and Roy Callis had been at the farm for nearly two years, having left a settlement to go it alone. Then, three months ago, the N.U.F. told Roy he had to join them for military service; He refused and since then they had virtually been under siege. That afternoon they had come again. This time they did not stop to parley. They set fire to the food store and shot the couple's pet dog when it went for them. Roy had gone completely mad, rushed out of the house and shot one of them before being gunned down himself.

'He should have joined,' Peter said.

'He wouldn't. He said they were bloody commies.'

'Maybe they are.'

'I haven't thanked you,' Peggy said. She began to cry.

'Believe me, I'm grateful for what you did, it's just. . . it was so sudden, so horrible. And I'll miss him.'

She stayed with them for five days. Then the food was running short and the holiday was over. They abandoned the trailer, placed what remained of the food and petrol in the back of the Range Rover and set off, heading for the Dover road.

They dropped Peggy off near a settlement, just outside Canterbury. She stood and watched them drive away; Peter screwed round in his seat to look at her diminishing figure. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, a fullsome figure. She was quite pretty. It crossed his mind that he could have taken her, had he wished. But he lacked sexual experience. He would barely have known what to do. Peter was still a virgin.

The main London-Dover dual carriageway was pitted and scarred with patches of vegetation that had found every crack and cranny, every weakness in the hard surface. Yet it was not overgrown to any extent and abandoned vehicles and fallen telegraph poles and lines had been cleared away to the verge. It was evidently still in fairly regular use. They passed two vehicles in the first hour, both heading towards Dover, both containing N.U.F. men. But they were not stopped. Peter had taken the precaution of tying a strip of red cloth to the radio aerial on the Range Rover. It worked like a charm until they came to the first road block on the outskirts of Rochester.

Only then did Richard bring up a problem that had been worrying him for days.

'We killed two of their blokes,' he said. 'They might've found out. If they know what we did they'll kill us.'

'They won't know. They'll think it was a shoot-out, as I said. You two keep quiet and they'll never know,' Peter said calmly.

'They might, they just might,' said Clive anxiously.

'What about the girl? that girl Peggy. She knows,' Richard pointed out.

'She can't tell. If she did they'd kill her as well.'

'I dunno . . .' said Clive.

'That's right!' said Peter with sudden violence. 'You don't know. You know nothing. It never happened, understand?'

If you ever open your mouths about it I'll deny it and then come looking for you. You want that?'

Neither of them wanted that.

The roadblock was manned by a dozen men. On one side of the road was a farm trailer and on it a man sat on a hard-back chair behind a machine gun. Richard stopped the Range Rover ten yards from the barricade.

'What now?' he asked.

'Wait,' Peter said.

Six men came forward, all armed with rifles. Their leader was a hefty man in his middle thirties. He wore two red arm-bands. It was he who spoke when they had surrounded the vehicle.

'Where're you going then lads?'

'We're looking for the National Unity Force Headquarters,' Peter answered.

'Yeah. Why's that then?'

'We want to join up.'

The man's face split into a grin. 'That right?'

'That's right,' Peter said.

'Get down then. All of you, nice and slow.'

The boys got out of the vehicle.

'I'm Sergeant Hallan,' the leader said. 'I'm in charge here. You call me sergeant. Now, you armed?'

'In the back, sergeant,' Peter said. 'Three shotguns and ammunition. Also a little food and petrol.'

'Done all right, haven't you?'

Hallan gestured and two of the men began to search the vehicle.

'We managed,' Peter said.

'Why d'you want to join up then, son?' Hallan asked.

'I don't fancy digging potatoes for the rest of my life,' Peter answered. Hallan grinned: 'Right. Follow me. We'll have to see if you're the right material, won't we?'"

They were taken under guard to a house behind the barricade and led to a large room with no furniture except a single desk.

'Strip them off,' Hallan ordered.

The soldiers went about their task with gusto. Richard tried to shake them off. 'What the hell! . . .' he began.

'Shut up, Rich,' Peter snapped, 'do as you're told.'

'Good boy,' said Hallan, 'very sensible. You the leader, were you?'

Peter did not miss the careless use of the past tense. He nodded briefly. 'You could say that, Sergeant.'

When they were naked they were taken to a smaller room and locked in. There was no heating and they were soon shivering with cold. After half an hour the door was opened by Sergeant Hallan. He threw Peter a blanket.

'Come with me,' he said abruptly.

The door was locked behind him. Peter never saw Richard and Clive again. He was taken to the large room with the single desk. A man was sitting at the desk. He was dressed in a long brown overcoat. There was a cap on the desk in front of him. The original insignia had been removed and replaced by a single red star cut roughly, from some light material and stitched on.

'This is Captain Royce,' Hallan announced, 'you will stand to attention and address him as "Sir".'

Peter stood straight and held the blanket around him, looking carefully at the Captain. He was younger than Hallan, not more than twenty five. His hair was dark and curly, as was his moustache and beard. There was a scar across his left cheek where no hair grew. It had the effect of pulling his mouth to one side in a permanent leer. He looked briefly at the blanket-wrapped boy in front of him, then took a piece of paper and a ballpoint pen from an inner pocket.

'Name?' he asked. His voice was harsh but educated, with no discernible accent. He wrote down the answers without looking at Peter. '

'Peter Grant, sir.' 'Age?'

'Seventeen,' Peter lied. "→

'Parents' names?'

'Abby and David, sir.'

'Alive or dead?'

'Both dead, sir.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes.' It was strangely difficult to force that one word out.

Royce seemed not to notice.

'You were twelve when the Death came. What have you done since? Start at the beginning. I want details. Names, places, you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

Peter had carefully prepared his story. He told most of the truth. Royce wrote steadily, not looking up. When Peter had finished he folded up the paper and put it away in his pocket.

Now he looked at the boy, staring hard as if trying to read his mind.

'They tell me you want to join the National Unity Force,' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Mainly because you have an aversion to digging potatoes, I hear.'

'Not just that, sir.' ,

'No?'

'No, sir. We have to build for the future. That requires organisation and discipline, a unified effort. We cannot have individuals and small groups going their own way, using up valuable resources. We have an opportunity to build a new society, an equal and socially just order, we must grasp that opportunity. It seems to me that the N.U.F. is best placed -to ensure the kind of future I believe we should seek. I'm still young, I want to be part of the new order.'

The speech had been as carefully rehearsed as the explanation of Peter's wanderings in the past five years. But it was impossible to tell from the Captain's face what effect it had had on him. '

Behind Peter, Sergeant Hallan cleared his throat loudly. 'I see,' said Captain Royce, noncommittedly. 'And if we

were to accept you, young as you are, what can you offer us, what use would you be to us I wonder? I doubt you have any special talents.'

'I have a talent, sir.'

'Yes?'

'I can kill people.'

Chapter Three

Tom Price rapidly came to the conclusion that he had fallen out of the frying pan into the fire. He soon understood why Wallace had not expected an attack from N.U.F. - there was precious little of value in the town. They had few arms and were desperately short of all food except fish, of which there was an abundance. When they could, they traded the excess fish for farm produce from communes in the surrounding area.

The group numbered thirty two, of which eight were women, and they occupied a few buildings in the dock area of the town. The women prepared the food and cleaned the living areas and the men were split into two groups; one section manning the roadblocks, patrolling the town as best they could and scavenging for food and firewood, the others crewed three forty-five foot fishing boats. They did some trawling but nets were in short supply, were frequently ripped by underwater snags and took an age to repair for lack of the proper materials. The result was that the group lived on a diet that consisted in the main of mackerel.

The first day had passed without incident after his interview with Wallace. He was fed baked mackerel and hard flat bread, shown to a small but clean room which contained a real bed, and given a thick rollneck pullover, Wellington boots and a set of waterproofs. The heavy clothing seemed excessive for a little light fishing but who was he to complain? He fell onto the bed and into a sound dreamless sleep.

It was still dark when a huge gruff man with a long straggly beard shook him awake the next morning.

'On your feet, Price. Time to go to work. If you get a 'move on you'll have time for breakfast.'

Tom Price was still heavy with sleep when he appeared in the mess room, a ludicrous figure bundled up in his fishermen's clothes. Breakfast was cold smoked mackerel, some more of the fiat bread and a cup of barely sweetened hot water. There were twelve other fishermen present, all similarly attired, separated into three crews of four. Conversation was minimal and 'no-one bothered to make Price feel welcome.

The burly figure that had so brusquely woken Tom Price turned out to be Ted Pike, skipper of the 'Dover Princess' and before Tom had finished his meal Pike was on his feet, ready to go.

The 'Dover Princess' had seen better days. Her sides were rusted, the paint on her superstructure peeling badly and the engines reluctant. Tom Price was lost in this alien world

and collected kicks and curses as he stumbled about the deck in the cold grey dawn, contributing nothing and hampering the others. They followed the two other boats out of the

harbour and plunged into a misty grey-green world of heaving seas and biting wind-borne spray. Within half an hour Tom was violently sick, certain he would die.

He was left alone to recover as best he could. He huddled miserably behind" the wheelhouse, retching occasionally on an already empty, stomach. After a while the tooth that had troubled him before began to ache again.

Five miles out Ted Pike cut the engines and let the boat drift. If anything the new motion of the boat was even more upsetting to Price's stomach. It heaved and wallowed on the waves and the slippery deck was never still, never level. The wind had blown the dawn mist away but there was nothing to be seen except miles of heaving ocean. Tom Price felt desperately sorry for himself.

Pike was without compassion. He hauled Price to his feet and pushed him over to the side of the boat. Price clung on to one of several large wooden reels fixed solidly to the all-too-low coping round the well of the boat. On the reel was a length of thick line at the end of which were thirty featheredhooks and a large lead.

'This here's how we do it,' said 'Pike, ignoring Price's feeble protests. "Throw the lead over and let the line run out until it hits bottom.' Then start to reel in slowly until you feel 'em bite. If you don't get a bite let it drop and start again. When you've got 'em hooked haul 'em in and drop them off into these boxes, okay?'

'I can't do it,' Price begged. 'I'm ill.'

'Sooner you get to work, sooner you'll forget it. If you don't work, you don't get fed,' said Pike uncompromisingly.

To give him his due, Tom Price did his best that day but he was ill suited to work in general and this kind of work.

in particular. By mid-afternoon, when Pike started the engines and headed for home, Price was bitterly cold, covered in fish blood and scales, his hands scratched and cut by hooks and fish spines, and his toothache was blinding him with pain.

And it was not yet over. On the way back to port they had to gut the fish, then, on arrival, the fish had to be unloaded

and the boat cleaned. It was almost dark again; by the time, they returned to the mess for the evening meal. None of the

fishermen were over-concerned about personal hygiene but, compared to Price they were positively sweet-smelling. The women serving the food refused to have him in the room unless he washed and were adamant in the face of his protestations.' "

He went to his room and fell on the bed. His ejection from the messroom did not concern him overmuch. It was unlikely

that he would have been able to eat, especially since he had

already seen enough mackerel that day to last him a lifetime. He slept like a log until the skipper shook him awake in the darkness of the following morning.

He tried to report sick, pleading toothache, but Pike suspected he was malingering and would not listen. Price went through' another day of torment. That evening he went to see Wallace, the group leader and was sent to see ,the doctor.

'I'm not a doctor, I was a medical orderly, that's all. I don't know anything about dentistry,' the doctor said. He \ 'was short and fat, with piggy eyes and a mousey beard.

'Can't you give me something?' Price pleaded, 'I'm in agony, man. Can't you give me aspirin or something?'

'Don't have any. Better let me look at it.'

Price had washed for the occasion but it had been years since his mouth had been disturbed by a toothbrush. The doctor recoiled from the odour but stuck manfully to his task.

'It's rotten,' he announced, 'decayed right through. You can either put up with the pain or have it pulled.'

'Oh hell!' said Price, 'Oh, bloody hell!'

'Up to you.'

'Better have it out then, hadn't I?'

'I'll get some blokes in.'

'What for?' said Price, suddenly apprehensive.

'Hold you down. We've got no anaesthetic.'

'To hell with that!'

'Okay. Put up with it. Let your mouth rot away.'

'Just a minute. . . a bottle of scotch. . . at least get me drunk, man.'

The doctor shook his head sadly. 'There's no medicine, no anaesthetic, no operating theatre, no surgical instruments, no alcohol. The good days have gone, remember? Now, make up your mind, I've got other people to see.'

They held Tom Price down on the table, four big fishermen and the fat doctor at his head. After a few minutes of painful experiment the doctor obtained a grip on the offending tooth with the pliers. It was a further ten minutes before he managed to yank out the bloodied tooth but by then Price had been unconscious for some time. Despite that horrifying and excruciatingly painful experience Pike called him the following morning and insisted he got up for work. Price made up his mind to escape. Escape was not so easy however. He was called every morning long before he was ready to face the day, was worked like a dog on that stinking boat and by the time he returned to the living quarters was starving hungry and tired beyond anything he had ever known. Then, almost two weeks after he had arrived at Dover, a gale blew up and even Skipper Pike was not prepared to go to sea.

Price left Dover with only the clothes he stood in. His shotgun had been commandeered and he could scarcely ask for food without being questioned. But the future held no terrors equal to facing one more day on the mackerel boats. He avoided the main roads and had no difficulty in making the open countryside undetected.

Despite the gale and the heavy slanting rain he was warm and dry in his heavy clothing and oilskins. Hungry he was, but that was forgotten in the relief of his escape. In the late afternoon he took cover in the remains of a cottage and, too exhausted to make decisions as to his future, fell asleep on the damp floor. When he woke, it was to find that the decision had been taken out of his hands.

Two men were standing over him. They wore overcoats with red armbands. They were dripping water on the barn floor. They were pointing rifles at him. But Tom Price survived on the quickness of his wits.

'Thank God I've found you,' he said.

Peter Grant received no training for his new role as serving soldier in 'the National Unity Force. The Range Rover and everything in it, including the shotguns and his knife were confiscated. His clothes were returned and in addition he was given an overcoat with a red armband, a waterproof hat and a rifle with fifteen rounds of ammunition.

He joined a patrol of six men under the control of Sergeant Painter, a dull unintelligent man whose prime interests were food and sleep. The patrol was in the base camp near Rochester for a week's recuperation following a month, of 'active duty' during which they had lost a man in a skirmish with an armed commune who did not wish to be absorbed into the New Order. The proximity of death had weakened what little resolve Painter had ever had and he was in no hurry to leave the comforts of the base camp. The one week stretched to three.

Peter put the time to good use, familiarising himself with the camp, the command structure of the N.U.F., the gossip, the men of his patrol. He had no firm plans for the future but he knew that the more knowledge he could acquire the greater his chances of survival in this new world.

The army had comparatively few ranks. A sergeant commanded a patrol of six to twenty men, or had charge of a base camp, or was political and military governor of an area the size of an old county, depending on his standing. After that came the rank of Captain, and there were only two in the area south and east of London, perhaps only twenty altogether. The next rank was General, of which there were reputedly six, but none of the men in Peter's patrol had ever seen one. It was rumoured that the Generals had overall command of the army under the President, Arthur Wormley, but they played no part in the life of the men of the patrol, they were men of rumour and speculation, Gods of the far distance.

It Was a system which held inviting prospects of advancement for an intelligent and ambitious young man, since the least promotion offered a position of considerable power.

Discipline was harsh. Peter soon learnt that orders, however ludicrous, were obeyed on the instant and to the letter. There were only two punishments, a beating with rifle butts or a bullet in the head. Within its limitations, the National Unity Force was efficient and orderly.

There were women in the base camp. They cooked, cleaned out the barrack rooms of the buildings that had once been an industrial estate, and tended the vegetable gardens a mile or so away. There were no moral strictures imposed. The women selected the men they chose to sleep with; no man ever complained if he were refused, the penalty for causing a disturbance in the camp area was death. When a woman became too heavily pregnant to work she was sent off to the nearest nursery complex until she was fit to work again. The child remained there once it was weaned and the woman returned to work. It was callous but it was efficient. No-one ever complained. Very occasionally a woman committed suicide. ,

Not even Sergeant Painter could keep the patrol in the base camp for ever. In tile depths of winter the patrol moved to Maidstone and took over the running of a roadblock on the main road from London to Folkestone.

Peter set about the task of ingratiating himself with the rest of the patrol. It was not difficult. They were not men of wit or intelligence, they mirrored their leader. Within a month of joining them 'The Kid' had them eating out of his hand, had charmed them with coarse jokes and a readiness

to take menial chores from them. Only Sergeant Painter remained aloof. He had been told to watch the boy in case he wasn't right in the head, in case he really was a killer.

But time went by and Peter showed no signs of belligerence.

Painter relaxed.

Another month passed and they were relieved from the boring roadblock and sent southwest towards Tunbridge Wells to take over military control of an area that had already been more or less subjugated. It seemed like a safe posting, almost a sinecure. Sergeant Painter had been worried lest they were sent to fight the Liberation Front, still holding out further to the west around Winchester.

The patrol had a Landrover and trailer with ample supplies of diesel, weapons and food. Peter no longer knew or cared how the other survivors fared, the N.U.F. was always well fed and equipped. He had made the right decision. They had a map of the roads that were still useable and made the journey to the large farmhouse that was the military base for the area in one day. They relieved a patrol of ten men and settled down to see out the next two months in comparative ease.

Sergeant Painter organised occasional forays into the countryside, visiting and collecting tribute from the communes in the area. On one of these trips they passed through the town of Tunbridge Wells, or rather the crumbling collection of ruins that for convenience still bore that name, and Peter Grant had a supreme piece of luck. He was left in charge of the vehicle whilst Sergeant Painter and another man went off to investigate a small general store glimpsed down a blocked side road. Close to where they had stopped was what had once been a small fishing tackle and gunsmiths shop. It had long ago been ransacked, the front glass broken, and moss, lichen and stunted

weeds had made homes in the rotting woodwork; Peter left the Landrover and pushed his way into the building, more from curiosity than from any real expectations of a find. He kicked about amongst the decomposing debris on the floor and revealed a plastic display case, covered in the slime of decayed packaging materials. He kicked it free and opened the top. It contained a number of filleting and gardening knives still cocooned in the original plastic,) containers. He took out the largest of these and smashed it open against the wall. Revealed was a hunting knife with a curved nine inch blade and a bone handle. It was housed in a leather sheath which had been saved from decay by the airtight seal of the container and the blade was perfect, still bearing a thin coating of oil. The knife was perfectly balanced, a beautiful weapon, a delight to handle. It became accepted as part of Peter's personal armoury once he had demonstrated to the patrol his skill in its use.

Sergeant Painter died six days after they were posted to Tunbridge Wells. The motor cycle courier had left the previous day and there would be no further contact with the N.U.F. command for another week or more.

Peter Grant did most of the cooking. It was a chore the others were happy to avoid.

Sergeant Painter, a glutton to the last, wolfed down the food into which Peter had introduced a lethal mixture of deadly nightshade and Fools Mushrooms. He was not an accomplished poisoner so he made the dose a large one and hoped for the best. No blame could be attached to him as cook since they had all eaten from the same stew.

Painter woke in the middle of the night, screaming. He died a few hours later, before it was light. Peter said he thought it might have been an ulcer, brought on by overeating, and the others felt sure he was right. There was no discussion about leadership. Peter gradually assumed control and the others acquiesced. They buried Sergeant Painter and Peter took possession of his overcoat. It was easier than sewing a second armband onto his own.

Peter had not acted from any personal spite against the sergeant, he felt nothing about him one way or another. It was simply that Peter had rightly judged that in Painter's absence he could assume command of the patrol., Painter had stood in his way and had been removed. That was all. But promotion in the field might not be confirmed. It was necessary to prove his value in action, show himself worthy of the rank, establish his position firmly before the next courier arrived. Peter needed to report something more than Painter's death and his assumption of command, he needed to report a military success.

That problem occupied him for two days. The area they controlled had long been pacified and opposition to the N.U.F. was minimal, hence one small patrol was deemed enough to maintain discipline over such a large expanse of countryside. Peter needed a target. His options were few. He decided to attack The Priory.

The building had stood for more than three hundred years. Of its kind it was not large, perhaps thirty rooms in all. It stood in open rolling countryside south of Tunbridge Wells,

approached by a long wide drive, now delineated only by the absence of trees and the shorter shrub growth along its length. The outer walls were" of stone and several feet thick and behind The Priory was an enclosed area of land, the whole protected by a moat which was bridged only by a stone and gravel approach to the massive front doors.

It was an ideal defensive position. The enclosed land grew crops, there was a well for fresh water and the sheer walls 'defied scaling without unacceptable losses. A few men could, and did, hold The Priory against all comers.

The N.U.F. had chosen to ignore this outpost of revolt, it was not worth the manpower needed to take it. There were seven occupants, one woman and six men, and the leader had been a priest. As a result of intelligent looting years before and by virtue of ample dry storage space the defenders were well provisioned and armed. Doubtless they would have farmed the surrounding area but for fear of attack. As it was, they could hope for many years independence supported by the stores they had and food grown in the enclosed land. Now and then an N. U.F. patrol put a few bullets into the main door, just to remind the occupants who had control of the area, but that apart they remained in a state of siege but enjoyed relative peace. '

Peter camped his patrol in a wood a mile from the Priory. He denied them' a cooking fire and spent long hours studying the building. He occasionally saw figures moving behind the walls but the front door never opened and no-one emerged from behind the safety of the moat. The patrol had not been keen on the enterprise at first but the prospect of loot in their hands long before account had to be made of it to headquarters had swayed them. Besides, they had every confidence in their young leader. And with just cause. His plan was simple, age old, and of proven efficiency. It was late afternoon when, after consultation, the priest opened the main door to admit the pathetic figure that had staggered down the drive and collapsed on the bridge over the moat. He was barefoot, his clothing ragged and dirty.

The boy told a harrowing tale of dead parents, of years of wandering, of near slavery in a commune, of harassment and assault at the hands of the N.U.F., of escape and further wanderings. ,

They searched him but did not find the hunting knife strapped to his left calf. The woman was elderly, motherly.

When he was bathed they fed him and the woman tucked him into a warm bed. They placed no guard on his door.

In the last dark hour before the dawn Peter left his room and walked bare footed up the stone stairs to the top floor of the building. After some searching he found the guard on a balcony outside a large, empty, wood panelled room overlooking the front

approach to The Priory. He was a big man, armed with a rifle and, despite the hour, seemingly quite alert.

Peter made no attempt to approach him. He waited until the man's back was framed in the open window against the first lightening of the sky, then the knife flickered into his hand, flashed across the intervening space and sank deep into the man's back. He started a scream but it came out as a shocked grunt. Then Peter was upon him, hand over his mouth, forcing the blade of the knife deeper into his back.

Peter left the body on the balcony, made his way back down to the ground floor and out into the square central courtyard. The massive main entrance gates were locked in position by a single wooden beam, pivoted at one end and operated by a chain and pulley. The chain clanked and squeaked but worked efficiently enough. Within thirty seconds the patrol entered the courtyard at a run. ' '

The priest and two of the other men ran out into the courtyard, aroused by the noise of the fall of their defences. The patrol gunned them down. They found the other two men in the main hall, armed and on the way to meet the attackers, but they were slow in their reactions and died without firing a shot. There was no sign of the old woman. They found her eventually. In the small, carefully preserved chapel. She was kneeling in front of the altar table, her back to them, looking up at a sculpture of Christ crucified. The patrol hesitated, stayed by some remembered awe, some vague sense of the sanctity of the place.

'Get up and come with us,' Peter said.

The old woman did not move. I

'I said get up. We won't harm you.'

Then she stood and turned to face them. She had a pistol in her right hand. The patrol raised their rifles in a reflex action but Peter stayed them with a gesture.

'Don't be stupid. Throw the gun down,' he ordered. 'Murderer!' she suddenly screamed at him.

'D'you want to die?' Peter shouted back.

'Murderer!' And then the blazing anger drained from her and her shoulders slumped.

'May God forgive me,' she said.

And she raised the pistol to her own temple and fired.

Chapter Four

The men took Tom Price back to the main column of two hundred men that was advancing on Dover, bound him and left him in the back of a truck.

About an hour later the truck moved off towards the town. No-one came to see Price and he did not judge it wise to attract premature attention to himself. The truck contained boxes of food and ammunition which formed a constantly moving and supremely uncomfortable bed. The jolting, bouncing and noisy progress of the vehicle ceased after half

'an hour. There were shouts of command and four men in charge of a Sergeant came to collect ammunition from the

truck. They ignored Price, bundling him aside to collect the heavy boxes, then the heavy canvas flaps at the rear of the lorry closed again and) there was silence for a while.

Later he heard desultory firing, shotguns, rifles and some automatic fire. Later again the distant 'whump', 'whump' of a field gun. And after half an hour silence again. He had no doubt that Dover had fallen.

After dark a Sergeant dragged him out of the back of the lorry and across the temporary camp to an open fire' where an officer sat eating a meal at a folding table. He ignored the sergeant and his prisoner until he had finished his meal.

'Yes, Sergeant?'

'The straggler, sir. Says his name is Tom Price.'

'Is that so.'

The captain had a full beard which was well cut but failed to cover a wide scar on his cheek. The Sergeant prodded Price forward, then stood back.

'You'll answer the Captain's questions. Address him as "sir" he ordered Price.

'Obviously you were not in Dover when we attacked,' the Captain began, 'but no doubt that is where you came from.'

'Yes, sir. That's to say, that's where I escaped from,' said Price, trying an ingratiating smile.

'Escaped?'

'Yes, sir. They captured me, see. Made me work on their fishing boats, slave labour it was . . .'

'How long were you with them?'

'Only a couple of weeks. Took me that long to find a way to escape it did. At first they thought I was a spy for you sir,

for the N.U.F. Tortured me terrible they did...'

'You 'seem fit enough '

'Look, sir...'

Price held his mouth open and showed the gaping and still blood-caked hole where his rotten tooth had been.

'Pulled me teeth out with pliers, sir. But I didn't talk, not me sir.'

'But you had nothing to talk about. You were not spying for us were you?'

'No, sir . . .' Price hesitated for a moment, seeking a telling lie. 'But they suspected I was a sympathiser, sir. They knew

I was on your side.'

'We've been around for some years, Price. If you wanted to do so you could have joined us long ago.'

'Yes, sir, true. But I had to deny myself that pleasure, sir. I had me duty to the poor people who couldn't manage alone. They needed me, sir, and what're we here for except to help others, eh?'

'The N.U.F. is better placed to help the individual than you ever were.'

'Yes, sir,' said Price hastily, 'that's true now, that's why I can join you now. At first, those first few years it wasn't like that. They needed me then, sir. I'm good at things see, I can live off the land, I know about growing things and building things, I was manager of . . .'

. 'Exactly what can you do?' The Captain broke in to ask him.

Price had given some thought to which of his many talents he should offer the N.U.F. One thing was certain, he had no intention of being involved in combat, or of engaging in any more physical labour than was necessary. .

" I can cook, sir. I'm a brilliant cook. Chef I. was, see. All the big Hotels ...'

'After you were manager of whatever it was you managed?' the Captain asked dryly.

. 'Yes, sir. Well, no... see I was butler as well as estate manager...'

The Captain stopped him with a tired grin and a wave of his hand. He addressed the sergeant.

'This man has not told us much of the truth but I'm of the opinion he's simply a congenital liar. Hand him over to the cooks. Tell them to watch him. You know what to do if he steps out of line.'

'Yes, sir,' said the Sergeant.

Tom knew full well what the Captain had in mind but it did not bother him particularly. He had, no intention of stepping out of line, His instinct for survival was as strong as his grasp of the truth was weak.

Price knew virtually nothing about cooking but then, neither did the men whom he joined. They were selected not

for their culinary ability but because they were incapable of, or unsuited for active duty. They were the older men, those who had been wounded and recovered although crippled, and those who were simply too unintelligent to interpret the simplest order accurately. In this company Price soon prospered.

Within a month he was as good a cook as any of them and occasionally displayed an inventive genius which drew favourable comments from the men. .Price knew the value of a sinecure in this uncertain new world and he worked hard to keep it. They

soon gave, up the watch on him and he did a little light trapping, adding rabbit and chicken to the menu.

Before the cold of the winter set in he was undisputed master of the kitchens and revelled in his small power. They gave

him an overcoat with a red armband. He joined the ranks of the N.U.F. by a casual acceptance of his continued presence over a period of time.

The column moved frequently. It was a rough and ready commando force whose job was to confirm the N.U.F. stranglehold on South East England by eliminating isolated pockets of resistance. At this task, by virtue of superiority of numbers and equipment they were highly efficient. Camp gossip said that when that task was completed they would be sent to supplement the 'force which' was engaged in a running battle with the Liberation Front, the only substantial opposition left in the country. Price listened and took note but did not much care what the strategic plans of the N.U.F. were. He was far too busy building his own small empire, securing his own future. He forgot the past, even lost his fear that he would be recognised as a deserter from the N.U.F. It had been four years since that unfortunate incident. Who would remember him now? During that winter cigarettes became scarce. They were rationed to the troops. Price rapidly cornered the black

market. He was in his element, saw himself as a wheeler-dealer, expanded his operations into gambling and usury. He became the 'Mr Foot' of the column. There was little that good old Tom Price could not obtain for you - if you could afford it. And the currency was cigarettes.

He paid special attention to the Sergeants and to Captain Royce. They did not like him but they found him always useful and attentive. Nothing was too much trouble for him. He was always available, always amiably unctuous, and he never charged them for the little extra services he provided. He knew his place and he kept to it. It was safer that way. He became unofficial batman to the senior ranks and eventually was absorbed into the background of their lives, as familiar and unobtrusive as the air they breathed. They spoke openly in front of him of military and personal matters, as if he were deaf and dumb, of no potential danger to them whatsoever.

It was an error for which some of them were later to pay dearly. Tom Price was weak, an autumn leaf to be blown in whatever direction the strongest wind of the moment dictated. And sometimes there were visitors at the camp who came and went at night. Secret people whose faces were never seen, not even by Price. But he knew of them, eventually came to know what their business was, and decided that it was better he forgot what he heard.

In the early spring the column moved to a base camp just outside Rochester for a period of rest and recuperation and to replace casualties. There Price adjusted to the slower pace of life and was able to expand his business activities even further. Life was good.

Until the day Sergeant Peter Grant led his patrol into the camp.

Six trucks had been sent down from the base camp at Rochester to carry away the stores captured at The Priory, and they made two trips before the storerooms were empty.

The patrol received instructions to abandon the rather primitive camp they had occupied and take possession of The Priory, waiting there for further instructions. Weeks passed and no instructions came and there was no official comment about Peter's assumption of control.

That winter was mild and there was little rain. The patrol made forays into the countryside and collected taxes in the form of food and whatever stores they could confiscate and these were duly collected by lorry, but no orders came. They had kept back cigarettes and alcohol from The Priory stocks and they fed well. Peter spent long hours practising with the knife and walking alone in the countryside.

Sometimes he went to the chapel and sat alone in the silent room: He was puzzled by the old woman's suicide. He had told her she would not be harmed, had she not believed him? It did not occur to him that he and the patrol represented something so fundamentally unacceptable, so evil, that she preferred death to submission. Had he known that was!

her reason, he would still not then have understood. Even after his curiosity had been eroded by time he still went to the chapel and he was not sure why. He did not understand what he sensed in the chapel to be a spiritual experience. It was simply a feeling of peace, of quietude. A sense of warm comfort comparable only to vaguely recalled winter nights in a world now gone forever, when he had sat on his father's knee before the fire, dreamily contemplating nothing.

When the relief patrol finally came towards the end of winter it consisted of a Sergeant and twenty men with a half-track and heavy machine guns. The Priory was to be held and fortified as a regional stronghold. Peter and his men were ordered back to the base camp at Rochester.

Peter reported to Captain Royce. He received no congratulations on his military success but equally was subjected to no inquisition concerning Sergeant Painter's death. He was told to rest the patrol and await orders.

During the weeks of waiting he saw Tom Price on several occasions and was vaguely aware that Price seemed uneasy when in his presence, always anxious to avoid him. But Peter had not seen Price on the beach and therefore did not recognise him. The man meant nothing to him.

After the first day, boredom set in. Peter did not smoke and had little liking for alcohol or gambling. There was no power available in the base camp except that provided by a small generator which gave indifferent light for the senior officers quarters and was used to charge the vehicle batteries. Uncertain of his official standing Peter ate and slept with the patrol. A new order restricted the use of all motor transport. It was not

shortage of petrol or oil but of spare parts, distilled water for the batteries and such previously barely considered trifles as brake fluid.

There was no entertainment. The rains that had held off during the winter came now, and soon the whole camp area was a sea of mud. Time seemed to pass more slowly for not being counted in minutes and hours. There were no clocks or watches, no calendar, no reference to dates. There was day and night, dawn and dusk, the phases of the moon, the four seasons, so many years since the Great Death. Man had reverted to nature's timekeeping. Cocooned within the bountiful shield provided by President Wormley's army, Peter had a false sense of comparative normality. In fact the finite stock of food and materials bequeathed by the pre-Death society was fast being diminished. The survivors, even the President's men, were walking a path that led inevitably to social degeneration. And there were few who ever gave it a thought. They were 'too occupied, depending on their circumstances, either with ensuring bare survival,' or in the case of the army with 'an easy billet, or in the case of the leaders with maintaining power and the intricacies of outdated political ideals.

Peter Grant thought of these things in those long boring weeks. And he could see clearly that President Wormley's regime had a limited life. It was tied too firmly to the past, relied for its power on artefacts that had a predictably short life. What use a tank without mechanics, spares, fuel, ammunition? Better be armed with a bow and arrow than a dead tank. If Wormley was a man of vision he would have been active by now, setting his peoples to new talents; forging arrowheads, breaking horses, mining salt, hunting and trapping and farming. But Peter could see no sign of such forward thinking, there was evidence only of an insistence on conformity for the sake of preserving an inevitably temporary power in the hands of Wormley's ruling elite. The regime was but the final desperate spasm of the dead hand of authoritarianism. It was an anachronistic social engine still at work but destined to seize solid for lack of a lubricating consensus of support when Wormley's firepower failed and corporate compulsion succumbed to individual will backed by the sword~ the spear, the arrow. . . and the knife.

Heresy. Such thoughts were heresy. They begged the bullet in the head. So Peter Grant wisely kept his own counsel. The regime would survive for a few years yet, perhaps a decade, for they were still expanding, still harvesting the accumulated stores and artefacts of other survivors. He must ensure that he did not fall from grace before the regime had run its course. And to ensure his survival he could either seek advancement within the regime or accept lowly obscurity. But the latter was not an option open to him. It was not his destiny. So he planned his future but said nothing, not even to Peggy.

She served him his food in the mess-hall on the second day after his return. He did not recognise her. She was clean, her hair washed and neat, her dress enhancing her ample figure. Peter was one of the long queue and there was no time

for her to jog his memory. She found him in the afternoon, practising with the knife, flicking it with arrogant ease into a two inch diameter ring scratched on the bark of a tree.

'You don't remember me, do you?'

'I'm sorry. . .'

'Peggy. You saved my life. . . the farm, remember?'

He remembered then. Remembered the N.U.F. men he had killed. Remembered she had witnessed their deaths, that she was a potential danger to him. He toyed with the knife in his hands.

'Yes. I remember.'

She smiled, touched his arm. 'I never did thank you properly.'

'I think you did.' -I'

'Is something the matter?'

'No. Should there be?'

'Of course not. I... I was surprised to see you here.' Peter stiffened. Despite an attempt at control, his voice was cold and harsh. 'Were you?'

'Yes.' Then she understood. 'You don't think? . . . I wouldn't, not after what you did for me, never! Not even if they tortured me. I could have died back at the farm, those bastards would have raped me then... no, Peter. I'd never say a word.'

'There might come a time when it suited you.' -

'No. I tell you' no!' Her reply was emphatic and she was rewarded by seeing him relax a little. 'If you're worried about someone telling on you, what about the boys that were with you?'

'I don't think they'll say anything. They were accomplices. They'd be shot and they know it.'

'I'm in the same boat aren't I? And I've got an even better reason. than them to keep quiet, you saved my life, I promise, I'd never let on.'

'Perhaps.'

It began to rain, gently but determinedly.

'I have to go back to work,' she said. 'Will you come to see me tonight? I've got my own room. All the women have got their own rooms.'

And he agreed. Because there was nothing better to do that evening. And because he was still not sure if he should kill her or not.

Her room was a tiny cubicle in a partitioned room. It shared a glass window with the cubicle next door. There were no washing facilities, no furniture, just a mattress and bedding on the floor. It was cold and the only lighting was a stub of candle on the window sill.

'Not much, is it?' Peggy said ruefully.

'I share a room with thirty others,' Peter said. 'You can be alone here.'

'Yes, I suppose so. But it's not always good to be alone.' He placed his rifle in a corner of the room but kept the knife that was snug in its sheath attached to the belt round his waist. If she noticed she said nothing. Peter took a half bottle of whisky, a packet of twenty filter-tipped cigarettes and a box of matches from his overcoat pocket and gave them to the girl.

'You shouldn't,' she protested, 'I didn't ask you here to . . .' 'I know. But I don't smoke and I seldom drink. Usually I give this stuff to my men. I thought you'd like it, that's all.'

She reached up and kissed him quickly on the lips. 'I do. Thanks. I appreciate it.'

He stood awkwardly just inside the door whilst she sipped at the bottle and lit herself a cigarette. Then she sat down on the mattress, her back against the only solid wall.

'Come and sit with me,' she said, patting the mattress beside her. And when he sat beside her he was suddenly conscious of her in a new way, conscious of the warmth and femininity of her. .

She insisted he share the whisky. It bred a different kind of confidence in him, fed dawning interest. He wanted her, and from her experience she sensed it. .

'Have you ever made love with a woman?' she asked. 'No.'

'But you fancy women, you don't fancy men?' She knew the answer but wanted to hear it from him.

'I don't fancy men, no.'

'I'm not a virgin.' She looked at him and smiled.

'No, I didn't imagine you were,' he said.

'I like you. There's something I could do for you. . . call it a repayment for what you did for me if you like.'

He looked away from her, no longer so sure of himself. She smelt clean and sweet. She must have washed with soap for his benefit. She took his hand and placed it beneath the thick material of her skirt, high up on the inside of her thigh where it was warm and silken soft. 'I can teach you. Would you like that?'

And it seemed to Peter that it would be a lesson well worth the learning.

Camp gossip had it that Captain Royce was soon to take his commando column to join up with the main army near Winchester for a final assault on the Liberation Front. The N.U.F. had taken a lot of casualties it was said and although their ranks had been decimated the Liberation Front seemed determined to fight to the last man.

Peter Grant waited anxiously for word that he was to join the column. Sixteen days after his return to the camp he was ordered to report to Captain Royce. He went in high hopes that his promotion would be confirmed and his patrol attached to Royce's column.

'You did well, taking The Priory,' Royce said.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Your promotion to Sergeant is confirmed. You should have been told before but as you know, communication is still difficult and all these things are decided at Headquarters.'

'I understand, sir.'

'Your patrol will be made up to twenty men. You will take that patrol to Canvey Island, Essex, and take over guard duty on the oil refinery. It's an important job, that.'

'Yes, sir.' But Peter's face must have shown his disappointment.

'You want to fight, eh?'

'That's what an army's for, isn't it, sir?'

'Yes,' Royce scratched at the scar on his face, as if it itched. 'That and a lot of other things besides, as you'll learn in time. You're very young, Grant. You're lucky to get this promotion. You'll be in charge of men a lot older than your-self. I want to give you a chance to weld them into a fighting unit, get them to accept you as leader, understand?'

'Yes, sir. The extra men, have they been in action before?' Royce grinned. 'Oh yes, Grant, they've seen action before. They're also the nastiest bunch of malcontents you're ever likely to set eyes on. If you can handle them you can handle anyone.'

'I don't understand . . .'

'Gone off the idea?' Royce asked.

'No. I don't care. I can handle them. . . but why give me a patrol like that if you think my age is against me? They're more likely to kick against me than someone older. Anyway, if they're that bad why haven't they been shot?'

'Good question. They never do anything to justify such action, they're just difficult to deal with, and they can fight, if they've a mind to it. We can't shoot the whole army, can we?' He stood up from the desk and walked across to the dirty cracked window of the office, staring out into the rain. 'As for why I've given them to you. . . you're not a fool Grant and you've already proved you're a better prospect than most. We're short of men with anything more than average intelligence, short of officer material. Maybe you have a great future, maybe you'll go far, but I have to know, and quickly, we're running out of time. Anyone can fire a rifle, anyone can kill, it takes no intelligence to pull a trigger, but I want to know if there's anything else in you, if you can handle men, use your brain, think. So you've got the

worst patrol I can find for you and you're going to do a boring, job in a Godforsaken hole where there's nothing to do but cause trouble.

Maybe one of them will kill you.'

'How long, sir? How long do I have to stick it out?'

Royce turned to face him, shrugged. 'Who' knows? Depends on how long it takes us to mop up the Liberation Front and how long you survive at Canvey Island. Let me give you

a word of warning Grant. Don't be too ambitious, or if you can't help yourself, don't let it show. That could be dangerous.'

'Thank you, sir. But I'm not personally ambitious. I just want to do my best for the President, the people. . . and my immediate senior officers.' Peter said carefully.

Royce laughed abruptly, his eyes fixed on Peter's face. 'You know,' he said, 'you might just make it young Grant, you might just.'

It had stopped raining by this time. Peter paraded his enlarged patrol in front of the three jeeps they had been allocated for the journey. One glance at the newcomers told Peter that Royce had lived up to his promise. The look in their eyes varied from contemptuous indifference to arrogant antagonism. Whilst none of them were taller than he, all were bigger built since Peter's body had not yet acquired the bulk of maturity. They were men of easy violence, of quick temper and contempt for authority. If he were ever to control them it would only be by a show of violence that surpassed their own, not by an appeal to reason.

It was easy to pick out the unofficial leader of the new arrivals. His name was Latimer, a barrel chested brute with bronze hair and a shaggy unkempt beard that hid a blunt chin and small mean mouth. When the trouble came Latimer would be to the forefront, of that there was no doubt.

'We're going to Canvey Island to take over guard duty on the oil refinery,' Peter told them. 'It should be an easy billet

but I'm told it's a sod of a place to live in. We're .to keep a twenty-four hour watch so you'll be split into four sections of five. Any questions?'

Latimer spat insolently on the ground near Peter's feet but nobody spoke. They set off in mid morning on the relatively easy drive along the remains of the dual carriageway to Dartford. The tunnel under the Thames was still in use but in darkness after the first couple of hundred yards and water dripped ominously from the roof. One day the Thames would drop down through that roof and claim its own again.

On the Essex side of the river the going was harder. In places the roads could only be identified by the lines of sagging telegraph and electricity poles. It was dark by the time they reached the refinery complex and relieved the incumbent patrol.

They chose a windowless room in a derelict office block as a barrack room, the one used by the previous patrol being filthy beyond description, and cooked a scratch meal over a wood fire. Peter put men from his old group on the first watches. He wanted as much time as possible before the inevitable flare-up came.

Dawn brought their first sight of their new home, and a depressing prospect it was in the misty rain. There had been a fire at some time and part of the complex was gutted. The fuel tanks that remained intact were in dubious repair, paint flaking and rust eating into the metal in great dull red patches that seemed to grow by the day. At ground level was a litter of debris, part overgrown now, making progress around the jumble of huge storage tanks and the spaghetti jungle of pipes, metal supports and gantrys a hazardous business. The only advantages the place boasted was a small generator for, electric lights and an ample supply of fuel.

There was nothing for the men to do when off watch. Latimer had a pack of cards and the games became longer and more intense, often ending in sudden violence. Latimer ignored Peter totally and Peter did not allocate him to a watch. None of the others complained, but they skimped on their duties and discipline dwindled, even amongst the men of Peter's old patrol. Now and then a tanker came, was filled and went away. Apart from that, they saw no-one.

After ten days Peter judged that the time was ripe. He had had ample opportunity to observe the new men and judge their weaknesses. Better provoke the conflict at a time and place of his own choosing than wait for Latimer to catch him on one foot. He waited until late one night when all the patrols except those on guard, were together in the barrack room clustered round Latimer, playing yet another interminable card game. They ignored him when he entered the room.

He stood by the door, waited for a lull in the hubbub of voices.

'Latimer.'

There was suddenly silence, then gradual understanding.

The atmosphere crackled with anticipation.

'You talking to me, kid?' Latimer stared insolently at the

. slim figure by the door. 'Cos if you're, talking to me you call me sir, hear?' He laughed, looked round at the others; and they joined him obediently. But the six men of Peter's old patrol shifted uneasily. They had seen that look in his eyes before.

Latimer flapped his cards.

'We playin' then?' he asked belligerently. .

'Put the cards down, Latimer. You will take the next watch.'

'Oh, will I! Oh, bloody will I!' Latimer threw down his cards and stood up. The others moved to leave an open

path between him and Peter Grant.

'You know the penalty for disobedience,' Peter said evenly.

Latimer stood with his legs apart. His face behind his beard reddening as he stoked up his anger, fuelling the furnace of violence. The cold black killer's stare in Peter's eyes escaped him, he was committed now, had established his position too firmly to back down. But the others noticed that the boy was relaxed, alert, balanced perfectly on his toes, and although he did not carry a gun there was that knife in his belt. Perhaps after all it was not such an even contest. 'I'm gonna kill you, boy,' Latimer pronounced thickly. 'There's no-one to help you here. We tell 'em you fell off a gantry, they'll believe us.' Which was painfully true. There was no time in this society for detailed investigation into a single insignificant death. Latimer grabbed a rifle from one of the men and advanced towards Peter, aiming at his stomach, flicking off the safety catch. There was no more time for talk. Latimer had plain murder in his eyes. It seemed that Peter barely moved. But there was the knife, sunk to the hilt in his adversary's throat. Latimer stopped, dead on his feet, the lifeblood pouring from him in jerky spouts. The rifle fell to the floor, then Latimer toppled and his heavy body thudded to the floor in a pool of blood, splashing those nearest.

Peter Grant took advantage of the moment of shocked silence. He stepped forward, removed the knife from the dead man's throat and wiped it clean on the arm of his jacket. Then he returned to his position near the door. 'Any questions?' he asked coldly. No one spoke. They looked away from him, unwilling to face him, violent men faced down by the ultimate violence of sudden death. 'Burley. Step forward.' The man separated himself from the crowd reluctantly. 'Yes?' he enquired gruffly. 'Anything you want to say? He was your friend wasn't he?' Burley shrugged. 'Latimer didn't have no friends. He asked for what he got.' 'Who am I, Burley?' Peter asked. The man stared, nonplussed. 'Who...? Grant 'aint it?' He looked round at the others, asking them to share his bewilderment, but they looked away. 'No. Try again,' Peter, advised. Then Burley understood. 'Sergeant Grant,' he offered. 'That's right,' Peter said. In the days that followed Sergeant Grant hammered home his advantage. He appointed Burley his second-in-command, rewarded him with an extra cigarette ration, gave him a little power. It was that easy to win him over.

The patrol was paraded every morning and made to perform elementary drill, marching in line, keeping step, changing direction. The men didn't like it. But they grumbled behind his back, never to his face, and if Burley heard them he knocked them into silence.

There was no more rain. They saw more of a slowly strengthening sun. Peter devised games to improve their efficiency and offered cigarette prizes for the winners. He knew nothing of army training but relied on common sense.

It was important that they could hit a target with their rifles, know how to use cover when under fire, be reasonably fit. Soon gambolling on the assault course and rifle shooting replaced the hours long card games. The physical training

exercises, culled from Peter's old school curriculum, were never popular but as time went by the men found them easier. They were split into groups, set to hunt each other through the rusting wreckage of the complex, on the uninviting beaches of Canvey Island, through the dense undergrowth of the overgrown gardens and in and out of the remains of the ruined houses nearby. By the time spring had given way to early summer they were no longer an undisciplined rabble of self interested individuals but a cohesive fighting unit.

They still hated him, but Peter Grant was not in the least concerned on that score. They would fight for him, that was what mattered. His patrol was now a tool he could use for his own advantage.

The patrol was recalled to the base camp at Rochester before midsummer. The middle-aged Sergeant in charge seemed surprised to see Peter and was, supremely disinterested in Latimer's death. It was a mild annoyance to have to find a man to make up the strength of the patrol. They had two days' rest, then were to join Captain Royce's column at Winchester. He was given a hand-drawn map and told to collect food and ammunition for the journey.

By the undemanding standards of the camp Peter Grant's men were by far the smartest and most efficient patrol. They wore their clean hands, trimmed beards and tidy dress with a pride that branded them as an elite. They played the war games they had perfected on Canvey Island and inveigled other patrols to join in, betting heavily on themselves and always winning.

Peter left them to it, spending most of his time with Peggy, no longer her pupil, now an experienced partner. The two days flashed by, and this time Peggy cried as she watched them go.

The cold wet weather of spring had changed with a vengeance. There had been no rain for a month and there seemed no prospect of any. The sun burned down every day, drying the half grown vegetation, changing the green of the countryside to dun brown, shrinking and killing the few crops the survivors were able to grow. Unless the rains came only the men of the N.U.F. could face the coming winter without fear of starvation.

It took the patrol three days to reach Winchester, even though the road had been kept remarkably clear by army vehicles trundling to and from the battle front. When they arrived they discovered only a supply camp, the battle front had moved away, west towards Salisbury Plain, as the N.U.F. pressed forward.

They finally caught up with the front line in the late afternoon, just outside what had once been the town of Wilton, and to his surprise Peter found the whole army of some five hundred men encamped together and no sound or sight of a battle proceeding. A sentry stopped them and rode with them into the encampment, directing Peter to a truck which served as the command office.

During the ride in, it became apparent that the N.U.F. had taken a mauling. There were men digging a mass grave, many injured receiving untutored treatment in and around the parked vehicles, and those who had emerged unscathed looked tired and dejected. It was not what Peter had expected. It did not tally with the official reports of the progress of the battle.

He waited outside the command truck until it was dark, then a sergeant emerged to tell him to go away, report the following morning. A high powered meeting was in progress and the officers could not be disturbed. Peter returned to his patrol and singled out Burley.

'Poke round the camp, find out what the situation is,' he instructed.

Burley did not return until after the patrol had made camp and finished their meal. He had a disquieting tale to tell.

'Things 'ain't going too well,' he said. 'We had 'em on the run up to a week ago, they reckon there's not a hundred of 'em left.'

'So what went wrong?' Peter asked.

'Seems they gave up fighting fair. They form up like as if they're going to fight, but when we advance they sort of disappear, split up into small groups and next thing our blokes know they're being hit from all sides. They fire into us from hiding and when we go for them they've had it on their toes again. Bastards. Lost more men this last week than we did in the year we've been after them. Bastards!'

'I'm surprised it took them so long to change tactics.' 'Eh?'

'They should have fought that way from the start. I would have.'

'Yeah. Well, anyway, there's a big meeting going on with the officers tonight. Seeing what they're going to do about it.'

'It's obvious what they've got to do.'

'Is it?' said Burley doubtfully.

'Yes. Who's in charge, who's the commanding officer?'

'General Blake. He was iv. the army before the Death. Says he was a major. Blokes reckon he was a corporal. There's something else. . .'

'Yes?'

'We don't want no trouble for our patrol, right? We don't

want to get involved in no high rank politics, right?'

'Not if we can avoid it,' said Peter, restraining his interest. 'Right. I spoke to Tom Price, you know Tom Price?'

Peter knew him. A scruffy, mean faced little man, the unlovable Mr Fixit of the Rochester base camp. A man who could never meet your eyes. Not a man to be trusted.

'Yes, I know him.'

'Well, he's well in, sort of batman to the officers and that, gets to know things he does. He reckons Captain Royce is bad news at the moment, out of favour with the high-ups, know what I mean?'

'I know. Did he say why?'

'No. Don't think he know himself, but he reckons General Blake and the other Captain, bloke called Dicks, reckons they keep 'im at arms length; sort of. Best we don't get too involved with Royce, things bein' like that, eh?'

'As I remember it Tom Price was well in with Royce, almost his personal servant. If Price is telling the truth why is he still with him? He's not the sort of man to put a high price on loyalty I shouldn't think.'

'Got no choice, has he? Can't very well say, "sorry sir I want out because you're goin' to drop in the deep and smelly", can he?'

'I suppose not. Does Royce know he's out of favour?'

'Don't know. Don't see how he can miss it though. Thing is, we don't want to be about when the shit starts to fly, do we?'

'Not unless. we're under cover,' said Peter thoughtfully.

The comfortable world that Tom Price had built for himself had been shattered before he left the Rochester camp with Captain Royce and his commando column to join the battle against the Liberation Front.

Tom had wangled himself a rare privilege at the camp, a small room entirely to himself. By means of his business transactions he had been able to furnish it to a standard which might have aroused the envy of an officer. But Price kept the room securely locked and no-one knew just how resplendent his quarters were. Apart from those rare occasions when his path crossed that of Peter Grant, when the cold calculating eyes of the boy killer ravaged his contentment and jellied his legs with fear, Tom Price had been smugly satisfied with his lot. Then he returned to his room one evening to find the door unlocked and a man sitting in his best chair.

'Come in Price, close the door,' the man said. He was well spoken, calm and assured. His manner of dress was eccentric, blue three piece suit, white shirt and blue tie. He was immaculate, as if he had stepped across the eight years since the Death without ever treading in the mire of chaos the holocaust had left behind. And he was

dramatically clean shaven at a time when beards had become the norm for lack of shaving facilities, when a shaven face in the N.U.F. was a sign of effeminacy, a cause for ribald comment. He was round faced, sleek and well fed. And although he wore no army insignia he had the unmistakable aura of authority.

'I said close the door, Price,' the man said conversationally.

His brown eyes were receptively soft and gentle. ,

'Who the hell are you?' Price blustered. 'You get out of here see? This is a private room. You get out or I'll call the guard...'

'Please do call them,' the man said calmly. 'When they come I'll tell them to take you out and shoot you for the thief and deserter you are.'

Price slammed the door closed behind him and collapsed against it. 'Who are you, what d'you want, eh?' But the bluster had been blown away by the shock wave of the man's revelation of his intimate knowledge of Price's past. ,

'I am Commander Simons of the Counter Revolutionary Guard. You may sit in that chair.'

Price took two crab-like steps sideways and plopped down into the indicated chair.

'Counter Revolutionary Guard? Never heard of that, there's no such thing.'

'But there is Price. And I am here to recruit you into our service. . . unless you'd rather face a firing squad as a de-serter?'

'Deserter? You're gettin' me mixed up with someone else, man. Ask anyone here, they all know Tom Price. . .'

'Good old Tom Price?'

'That's it, that's it. Well liked I am, ask anyone...'

'You're a thief, a deserter and a liar. I can have you shot on the instant. Let us not debate that issue again.'

Tom Price said nothing. He shrank into himself, and stared anxiously at his tormentor.

'The Counter Revolutionary Guard,' Simons continued, 'has been formed to protect the people against reactionary elements. It is responsible to President Wormley, and only to him. Unfortunately it has been discovered that certain people are plotting to kill the President, overthrow the popular government and institute a regime of capitalist chaos. It is the job of the C.R.G. to counter that threat. You, Price, can assist us. Would you like to do that?'

Price swallowed hard. He could not understand how he could possibly be of assistance but was prepared to agree to anything that Simons suggested. He nodded compliance.

'You're very close to Captain Royce, you act as a kind of servant to him I understand?' Simons enquired gently.

'Well,' Price cleared his throat loudly, 'I wouldn't put it like that, see. More like a batman. . .'

'Exactly,' Simons agreed. 'And you have his confidence, he trusts you. . .'

'Well. . . suppose he does...'

'Tell me about Captain Royce. Tell me about the people who visit him at night and hold secret meetings with him.'

Tell me about that, Price.'

And Price told him. And was recruited into the service of , the Counter Revolutionary Guard, latest in a long line .of secret police forces that stretched back into history, spreading the disease of compulsion on behalf of successive dictators.

Tom Price was a man who would always be blown by the wind of events. He destroyed Royce and his fellow con-spirators without the slightest compunction, without pity or

regret, feeling only relief at his own escape. ,

Tom Price was a survivor.

Chapter Five

Sergeant Grant was called to the command truck soon after dawn on the day after he and his patrol had arrived at the front line. Only the two Captains, Royce and Dicks were present.

'I hear you killed Latimer,' Royce said.

'I had no choice, sir.'

'I doubt if you did. Your patrons up to strength, ready to go into action?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How old are you, kid?' Dicks put in.

'Eighteen, sir,' Peter said.

'You look older,' Dicks commented. 'I knew Latimer.'

'Killed him, did you?'

'He disobeyed orders, sir. I executed him.'

'Just like that. . . Latimer . . .'

'That is exactly what happened, sir.'

'The others help you?'

'No, sir.'

'Did it on your own?'

'Yes, sir.' I

'Like you cleaned out The Priory on your own?'

'I had help then, sir. There were five of us.'

'But you went in on your own, opened the place up?'

'Yes, sir.' ,

Dicks looked across at Royce. 'Got ourselves a living legend here,' he said laconically.

'You'll parade your men with my column when you hear

I the car horn,' Royce instructed. 'The battle plan has been changed for today. The enemy have taken to splitting up as we advance and taking us on the flanks. It is the General's instructions that we divide our force into twenty man patrols as soon as they have made a move, then advance on a wide

, front with the tanks and half trucks in the centre. When the centre patrol stops the wings advance and close in. With some luck we may catch some of them in the pincers, hit them with the heavy stuff.

Captain Royce did not sound overly enthusiastic about the plan. For his part Peter could hardly believe his ears. Once the N.D.F. split their force in the way suggested they would be losing whole patrols at a time as the enemy ambushed those on the outer flanks first, then gradually worked their way in as the pincers closed, if there were enough men left alive to close the pincers. It was a plan for mass suicide.

'That's all,' Captain Royce said. .

Peter left the truck. There seemed no point in arguing with the two Captains, it was obvious they had raised objections and had been over-ruled. If he and his patrol were to escape the laughter he had to go straight to the horses mouth. He spoke to the soldier on guard the command truck.

'Where can I find General Blake?'

'He's taken his dogs for a walk, Sergeant,' the man replied. 'Dogs?'

The man grinned. 'Two 'bloody great alsatians. Treats 'em like they was kids, sod the fighting, they gotta have a walk every morning.'

'Which way did he go?'

The man pointed out across the expanse of countryside,

'Always does three or four miles, every morning.'

'Is he alone?'

'Not likely. Two of me mates with him, armed to the teeth.' Peter nodded curtly and set off in the direction the man

had indicated. It was safe enough, they could hardly muster the army before the General returned.

The dogs found Peter before he was half a mile from the camp site. They came at him swiftly and silently through the long grass, racing side by side, menace in their raised hackles

and noiseless approach. Peter stood still and waited for them. \. They separated as they approached, circling him before closing in. He called to them in a firm voice, held out one hand.

'Here boys, here.' .

The dogs stopped uncertainly, walked slowly forward to sniff him. By the time the General and his bodyguards had caught up they were lying on their backs, squirming with

pleasure as Peter tickled their stomachs.

'Bloody hell! Look at those daft bastards!' exploded the General. 'Bloody fine guard dogs they are.'

Peter stood stiffly to attention and the dogs reluctantly rolled over on their feet and returned to their master's heels.

'Sergeant Grant, sir,' Peter said. 'I came out to see you.'

'Yeah? What about?'

General Blake was short and stocky, his weak chin well hidden by a full curly black beard. He had small eyes set close together, a sharply pointed nose and his teeth were mottled black with decay. The lapels of his jacket had been covered with red material as an insignia of rank and a red band surrounded his officers peaked hat. He was bow legged and walked with his weight thrown forward; giving the impression that he was constantly in imminent danger of toppling forward off balance. He was in no way an impressive figure

and, face to face, his claim to previous high rank seemed dubious.

'I came to volunteer, sir,' Peter said. 'Volunteer? What for?'

'For the infiltration patrol, sir.'

Blake put his hands on his hips and stared belligerently at the young man facing him.

'I don't know you Sergeant, where the hell did you spring from?'

'My patrol was sent here from Rochester base, sir. We arrived yesterday afternoon.'

'Twenty men, I remember now.'

'We spent weeks guarding the petrol refinery at Canvey Island,' Peter explained.

'There wasn't much to do there when the men were off duty so I trained them in field craft.

They're very good. We could find the enemy base camp and set it up for you, I'm sure we could.'

General Blake was momentarily caught off balance. It had not occurred to him to try to locate the Liberation Front's base. Up to the last week he had always been able to find them and bring them to orthodox battle. The tactics required had been simple, success had seemed assured, just a matter of time. When things began to go wrong he had been forced to come up with a new battle plan. After much mental effort he had done so, only to be opposed by his junior officers. Naturally he had imposed his will, he could not be seen to lose face. Now this smart looking young sergeant was opening up a new possibility, one that Dicks and Royce had not thought of.

'And you want to volunteer,' Blake said.

'Yes, sir.'

'And how did you know what my plans were?'

'I worked it out, sir. I was briefed this morning but I'm

only a Sergeant and it was obvious I wouldn't be told the whole plan.'

'So you know the whole plan?'

'I think so, sir.'

Blake turned on his escort. 'You two, go back to camp.

We'll be along later. Tell Captain Dicks he'll have to wait.' The two men came to attention, then walked off in the direction of the camp, 'Now,' said the General, 'let's just see if you know as much as you say. Tell me what my plan is.'

'As I see it, sir,' Peter began, 'you intend to split your force in two. One half will engage the enemy in battle exactly as they have always done, so that they will not be suspicious, but when things get tough they will gradually retreat so as to suffer the minimum casualties. They will eventually disengage leaving the enemy to think they have won a small victory. The second half of the force will have a day of rest, ready to attack the enemy base when we locate it. In the meantime a single patrol will go out and locate the enemy base camp and prepare our attack plan. We position ourselves before dawn and attack the camp at first light, one massive blow that will destroy them for good. I think your plan is

brilliant sir.'

'Do you...?' said Blake. His mind was working to the limit of its capacity, which was not exceptional. He grasped the plan but failed 'to understand the reasoning behind it. The enemy had been retreating for months, they must have moved their base many' times, how was it to be located? 'Tell me Sergeant,' he said, 'if I were to give you this job, how would you go about finding the enemy's base camp?'

'I would take six men in a wide arc across country behind the enemy forces. Wherever their base is, it must be within' five miles of the front or they wouldn't be able to maintain communication. They must communicate by courier, as we do, so we set ambushes on the most likely routes. We take two couriers prisoner, question them separately, and then we have the location pinpointed. The patrol returns and you set up an attack on the camp.'

'And if the couriers didn't talk?'

'They would talk, sir,' said Peter coldly. I

'Yes, of course. And how d'you. think I planned to attack the camp when we found it?'

'That would depend on the location, sir. But obviously You'll have in mind not to attack before full light.'

'Why not?'

'Because in the dark there would be confusion between our men and theirs. We might finish up shooting ourselves.'

General Blake stared across the countryside, lost in thought, his brain wrestling with the details of the plan. He could find no fault in it. It offered a quick clean end to the campaign and that could only reflect to his credit.

'So I wish to volunteer my patrol, sir,' Peter said.

'Go back to camp,' Blake ordered. 'Pick out the men you'd take if I decide to use you.'

'Yes, sir.' Peter came to attention, then walked away, leaving Blake deep in thought.

The two captains accepted General Blake's improved battle plan with relief and enthusiasm. Both of them revised their private opinion of his ability. They were doubtful only of his selection of the young Sergeant Grant to lead the in-filtrating party but acquiesced without demur. At least they were being presented with a plan that offered a superior opportunity for success.

Peter was called to the command truck and briefed by Captain Dicks as if he knew nothing of the plan and he listened attentively, happy to play it General Blake's way, hoping that if all went well Blake would want to call on his services again. Blake seemed a more solid future prospect than Captain Royce.

The small patrol, consisting of Peter Grant, Burley and four of the men who had shown most promise in the war games, set off two hours after sunrise, just as half the

main army moved westwards to engage the enemy. They travelled light, carrying only sufficient rations for one meal and lightly armed with automatic rifles and hand guns. They lost a man when they had been travelling for only .an hour, and it could easily have cost the lives of all of them. They were strung out in single file, five yards apart, moving through a lightly wooded area edging a vast flat area of grassland. It was already hot, the fierce summer sun boring down from a cloudless sky, and the trees were welcome for shade as well as cover.

Peter stopped the patrol dead when he saw the bull. It was grazing quietly with a harem of half a dozen cows a few yards out into the grass. The beast was fully grown, in magnificent condition, at the peak of its bulk and power, and must have weighed nearly half a ton. From the massive black head the horns curved up, out and forward, ending in vicious points.

It was no time for heroics, especially since they did not want to announce their presence by firing their rifles. Peter waved the patrol a little further into the copse and moved quietly forward. And it seemed as if they had passed undetected. Then the bull got scent of them. It's head came up quickly, the beast was alert, looking for trouble. Peter had passed on and assumed they were all clear. But the bull, not blessed with good sight, saw the blurred image of the last man creeping through the trees. His charge was shockingly sudden, and for such a huge animal he was un., believably fast. He was crashing through the light saplings on the edge of the copse before his victim let out his first scream of terror.

The rest of the patrol, alerted by the giant beast's steamroller entry into the copse, turned in time to see' their colleague standing stiffened with terror, his rifle falling from nerveless fingers as he screamed piercingly in the last second before those needle sharp horns tore into his ribs.

The bull tossed. his head upwards, grinding his horns into the man's chest, bellowing his anger. Then, with a final disdainful flick, he threw the body aside.

Burley fired first, a single shot that sank into the animal's broad chest and had no more effect than a pea shooter. The bull bellowed again and stared round with huge bloodshot eyes, searching for the next enemy. Whatever Burley's faults, he, did not lack courage. He dropped to one knee and fired again and the bull located him. He did not miss but the bullet had no discernible effect. The bull lowered its head and charged, flattening sturdy saplings as if they were reeds. And Burley fired yet again, joined now by two other members of the patrol. Still the bull came on.

Peter Grant, furthest from the action, was last to arrive on the scene. He thumbed his weapon to automatic fire and pressed the trigger. The bullets splattered the head of the charging beast, put out its eyes and finally entered the small brain. The bull still came on but its legs were buckling. Burley dived sideways as the huge body blundered past him to crash to the ground and lie still, blood pumping from the gaping mouth and from the empty eye sockets.

There followed several seconds of profound silence. Then Peter moved past the dead animal to look at the body of his soldier. The man's ribs were smashed to pieces, his chest gouged out by the raking horns. Burley came up to join him.

'You okay?' Peter asked.

'Just about.'

'Get two of the lads to tie him up and carry him. We've got to get out of here before someone comes to see what the fuss was about.'

'Might as well leave him.'

'No. If there's no body they might think one of their own killed the bull. If they find Joe they'll come looking for us.'

They moved out, travelling as fast as the extra weight of the body permitted. Three miles on they stopped in a wood to bury the dead man. His grave was hastily dug, shallow and unmarked. Then they moved on again. At noon they stopped to eat in a cluster of trees on a low ridge with a good all-round view.

Burley came to sit beside Peter. 'Big bastard, that bull. Never thought I'd see a man killed that way,' he said conversationally.

'You may live to see it again.'

'Nab, bad luck that. Chance in a million.'

'I remember, near, where we lived before the Death, there was a farm, nothing but bulls, seventy or eighty of them. They kept them to milk them of semen to artificially service the cows, see which ones were the best to keep for the future.'

'Hell I What if that lot got out.'

'You can be sure a lot of them did. And there's farms like that all over you can bet, there wouldn't be just one like that. Time to come, we're going to have trouble with the wild animals,' Peter predicted. ' ↵

'Ah, come on! A few bulls' . . . we can deal with that.'

'So long as we have ammunition for the guns. What when it runs out? Fancy tackling that thing with a knife or a bow and arrow?... could you fire a bow and arrow?'

'Could I hell I ' .

'Exactly. And it's not just bulls. I had a year wandering round the countryside in Kent before I joined up. I saw a lion, something else similar, couldn't tell what it was, and rumour said there was a pair of elephants around. Another group swore there was a crocodile in the river near them. Escaped from zoos, safari parks, private collections I suppose.'

'But things like that, they couldn't survive in this country for long, could they?' . .

'Why not? Most of them have bred in this country before. There's plenty of food around for them. We've only had one bad winter in the last four. There's no-one to hunt them, no cars to run them down, they'll multiply like flies, you'll see.'

, 'But surely these' things were in cages and that, weren't they?' ,

'Some. Not in the safari parks. It only needed a tree to fall and bridge a fence, a gatepost to be weak... and there you are. I tell you Burley, if you're ever out in the country on your own, keep your eyes peeled, you'll live longer.'

'Bloody hell! it'll be like living in Africa!'

'That's the way it will be. Even the domesticated animals have reverted. Chickens roost in trees, dogs run in packs and don't try getting near a wild pig if you want an easy life. Think about it, they've all been breeding wild for six years now.'

The patrol moved off after the brief halt and resumed their search for the enemy lines of communication. They found nothing until they came across the road in mid-afternoon. It was heavily overgrown as were all minor roads, discernible only from close range as an old highway. But it was clear of obstructions and the marks of motor cycle tyres were evident in the coarse grass that had long ago covered the old tarmacadam.

They moved along the road until they found a suitable spot for an ambush, a clump of trees shielding a bend, then settled themselves to wait. And they did not have to wait long.

The motor cyclist was travelling fast, heading west, away from the battle, concentrating on the road. He ran into the

log at considerable speed and somersaulted over the handlebars of his machine. He was dead when they reached him: He had a plastic pouch in his jacket pocket and in it Peter found a handwritten note informing the intended recipient

that the N.U.F. forces appeared to be fewer in number than in recent days and were in retreat towards their base near the town of Wilton. It was not addressed or signed. There was also an ordnance survey map of the area. Marked on it were a succession of circles, all crossed out but the one furthest to the west, some three miles from the ambush spot. Peter copied the marked positions onto his own map and replaced the plastic pouch in the dead man's pocket. It seemed they had what they wanted. But Peter Grant was not satisfied. He wanted a double check. They cleared the log from the road, left the body and the motor cycle where they lay. Another hour passed before the distant hum of an engine alerted them. The motor cyclist passed the accident spot, stopped and returned, sitting astride the machine, looking at the crumpled figure on the ground, face hidden by an enveloping helmet. 'Oh my God!' The voice was a woman's, a young woman's. She switched off the engine and leant the machine on its side stand.

The patrol surrounded her and Peter stepped forward and took the rifle slung across her shoulders. 'Take her off the road,' he ordered. They bundled her out of sight into the trees. She said nothing as Peter searched her, just stared at him with a mixture of shock, fear and contempt. She was wearing a bush

jacket and there was a leather bag slung from the belt round her waist and in it was a note telling 'A' Company to harass the enemy until last light, then disengage and rendezvous at the water tower. Again it was unsigned. There was also a map similarly marked to the one they had found on the dead man. That was enough for Peter. He stuffed the paper and map back in the girl's pouch as if they were of no account and ordered his men to leave him alone with her.

'I ought to kill you,' he said, 'but I'm prepared to set you free unharmed if you'll answer one simple question.'

The girl was sitting with her back against the trunk of a tree. She looked up at him, studying his face, recovered now from the pest impact of her capture. She was no more than Peter's age, of sturdy build With short brown hair, green eyes and a smattering of freckles across her face. She no longer seemed afraid.

'I'll not answer any questions that will help you.'

'Why not? It's a simple thing. It won't harm your people. I won't help them, that's for sure. I've a better idea.

Defect. Come over to us.'

'Why should I do that?'

'To regain your freedom.'

'But I have my freedom.'

'You can't believe that, not if you've any sense.'

'But I do have my freedom. I'm one of the oppressors. I keep my freedom by denying it to others.'

The patently honest answer nonplussed the girl. 'You know you oppress others and you don't care?'

'I survive. Perhaps things will change. Until then I stay where I am, on the winning side.'

'You are not on the winning side'

Peter was suddenly interested, the girl seemed so sure. 'But your army is nearly finished, you've been pushed back, there can't be more than a hundred of you left.'

She shrugged. 'We've already won. We've tied up three quarters of the N.U.F. fighting us for nearly a year. That's given the others time to train and establish themselves.'

'The others?'

'Haven't they told you there's two other battles going on?'

'No.'

I'm not surprised. Well, there's another army in the north and in Wales the Red Dragons have dug themselves in so well you'll never be able to winkle them out of the mountains.'

'The Red Dragons?'

'Just a name. We call ourselves the Liberation Front, they call themselves the Red Dragons, up north they call themselves The Traders.'

'And we're fighting in the north and Wales?'

'Yes. And not doing very well. We never intended to win here. It's a delaying tactic, that's all. When things get too bad we'll pull out, join the others. Even if we're wiped out it doesn't matter, we've done our job.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'It's no secret. Your party bosses know all about it. They keep it from the likes of you though.'

'So it seems.'

'Changed your mind? Want to join us?'

Peter was silent for a moment. Then he said: 'We're lost,

All I was going to ask you was how to get back to our own lines. We got separated from the others in the fighting.'

'You'll never get a better chance then.'

'I've killed some of your people.'

'I imagine you have. The other courier for one.'

'No. He broke his back falling from his machine. He was dead when we found him. We waited hoping to capture someone else, someone who could tell us where we are.'

'I see. You're sure then?'

'I've made my choice. I'll stick with it for better or worse.'

The girl stood up, pointed through the trees, across the open country to the north. 'See that building on the skyline? Make for that. When you get there you'll see what's left of Wilton.'

'Thank you.' Peter well knew she had lied, tried to send them at right angles to the true course back to their camp. It did not matter, she had accepted his story and there was no danger the Liberation Front would take fright and move camp before it could be attacked. .

'You're a fool,' the girl said. 'If you subdue the people by force, turn the country into one big jail, you have to live in the jail yourself. Then what difference does it make who's the jailer and who's the jailed? What sort of life is that?'

'I must obey orders,' Peter said.

'God give you a brain. Try using it sometime.'

She turned and walked through the trees towards the road, daring to presume that Peter intended to keep his word and release her unharmed. He watched her go. She had given him much food for thought. It was brutally clear now that if what she had said was true, the real strength of the regime was less than he had imagined. What other truths were there that he was not privy too, which might effect his own survival? He was a long way from the centre of power, too far for comfort.

The things he had heard confirmed his conviction that he must pursue his rise in the hierarchy of the regime with all vigour. He had to be in a position to know. Knowledge was safety and power. Knowledge was a treasure beyond value.

In the late afternoon of that day Tom Price left the N.U.F. camp, ostensibly to go hunting, something he often did, and

it caused no raised eyebrows. .

He Diet Simons some two miles from the camp. The Commander of the Counter Revolutionary Guard arrived alone in a jeep on which a broad red stripe had been painted lately over the bonnet, roof and boot. He was as immaculate and cool, as gently menacing as ever.

'Captain Royce had a visitor a few days ago. Tell me about it,' he said

.'Well, I couldn't find out much, see. . .' Price began apologetically.

'Tell me what you know,' said Simons sharply.

'He left the camp, late evening, night before last it was.

Captain Royce that is, left the camp and went off on his own, see. So I followed him, sir.'

'And?'

'He went straight back along the road to Salisbury, walking he was, met some bloke in a big car. Posh car, polished and that, you know? Anyway, he got in the car, they talked for a bit, then! the car drove off and he went back to the camp, Royce that is.'

'Did you hear what was said?'

'No. Couldn't get too close, could I? I mean, didn't want

Royce to know what - I'm up to do we, sir?' said Price anxiously. '

'You heard nothing?'

'No, sir.'

'But you saw the man in the car?'

'Well, yes. Sort of. . .'

'Describe him.'

'Difficult, see. Dark out there, black as hell. He was in the car most of the time but I got a look when Royce opened the door to get in, the interior light went on, see...'

'Yes, yes. Get on man. . .' said Simons irritably.

'He was a General, sir, had the cap with the red band all the way round and red lapels on his coat.'

'Ah! ...'

'Couldn't see much of his face but he didn't have a beard.' 'Excellent!'

'Did I do all right sir?' Price asked, washing his dry hands nervously. '

'You did well enough.'

'Thank you, sir; Always glad to help. . .'

'I shall be coming to the camp in the next few days with some other officers. You will not recognise me, understand?'

'Yes, sir. Absolutely, sir.' Price was only too glad to obey that command. The less he had to do with Simons the better

he would be pleased.

'No matter what happens when we arrive, you will say

and do nothing, nothing at all, it's for your own safety.'

'Why, what's going to happen, sir?' The question was out before Price had considered the advisability of putting it. '

'You'll find out soon enough. In the meantime keep your mouth shut and do as you're told.'

Simons turned on his heel, climbed into the jeep and drove off. Price stared unhappily after the retreating vehicle, feeling painfully sorry for himself. He was a most reluctant spy.

'Get anything Tom?' the sentry asked as Price re-entered the camp lines.,

'Bugger-all,' said Price. 'Best at night. You need a torch, see. Set it on top of the gun, then you can spot 'em and knock 'em off. But there's no bloody batteries, is there?'

'Don't know why you bother,' the sentry commented. 'Ah, get a few now and then.'

The sentry was suddenly alert" then relaxed as he recognised Sergeant Grant and his patrol coming in. Price made off quickly. There were two men who bred a fear in him that reduced him to a jelly. He had just left one of them and had no intention of so much as passing the time of day with the other.

Peter Grant dismissed his patrol and went directly to report to General Blake. No doubt he should first have seen the two captains but he was sure that Blake would not want that.

He found the General in his travelling palace, a dormobile motor caravan. Blake believed in waging war in the maximum comfort this difficult new world could afford.

'How'd it go then?' he asked anxiously.

Peter reported in detail and handed over his marked map.

'There's no doubt that's where they are, sir,' he ended.

'That's that, then,' said Blake, rubbing his hands in self satisfied pleasure. 'We'll slaughter the bastards!'

'With your permission sir, I'll take out my patrol in the morning and take a look at their base, locate the sentries and report back to you on the best way to implement your attack plan.' .

'Oh, yes. Right, do that Sergeant. And I'll order the same battle plan here as before, kept them all occupied.'

'Exactly, sir.'

Peter took Burley and five men, leaving the camp just after dawn and heading out in a wide arc across country that brought them at mid-day to a position a mile to the rear of the enemy base. The journey, was hot but uneventful and Peter ordered a meal break before they moved in to spy on the camp.

During the afternoon they located six sentries in what seemed to be fixed positions round the rim of the. tiny valley that sheltered the farmhouse where the Liberation Front had their headquarters. , .

Peter took Burley and slipped in past the sentries for a

closer inspection. There was a good deal of activity in the farmyard. A barn had evidently been taken over as a cook-house, there were about thirty tents pitched in the home paddock and. lean-to shelters had been erected against the outside walls of the farmhouse and outbuildings. There were several vehicles parked in the yard, including four motor .cycles. Figures moved about from building to building, occasionally a motor cycle arrived or departed.

After an hour Peter led Burley back to the patrol and they made their way cautiously back to camp, arriving at dusk.

Peter drew a map for the general. 'The farmhouse is at the head of a small valley, hardly that really, just a dip in the ground, maybe half a mile long and quarter mile wide and I doubt if the surrounding ridge is higher than the chimney pots of the building. I've marked the position of the sentries. . .'

'They're in a trap, aren't they?' said Blake scratching absently in his beard. 'In a bloody trap.'

'Yes, sir. Now, according to your plan we move the whole army out on foot just after midnight tonight. A mile away my patrol goes forward and disposes of the sentries, no guns of course...'

'Of course, don't want to wake the bastards up do we?'

Blake laughed a loud anticipatory laugh.

'Then the main force is split into three. Two sections block off each end of the Valley, the other section is split to line the ridges on either side. At dawn the section at the head . of the valley attacks, driving the enemy out of the farm-buildings onto the open ground. There the section on the ridge has them in a cross-fire. If any survive they run into the section advancing down the valley.'

'I'll lead the first assault from the head of the valley,' Blake enthused, 'it'll be a turkey shoot.'

'Is that really wise, sir?' Peter enquired.

'Why not?'

'Perhaps you should remain aloof from the battle, sir. Stay up on the ridge to supervise the strategy of the attack...'

Blake chewed that over. Eventually, and reluctantly because he was no coward, he agreed that it might be wise. Peter was considerably relieved. It would not have suited him to have General Blake killed at that moment, not now he had been so carefully cultivated, and in addition Peter did not want to squander the lives of his men in a free-for-all skirmish. His loyal patrol was too valuable to be lightly risked for no advantage. With Blake safely on the ridge Peter could retreat to join him after his patrol had disposed of the sentries.

The General dismissed him, then called in the two Captains to acquaint them with the fine details of his master plan.

Peter briefed his patrol on their duties and sent them to their beds for a brief rest.

Despite the fact that inefficient communications resulted in the ridge being only partly manned by the time the attack started, and that an over eager or nervous soldier fired off a wild shot as the first section descended on the farmhouse, what occurred at dawn that morning was not a battle but a massacre.

Half the defending force died within the immediate environs of the farmhouse, the rest retreated down the valley only to be cut to pieces by the N.U.F. men coming on them' from behind. Blake took no prisoners. His force killed ninety three men and twelve women in a slaughter that lasted less than half an hour. The N.U.F. lost three men dead and had twelve wounded.

In those thirty minutes the army of the Liberation Front ceased to exist. Individual freedom had taken its worst defeat since long before the Great Death.

And Peter Grant' stood on the ridge, watching the destruction and death he had conceived and counselled. And he felt nothing.

Chapter Six

General Blake got drunk on the night of his victory. He insisted on the company of Royce, Dicks and Peter Grant whilst he' did so. In the early hours of the morning he became violently sick and after that he dismissed them with a drunken curse and took to his bed.

The N.D.F. army had taken over the farmhouse as temporary headquarters, stripped and buried the dead, stepped into their shoes. On Blake's orders Peter Grant had been separated from his patrol and quartered with the two Captains in the main house, where they shared a room.

Captain Dicks was well in his cups but Royce and Peter Grant had drunk sparingly. When Dicks began to snore, Royce came over to Peter's mattress and sat beside him.

The scar on his cheek stood out from his beard in the moonlight but his face was in shadow.

'Grant.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You won't be calling me sir much longer.'

'No?'

'Blake has in mind to promote you to captain.'

'He's said nothing, to me, sir.'

'He will. You delivered' the goods. He'll pay his debt.'

'I don't understand, sir.'

'Do I treat you like a fool, Grant?'

'No, sir.'

'Then don't treat me like one. You handed Blake that plan on a plate. He'd never have come up with it himself in a month of Sundays. He hasn't the brain. So he'll be grateful, he'll give you what you want.'

'What do I want, sir?' Peter asked, quietly.

'I've seen men like you before, Grant. You've a worm in your belly that feeds on power. You have to have power or the worm destroys you. I pity you, there's no cure for what you've got. The more you feed it the more the worm grows.'

'It isn't like that.'

'No? Then tell me.'

'I don't know. I just do what I have to from day to day.'

I want to survive, that's all.'

'Crap! Remember what I told you back in Rochester camp. Don't let your ambition show, it's dangerous. People see it, see it as a threat, then one day you'll wake up dead. For the time being at least, keep your head down.'

'For the time being?' Peter asked, suddenly interested.

But Royce was not to be drawn. 'When Blake promotes you, try to look surprised,' he said. And then he stood up and crossed to his bed in the corner of the room, leaving Peter to ponder on his advice.

General Blake did not rise from his bed the following day. He let it be known that he had a mild stomach disorder. The next morning he sent for Sergeant Grant.

'I'm promoting you to Captain,' he announced.

Peter looked suitably stunned. 'Thank you, sir. I really... ' Blake waved his thanks aside. 'Deserve it. Followed my

orders, exactly right. What's more when we leave I'm keeping 'you and your patrol with me. Bright lad like you could do well, with a bit of help, understand?'

'Yes, sir. Thank you. Are we leaving soon then?'

'Not long. The army'll be split up here. Some'll go to Wales, some up North, some'll stay here and push on down to Cornwall. God knows it'll be easy enough, for 'em now.

You and me, maybe we'll get a bit of a rest, eh?'

'A rest, sir?'

'I don't know yet~ Maybe the President will want to see us. Congratulate us, who knows? Maybe we'll finish up at the Castle for the winter. You ever been there?'

'No, sir.'

'Windsor. The President's Palace. Some place, -I'll tell you.' But two days went by and there was no sign of orders to

move. On the fourth day after the massacre of the Liberation Front two jeeps drove into the farmyard. Commander Simons got out of the first and entered the house flanked by six men of varying age but all dressed in a style aping their leader and armed with immaculately maintained automatic rifles. They were closeted with General Blake for fifteen minutes. Then Captain Royce was called to the room. Five minutes later Simons and his men emerged with Royce under guard. They took him into the farmyard and tied him to the front bumper of one of their jeeps. Then orders were given for the whole army to muster in the home paddock. General Blake stood up on the rear of a truck to address his men. Beside him stood Commander Simons and around the truck was the small coterie of policemen, their prisoner amongst them, his face blank of expression. Captain Dicks and Captain Grant stood at the head of the waiting parade, the men lined up in patrols, each patrol fronted by a Sergeant. The setting was formal, ritualistic. Blake seemed strangely diffident and ill at ease. He spoke only briefly, indicating Simons. 'Men. This is Commander Simons, head of the newly formed Counter Revolutionary Guard. He will speak to you now.' There was a buzz of talk amongst the men which died as Simons stepped forward and took over the stage. He did not speak at once but allowed a dramatic pause, looking above their heads, as if collecting his thoughts. When he did speak it was as if he were reading from a book, or repeating a hard learned lesson by rote. 'The Counter Revolutionary Guard has been formed at the express order of our revered President. Its duty is to protect the President, the people and the Peoples Revolution. It is a task we of the C.R.G. have sworn to undertake with vigour and determination. We shall not shrink from the harshest measures to carry out our duties for the common good. From now on your commitment to the Revolution will be measured by the degree of assistance you afford to the Counter Revolutionary Guard, as and when you are called upon to do so. 'The President instructs me to congratulate General Blake and the National Unity Force on their famous victory over the reactionary traitors. He wishes me to tell you that in recognition of your courage and dedication in defence of the Revolution, the National Unity Force, the strong arm of the people, will henceforth be known as the Revolutionary Defence Force. I know you will appreciate the honour he does you all in publically naming you as defenders of our ideals. 'I now have to tell you that, through the diligence of the Counter Revolutionary Guard, a plot has been discovered to murder our revered President and destroy the Revolution. These 'foul reactionary murderers have been caught and have paid the price for their vicious plot against the peoples democratic freedom. We must always be on guard against such people, they exist everywhere, even among your own

ranks. Your own army was not free of contamination. The man Royce, once a Captain and a leader amongst you," was hand in glove with the reactionary pigs and would have embroiled you in his wicked plans had we of the 'Counter Revolutionary' Guard not seen him for the despicable traitor he is. You will now see how the C.R.G. deals with reactionary traitors.' Simons jerked his thumb at his men. They dragged Royce, forward, stood him away from the truck, then lined up in front of him, rifles raised. 'Fire!' Simons shouted. The rifles spat simultaneously and Royce's body bucked backwards and crumpled to the ground. Simons spoke into the total silence that followed, calm and unemotional. 'So die all traitors. Long live our revered President and the glorious Peoples Revolution.' He stepped down from the truck and walked away, his policemen following. General Blake, in common with his men, stood in irresolute silence until the sound of the jeep's engines had died into the distance. 'Parade dismissed,' he said. And his voice was unusually small and weak. Tom Price lived for the next few days in a state of constant terror. Even whilst the army was at war he had managed to maintain his business activities but now he closed up shop and contrived to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. Royce had fallen, and Simons, his new master, had shown a frightening ruthlessness, a vicious conformity to the dictates of the regime that left Price breathless with fear. This was the man he was now compelled to obey on pain of death, the man who held his lifelines, dangling him like a puppet. Worse, Royce's death had left a convenient gap for the newly promoted Captain Grant to fill. Grant was now his immediate senior officer. He dreaded the possibility that Grant might demand from him the same kind of unofficial batman duties he had performed for Royce. Price had been certain that Grant had not seen him that day on the beach but fear now eroded that certainty. Suppose, after all, Grant had caught a glimpse of him, perhaps if he saw Price's face often enough memory might return. Then Price would measure his life in seconds. Common sense told him this was not possible. If he had been seen on the beach he would have been recognised by now, wouldn't he? Price slept badly. Days passed and Peter Grant did not send for him, nor did he hear from Commander Simons. As fear receded, some of his old bravado returned. He resumed trading. Tom Price was clever enough to handle anything fate threw at him. Ten days after Simons and his secret police had left, orders came through from the President to dismember the victorious army. One hundred men were sent to reinforce the army fighting the Red Dragons in Wales. Captain Dicks took command of a further group of one hundred men whose job it was

to complete the pacification of the rest of the south west. The remainder of the force, comprising Peter's old patrol and what remained of the late Captain Royce's commando column, were ordered to The Castle for guard duty under the command of General Blake.

The journey to Windsor was comparatively easy, since for most of the way they followed the one time dual carriageway that had been cleared over the last year as the army advanced against the Liberation Front.

Windsor Castle itself was surrounded by an impressive display of heavy armament, tanks, half tracks, mobile field guns, and, standing incongruously alone, a large camouflage-painted helicopter. The men on guard were cleaner and better dressed than the arriving column but they lacked the hard eyes and easy confidence that identifies men who have seen battle.

The arriving soldiers were quartered in houses bordering the castle estate. These provided more luxurious lodgings than any of the men had known since the Great Death having been cleaned out, well maintained and well furnished. General Blake and Captain Grant were placed in a wing of the Castle itself which had been allocated to senior officers.

Here there were individual rooms, all with baths, running water and electric heating. There was a large high ceilinged common room and a mess hall of a size and splendour that suggested it once had a more regal function. There were four other Generals and six other Captains in residence, a gross disproportion of officers to men in the Castle command. The Generals had their own common room and were seen only at mealtimes. Of the six captains that Peter Grant joined, none had seen any active service and their antagonism towards him was instant and sustained.

Peter Grant saw virtually nothing of General Blake for the first four days. He spent the time familiarising himself with the layout of the Castle and grounds, organising his men to take over guard duty from the men whom they had replaced and who were now being sent to join the northern army, and working with Sergeant Burley to bring the whole

column up to the standard of his old patrol.

As a matter of deliberate policy Peter had as little to do with his fellow Captains as possible. He soon realised they were potentially a danger to him. Having no men to command they spent their time drinking, gambling, womanising and gossiping. They seemed to share a sycophantic approval of

'Lady Sarah' who, it soon became apparent, was President Wormley's woman. They disliked Grant for his youth, his handsome appearance; his ability, his fighting experience, the loyalty he engendered in his men, his aloofness, and most of all for the aura of cold menace that he wore like a shield. Behind his back they slightly referred to him as 'Blake's bum-boy' and 'the peasant,' the latter because he evidently preferred the company of the common soldiery to that of the officers. To his face they were insolently patronising. Peter Grant listened, remembered, and said nothing.

Apart from the army personnel and the President and his woman, the Castle housed a group of civilians whose function was uncertain. Certainly some had duties in respect of the supervision of catering, cleaning and maintenance of the establishment but there were a number of men whose sole employment seemed to be to dance attendance on the

President.

Of the President and Lady Sarah, Peter Grant saw nothing. They occupied a huge area of the Castle which was guarded by Commander Simons' secret police. Simons himself occasionally dined with the junior officers, always polite and

urbane, but when he was present there was a palpable air of tension which could not have escaped him. He made a point of speaking to Peter and gently questioning him about his past. Peter answered frankly, volunteered his information and larded his speeches with the slogans of the regime. Simons seemed satisfied.

There were frequent evening parties held in the officers' mess room and the Castle seemed to have attracted the better

looking surviving females to the drudgery of housework, cleaning and waiting at table. The liaisons they formed were brief and casual. As a woman became pregnant and left for the nursery camp, so a new face appeared. Peter took advantage only sparingly of the opportunities offered. He had his physical needs, but he also had tight control over them.

There appeared to be no shortages at the Castle. There was plenty of food and drink, cigarettes, soap, clothing, even razor blades, although in the main only the civilians used those. For the Castle hierarchy, including the junior officers, it was a courtier's life, full of comforts, blank hours and the titillation of minor intrigue and distant fear. Remote as he was from the inner circle of courtiers, Peter could not help but pick up some of the gossip and it soon became clear that the Lady Sarah was not adverse to bestowing occasional intimate favours upon the officers. Her selection seemed random and indiscriminate dictated by whim. One of the 'in' jokes amongst them was to speak of 'the knock.' Apparently, once the Lady Sarah had made her selection, a woman servant was sent to knock on the door of the officer upon whom her favour had fallen and he was sent back to his own room when she had finished with him. Dangerous though it must have been to be selected, there seemed a lemming-like attraction amongst the officers for that particular cliff.

General Blake took a casual interest in the business of his command for the first month but then happily left control to Peter, who made promotions, organised duties, planned training and arranged field exercises without interference or comment. But he had little opportunity to advance his knowledge of the internal power forces of the regime beyond what little he could gather from the officers' brittle gossip. It seemed there were two factions, those under the influence of Lady Sarah and those who adhered firmly to the President, but who belonged to which camp was difficult to assess apart from the obvious allegiance of the junior officers to Lady Sarah. As to which side might win should a confrontation occur, that was impossible to judge

from Peter's limited knowledge and indeed there was no evidence of a political or ideological split, it seemed more a matter of two powerful personalities pulling in one harness but occasionally out of step. Peter Grant kept to himself, took no sides, offered no opinions.

Autumn drifted into winter. It remained mild and there was little rain. The river Thames, shrunk by the long hot summer showed no signs of recovering its normal flow. In the countryside the scattered pockets of humanity grew thinner, hoarding their meagre drought-stricken crops against the even harder times to come, unaware of the extravagant opulence that prevailed at Windsor Castle.

President Wormley decided to parade his troops for inspection. No-one knew why. It had never happened before. Perhaps someone had told him that Heads of State were expected to do such things. He gave one day's notice of his intentions and the responsibility for arranging the spectacle fell on Captain Peter Grant.

Apart from Peter's men the only other force at the castle were the Counter Revolutionary Guard, who had absorbed the few men able to operate the heavy weaponry stationed there, but the C.R.G. did not parade.

The two hundred men of the column, washed, beards trimmed, paraded in neat lines in the inner courtyard of the Palace the day after the order was given for the inspection.

General Blake stood at their head and Captain Grant behind him. The President kept them waiting, as he had been kept waiting by the Lady Sarah.

Peter Grant had no preconceived idea of what form the inspection might take but the cavalcade that entered the courtyard was beyond anything he might have imagined. A big old open-topped Rolls Royce swept into view with President Wormley standing up in the rear. It was the first time Peter had set eyes on him. He was in his ties, a short man with a pale narrow face and a body that was painfully thin, as though he suffered from a wasting disease. His unremarkable appearance was only heightened by his bizarre manner of dress. He wore the full dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet, complete with a chest full of medals, but with it he had chosen to wear a red shirt and tie and on his head was a black bowler hat. There was no authority about the man, he looked like a clown, a figure of fun. But if anyone had thought to laugh, the presence of Commander Simons beside him in the car would have deterred them.

A second open Rolls Royce followed. In this stood Lady Sarah, and she was the most stunningly beautiful woman

Peter had ever seen. She wore a diamond studded tiara on her flowing white-blond hair, a pink formal gown dusted with jewels and a full length white fur coat. Quite apart from the tiara, she wore jewels worth a fortune, earrings, a huge pendant necklace, her hands heavy with rings. Her face was made up to perfection, something Peter could not remember ever having seen. He could not age her but she was a woman at the height of her mature perfection, a fairy queen compared to the comic figure in the leading car. He

now understood why the junior officers danced to her tune. She was eminently desirable, eminently dangerous.

Behind her came other cars containing the courtiers in descending order of social standing, with Peter's fellow Captains somewhere in the middle and the cars containing the army hierarchy near the front, just behind that containing the other senior C.R.G. men. Already the Counter Revolutionary Guard had begun to establish its dominance over the military.

The cars drove amongst the ranks of men, then returned to the front of the parade. As her cars passed him, Peter saw the Lady Sarah look at him closely, then turn to stare again as she was driven on. There was a faint smile on her face and her look was speculative and calculating.

President Wormley addressed the parade. His voice was small and even Peter, at the front of his men, could barely hear what he said. The men could have heard nothing, but neither did they miss anything instructive. The speech was rambling and indecisive, a collection of slogans and exhortations to vigilance on behalf of the President and the glorious Revolution. Then the cavalcade drove off and General Blake commanded Peter to dismiss the parade.

That night all the officers were invited to take dinner with the President and his Lady. In reality less an invitation than an order.

The guests assembled in a huge ante-room in the President's quarters and were served by the palace servants from a huge selection of drinks ostentatiously displayed on a long table at one end of the room. The walls were hung from roof to floor with paintings in frames of all colours, designs, shapes and sizes. Clearly no selection had been made, no attempt at presentation in a manner befitting the stature of the artists. A Constable hung cheek to jowl with a Picasso, Lowry beside Dali, Rubens beside Pissarro. From this confused jungle of genius none emerged with dignity. It hardly mattered. There were none present capable of aesthetic appreciation. The paintings were but symbols of the power that enabled their collection.

Massive double doors opened and a servant deferentially announced that the meal was about to be served. The guests filed through into the massive and imposing dining room where highly polished oak tables were laid with silver cutlery and decorated with fresh cut flowers and silver candelabra, the place for each guest marked with a card bearing his name for fear that an unseemly dispute amongst the lower orders

might disrupt the perfection of the evening.

The room was lit by candlelight and shadows danced across the exquisitely carved ceiling, the heavy draped curtains covering the elegant windows, the wood panelled walls smothered with more paintings, the delicate occasional tables on which stood a jumble of priceless porcelain. Here greed and ambition had survived the Great Death but good taste

and artistic appreciation had not.

Captain Peter Grant was seated at the end of the long central table, furthest from the President's seat, as befitted his low standing. The guests stood respectively behind their chairs and waited for the host to enter. Peter badly wanted to laugh. How could these pompous fools not see that they were taking part in a ritual that was an offensive and hopeless anachronism? The real world was out there, what was left of it, hungry and disillusioned, waiting its chance to strike. President Arthur Wormley was as vulnerable as the Sun King and apparently equally blind.

The Sun King entered with his Antoinette. He still wore his Admiral's uniform, now with a red-rollneck pullover and pristine white gloves. He was hatless and now it could be seen that he was almost completely bald, a few wisps of greying hair drawn across his naked pate in remembrance of a long lost youth. The Lady Sarah was taller by several inches, dressed in a magnificent ball gown of dark green. She was regal, arrogant, supremely confident of the effect of her appearance. Diamonds flashed and sparkled in the candlelight, so that she seemed to be walking in a mist charged with static electricity. She was the only woman present, the stage was hers and well she knew it. Beside her, President Wormley shrank to his true insignificance. The meal lasted an hour and no pre-Death gourmet could have faulted it. It left the guests replete and amiable. President Wormley, as was his habit, ate little but drank copiously. Given time, and such a diet, his ulcer would kill him. After the meal there were many toasts proposed from the floor, extolling the virtues of the President, the Lady Sarah and the glorious Peoples Revolution. Wormley remained until he had drunk himself into insensibility and was then carried off to his bed. From the lack of concern or surprise evinced by the Lady Sarah or the guests it could be deduced that this was not an unusual occurrence. The party moved to an ante-room to continue the evening and get down to the hard drinking.

Since no one else showed any signs of leaving, Peter Grant felt obliged to remain. Lady Sarah moved graciously amongst the guests, clearly revelling in their sycophantic adoration, playing the queen to the manner born. The room became heavy with tobacco smoke and alcohol fumes, laud with drunken laughter and meaningless talk, the air fetid and unpleasant. But the Lady Sarah seemed not to notice, and despite an always full glass, held herself under tight control. Peter Grant stood alone, sipping occasionally at his drink, present 'Only in body. He noticed Commander Simons. The head of the Counter Revolutionary Guard was also aloof from the crowd, 'Only momentarily becoming involved in conversation, always

moving, always listening and watching, always faintly smiling, never far from the Lady Sarah.

'What's your name?'

She had confronted him, as he knew she would. He was suddenly conscious of the smell of her, a powerful exotic perfume liberally applied and mixed with an animal female odour that stirred the stomach and deadened reason. And a few paces behind her, apparently taking no interest, Commander Simons.

'Captain Peter Grant, ma'am.'

'Yes, I remember you. You took the parade.'

'General Blake took the parade, ma'am.'

'He stood in front of it. I'll bet you organised it, that right?'

She inclined her head on one side, and smiled into his eyes, inviting frank confidence. 'General Blake gave me 'Orders, ma'am. I carried them au!.'

She sipped her drink and looked him over as if he were displayed for sale. 'You can relax, Peter,' she said, 'you have nothing to fear from me.'

'Na ma'am.'

'Then don't be so stiff and starchy. Relax and enjoy your-self, that's what we're here for. Have a drink and tell me about yourself.'

Peter dutifully sipped his drink. 'What would you like to know, ma'am. It's a long story...'

She smiled and touched his beard briefly with her fingers. 'Then don't tell me now. We'll talk same 'Other time, in private. I'll send far you.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

She was swallowed by the crowd, but the faint smell of her lingered. And Commander Simons was looking at Peter Grant with those gentle brawn eyes of his, smiling as if with faint amusement at some modest joke.

The sharp knock at the door woke Peter instantly, set him reaching for the knife under his pillow. It was the early hours of the morning, and he was expecting no visitors.

if: He opened the door cautiously. A bleary-eyed old woman stood waiting. 'You're to come with me,' she said.

'Why? On whose orders?' Peter demanded. But he already knew the answer.

'The Lady Sarah.'

The old woman was tired and disinterested. The role of procuress neither stimulated nor depressed her. She was alive

and living well because she could be relied upon to be discreet. She waited Outside the door until Peter Grant appeared fully clothed, then led him silently through the corridors Of the palace.

A C.R.G. man stood an guard in the hall by the rape barrier that marked the President's personal wing. He ignored the young P.D.F. Captain and the old woman, permitted himself a sour grin after they had gone. The old woman stopped outside a heavy wooden door with carved panels, knocked gently and went in, leaving Peter standing outside. She reappeared after a few moments and inclined her thumb into the room. 'Go in,' she said, and walked of down the corridor.

Peter knocked and entered the room. Sarah Bayer stood by a big old fashioned fireplace in which a lag fire burned. She was wearing a long enfolding silk dressing gown in pale blue. It clung to her body, emphasising large breasts and slim hips. She beckoned to him.

'Come in, Peter,' she said.

He walked forward. The only light in the large opulently furnished room, apart from that provided by the log fire, came from a small bedside lamp which gave emphasis to the centrepiece of the furniture, a huge, exquisitely carved wooden frame bed. Near the fire was a luxurious three piece suite and a law onyx tapped table an which sat a silver tray

with a single bottle of champagne and two glasses.

'You sent far me, ma'am?' Peter said.

'Of course I did you silly boy. Come over here and have a drink.' She poured out the champagne and handed him a glass. 'Here's to sin,' she said, smiling. .

'Your health, ma'am,' Peter replied formally.

Sarah sat down on the settee and indicated the place be- side her. 'Sit down beside me, make yourself comfortable.'

And as he did so she said. 'You weren't asleep then?'

'Yes, ma'am. I was.'

She laughed. 'And you got up and dressed in 'all those clothes to come here? How sweet. Have you ever had a woman, Peter?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

She leaned forward, close to him, looking into his face, almost touching him. 'But I bet you've never had a woman like me.'

'No, ma'am.'

She put up a bejewelled band and turned his face so that he was forced to look at her. Then she kissed him gently on the lips. 'Would you like to have me, Peter?' she asked. 'It occurs to me,' said Peter mildly, 'that if the President were to walk into the room at this moment be might not be pleased. '

Sarah entwined her fingers in his beard and nuzzled at his neck. 'He's as drunk as a pig, as usual. He'll sleep it off, won't wake 'till mid-day. You've nothing to worry about. Anyway, even when he's sober he can't do anything, you know what I mean?'

'Yes.'

'He knows better than to come in here without asking permission. Now, you haven't answered my question.'

'You're very beautiful, ma'am.'

'Peter, there's something I want you to do for me.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'When we're alone I want you to call me Sarah.'

'Yes... Sarah.'

'And there's something else.'

Peter waited. I

'I want you to stand in front of the fire and take off your clothes.'

He did as he was ordered. She lounged on the settee and watched until he stood naked in front of her, the flames of the fire throwing flickering shadows on his hard, muscled young body. She came to him then, mouth open, hands reaching for him.

'Pick me up, take me to bed,' she said, thrusting herself against him.

He picked her up and carried her as if she was featherweight, and she clung to him in urgent anticipation. And because he was without emotion, because be kept a part of his senses alert for an intrusion, and because he had learnt the lessons that Peggy had taught him back in Rochester camp, he was able to pleasure her more than any man had before. And when he left her two hours later she was bruised and sore, but utterly satisfied.

Having entered into an affair with Sarah Boyer, Peter was in no position to discontinue it at will. He was fully aware of the inherent danger of the situation, he had no friends at court except possibly General Blake, and if anyone wished

. to make trouble for him the opportunity was there, ready for the taking. A word in the President's ear and his future

prospects would be bleak. Yet if he incurred the wrath of the beautiful Lady Sarah he would scarcely be any better off. He lived in hope that she would tire of him.

Sarah Boyer had no intention of ending the affair prematurely. His body thrilled her, his lovemaking exhausted her and ,his beauty was a constant source of joy. He was her most treasured possession. Yet she was not fool enough to allow her passion to overrule her head. Sarah well knew that appearances had to be kept up. She was Queen and intended

to remain so, even after the weak and ailing fool she played wife to had passed on. She had tasted hardship in the years immediately following the Great Death and had no intention of giving up her privileged life.

On one matter however, she was firmly resolved to take a chance. Prized even above her jewels and furs was her store of contraceptive pills, because they gave her her

freedom. She never intended to become pregnant by Wormley, the very thought of producing his fragile whining offspring offended her. But she was approaching her middle years and nature itself was offended by her barren womb. Vain, self-interested and arrogant she might have been, but she was also subject to the natural drive to procreate, and she now selected the father of her child.

After Peter Grant's third visit to her bedroom she stopped taking the pill. Two months later she was certain she was pregnant. She took the precaution of enticing Wormley into a show of masculinity, over-rode his impotence with a fierce determination that was matched only by an equal determination to ensure that none of his falsified semen entered her. Wormley was delighted by her interest and the apparent resurgence of his own ability. He was a man born to be cuckolded.

Sarah Boyer blossomed with the springtime, as pregnant with new life as the budding trees, more beautiful than ever, of easy temper, secretly cuddling a sense of fulfilment to her breast.

With regret, she gradually sent for her lover less often, and did not replace him in her bed. She wanted to take no chances with the child. He would be born. He would be perfect. He would be as intelligent and beautiful as his mother and as strong as his father. But his father must never know of the child's true parentage. If he knew he might consider himself in a position of privilege and power, he might get above himself and wreck the life she planned for herself and her son, for the child would be a boy. If he never knew, if all went well, if Wormley lived, perhaps she would have further children by Peter Grant, let him father a dynasty to rule when Wormley was dead. But whilst Wormley lived Peter Grant must remain in ignorance of the very special privilege she had accorded him.

So Sarah Boyer denied herself the pleasure of his body, for once in her life practising self discipline, and redoubled her plotting to secure her personal position in the Revolution, fired by the urgent necessity to protect her secret, conspiring for two where previously she had conspired for one.

Inevitably the affair did not go unnoticed within the confines of the court, and the Lady Sarah's lengthy attachment to Peter Grant pleased no-one. What the Queen of the Revolution did affect every member of the elite to some degree.

That winter was a bleak time for the coterie of Captains who no longer enjoyed her favours. General Blake was uncertain whether to be pleased or dismayed. Peter Grant was his protégé and too valuable to be discarded. If things went well, if Peter continued to please her and was not discovered in his affair, then Blake was in an advantageous position. But if the affair was discovered, Blake was likely to fall with his young Captain. And he well knew that Peter was not well liked. If the Counter Revolutionary Guard decided to move against him they were both dead.

Commander Simons had known of Peter Grant's call to the bedroom within half an hour of his arrival on that first night, since his men guarded the private rooms. He

watched the affair with interest and debated how it might fit into his plans. He needed time, and if this new lover kept that whore Sarah Boyer quiet for a few months then he was not against the liaison. In any event, it would not pay him to move against her yet, she still had the President in the palm of her hand. Nonetheless, he set about the business of investigating Grant's background. Precious little was known of him before he began his meteoric rise in the President's army. It would do no harm to know more.

Simons was concerned that that bitch Boyer might persuade Wormley to promote her lover to the rank of General. That would make it fractionally more difficult to deal with the young man when the time came.

Not only did this not occur but in the spring Sarah Boyer called Simons to her room and suggested that Captain Grant was wasted at court, was becoming bored and needed to see active service again. Nothing too dangerous, something to occupy him for the time being. Simons was happy to comply. With any luck her pet stud might just get himself killed. Even if he did not, by that spring Simons had already gleaned sufficient information about him to put him in front of a

firing squad. Peter Grant's death only waited on Simons convenience, was adjourned only until he could use Peter to encompass Sarah Boyer's downfall.

Even Tom Price felt the repercussions of the affair. On Simons orders he was detached from his comfortable and profitable billet at the Castle and, for a dismal month in midwinter, sent to the Rochester base camp, ostensibly to reorganise the inferior catering arrangements there, but actually to delve into Peter Grant's origins. It was a task he had no stomach for, but he saw that if he could find what Simons wanted there would be one less man in the world for him to fear.

When Price returned to the Castle he delivered Peter Grant on a plate to the secret police. He named the sergeant who had accepted him into the army, tied Peter's early career inextricably in with the dead traitor Captain Royce, and

located the two boys that Peter had joined with, Clive and Richard, who were serving in the army at Dover. The two unfortunate soldiers were arrested by the C.R.G., taken to the prison at Maidstone and tortured. They told of the killing of the P.D.F. men at the farm. That was all Simons needed but to ensure secrecy he kept them in prison. For good measure Price also told Simons that he had been present on the beach two years before when Peter had gunned down his own mother. Simons rewarded his spy with ten cartons of cigarettes. A small price to pay for such valuable information.

So far as Simons was concerned Sarah Boyer and Peter Grant had joined the ranks of the walking dead.

Chapter Seven

'You're going on the rat-hunt,' General Blake announced. Peter nodded acceptance. He had been expecting a change of scenery ever since Sarah had begun to call on his services less often, and he was not sorry to be absent from the Castle or to call an end to the affair. As to the rat-pack, he'd as soon have fought them as anyone else. The rat-pack was army slang for the fifty or sixty skeletal fugitives who lived out their lives

in a section of the old London Underground system, near what had been Piccadilly Circus, rather than accept the brotherly embrace of the Revolution. They were an inconvenience, a sore on the buttocks of the regime rather than an active menace. Left to their own devices they would certainly have died out in time but they looted the diminishing

stocks of usable supplies left in the city and thus, now and then, the army mounted a punitive expedition against them, killing off a few then retreating from the stinking holes in which they lived before disease struck them down. Being sent on the rat-hunt was not exactly an accolade for an army officer, but then, nor was it particularly dangerous.

'Immediately, sir?' Peter Grant asked.

'In the morning. Here's a list of the men you'll take.' He handed over a sheet of paper and Peter perused it. Fifty men including all his own patrol and, he noticed, Tom Price. He

wondered at that selection. They hardly needed a man of culinary talents on a limited punitive expedition.

'If you'll forgive me, sir, I'd have preferred to make my own selection,' Peter said.

'Yeah . . . no doubt. But that's who you'll take.'

'Did you make out the list, sir?' Peter asked.

General Blake looked away and moved Uncomfortably on his chair. 'No, Grant.' He decided suddenly on the blunt truth. 'Look, the Lady Sarah told Simons to arrange for you to leave the Castle. She's not being vindictive or anything, wanted you to see some active service but nothing too dangerous. Simons gave me the posting and the list. The way things are, we have to accept it, like it or not.'

'So now the C.R.G. tells the P.D.F. what to do?' Peter enquired gently.

Blake made a face. He liked it no better than his sub-, ordinate. He feared greatly the increasing power of Simons and his secret police but was impotent to do anything about

it. His unfortunate looks, coarse manners and limited intelligence had caused his partial ostracism from the inner circles of the court and he had no sources of information to equal Simons but even he could see the way the wind was blowing. Once Simons achieved complete dominance for his C.R.G. over the military, only the frail President and his presumably equally frail woman stood between Simons and total power. It was debatable how long Blake would survive thereafter; he was tolerated now simply because he was the only officer with any previous military experience and if Simons discovered how limited that experience had been he would no doubt consider him expendable.

'That's the way things are at the moment,' Blake admitted.

'Can I speak frankly to you, sir?' Peter asked.

'D'epends,' said Blake cautiously.

'I appreciate all you've done for me, sir. My first loyalty isn't to you. You can depend on that. Can I speak?'

'Go on then,' said Blake, unable to resist the plea to his ego.

'Simons is a dangerous man: Dangerous to us all. He wants power, far more than he has, and he won't stop until he gets it. He might not even consider the body of the President was

sacred. Suppose he were ever to gain complete power, what then? What sort of dictator would he make? Have you thought of that?'

Blake shivered involuntarily. 'You shouldn't talk like that,' he said, 'the man's got spies everywhere.'

'Not in here, I'm sure. It occurs to me that we would all be better off without him.'

'No doubt, . . .' Blake was about to continue but evidently thought better of it.

'It could be arranged. It wouldn't be a matter you need have anything to do with of course, sir. But if you said the word, it might well happen.'

Blake had no doubt that it would. He had every confidence in Peter Grant's capacity to kill. Even someone as powerful and well guarded as Simons. The idea was frighteningly attractive. But there were drawbacks as even he saw.

'Not yet. We don't know exactly how he stands with the President. We don't know who he's got on his side. Better wait a bit 'till we know exactly who we're up against. Be daft to cut off one head and leave others alive wouldn't it?'

That was complex and detailed thinking for Blake, and pretty astute too. Peter acknowledged the fact with a nod.

'Very wise, sir. Still, remember what I said. Later on, when the time's right.'

'Okay, Grant. Now forget what we've said. Go catch a few rats. Don't go mad, no need to take risks. Just see out a few

months, fire off a few shots, then I'll try to arrange to bring you back here, okay?'

'Very well, sir. There's one more thing I'd like to ask.'

'Yeah?'

'I want to take one more man, one particular man, and a few cases of explosive. I know there's some here.'

'What the hell d'you want that for?'

Peter told him.

During that winter Tom Price gave a lot of thought to the possibility of escape. At first the idea seemed impractical after all, where could he go? But he now knew that President Wormley did not have the iron control over the British mainland that Price had previously imagined. Northern England, Scotland and Wales still held out, and what was more, the hierarchy of the Wormley regime was rapidly splitting into two factions around the Lady Sarah and the junior officers and Simons and the President. Price was committed to the Simons faction and on balance it looked as if he was on the winning side but one bullet could change all that. It was also extremely uncomfortable to know that Simons could execute him on the instant for the smallest failing. Even with Simons in total command and with Peter Giant dead, Price could not rest content that his survival was assured. For the moment he was safe. Simons had been delighted with the information Price supplied about Peter Grant. But now he was being sent on a rat-hunt under the command of the man he had betrayed, reporting to Simons on his return if Grant did anything worthy of secret note. A most unhappy circumstance, and Price could foresee that his career as a spy would inevitably lead him often into this kind of situation. Sooner or later his luck would run out. When the chance came, Price determined to defect and return to Wales, his homeland. At the thought, his heart swelled with tribal pride. He felt the emotional call of the valleys. But for the time being he was heading in the opposite direction, towards the stinking remnants of the dead city of London. They camped the first night in the remains of a church in Ealing. The place was cold and damp, the glass windows long gone and moss and thin grass growing on the rotted remains of carpets on the floor. The place was infested with rats and mice and draped with spiders webs. Setting off on foot at dawn, for the city was impassable to traffic, they split the supplies between them, and reached central London on the second day. The P.D.F. kept a small regular force in London with headquarters in the underground car park at Hyde Park corner. Their function was to contain the rat-pack and locate any remaining useable supplies. The park itself was now a jungle and home to a wide selection of wildlife. The buildings of the city were all derelict and overgrown, those that were brick built already crumbling away to heaps of rubble leaving the square tower blocks of reinforced concrete, towering above the remains to stare blank-eyed over the devastation. London had died and was fast being reclaimed by nature.

Captain Grant went off to confer with the local P.D.F. leader and left Tom Price and the patrol to billet themselves into the ample space of the large car park. When he returned it was to tell them that he intended to lead the entire patrol down the underground system the following morning. Tom Price assumed that this order would not include the cook. In that he was mistaken.

The patrol assembled at dawn the following morning after a brief and indifferent breakfast. Tom Price dallied in the kitchen area, hoping and expecting that his services would not be required. Sergeant Burley tracked him down and thrust a box of matches and a slim bundle of oil-soaked brushwood into his hand.

'You're being honoured, Price,' he announced. 'You're leading us down the hole.'

'Me!? You must be joking, man!' Price shouted fearfully,

'I'm the cook, see? I'm no good down there, can't shoot straight, can I?'

'You don't have to shoot. Just hold the torch. Now move your ass, you're keeping the patrol waiting.'

'But Sergeant, look here now,' Price wheedled, 'I can't do it, see, like to, but I suffer, see, suffer from claustrophobia, can't stand being enclosed, I'd drop the torch or something.'

'If you drop the torch,' said Burley grimly, 'I'll personally cut you up and serve you for dinner. Now move!'

As the patrol picked its way through the rubble of the city Price could hardly keep himself from being physically sick. He had been given the most dangerous job of all. When the patrols took casualties underground, nine times out of ten it was the torch-man who got it. The job was next best thing to a death sentence. And there was no way out. Sergeant Burley marched at his side, his hands never far from the trigger of his automatic rifle. Worse than the immediate physical danger was the inescapable thought that Captain Grant had discerned his perfidy and chosen this way to eliminate him. Tom Price was certain that he faced death. If the rat-pack failed to get him then Sergeant Burley would. Why in hell's name hadn't Simons arrested and executed Grant at the Castle? He'd had more than enough evidence. Come to that, if Captain Grant had discovered that Price was Simons spy, why hadn't he just killed him, why put poor old Tom through this torture? None of it made much sense. By the time they reached Piccadilly Circus, Price was white faced and weak legged with fear.

The Circus was a jumble of rotting and rusting vehicles and fallen masonry, recognisable only by the almost indestructible plastic signs announcing the entrance to the underground station. The patrol halted at the steps that led down into stygian darkness and Captain Grant beckoned Tom Price forward.

'Lead on Price,' he said.

Sergeant Burley lit the torch that Price held in a shaking hand and invited him forward. with a gesture. Price advanced cautiously down the steps. The stadium sized concourse below ground echoed with their footsteps and the scuffling of

disturbed rats. Other members of the patrol lit torches and the group moved forward in a pool of flickering yellow light.

Price hesitantly led the way down the escalator which had rusted into eternal immobility, through an arch and onto a platform. The air down here was rank and foetid, the stench a physical blow, the rats huge and numerous. The platform was strewn with rotting rubbish, old human excrement, rust-ing metal containers and tin cans. The human rats had been

here but long since moved on.

'Down onto the track,' Captain Grant ordered.

Tom Price scrambled down onto the rubbish-littered track, holding the torch aloft. The mouth of the tunnel gaped blackly at him, seeming to absorb all light from the torch.

Sergeant Burley prodded him in the back with his rifle. 'Not afraid of the dark, are you?' he demanded.

Price was almost paralysed with fear and would have taken not a step further but for Burley's grim encouragement. The tunnel closed about them and the torch Price held lit only a few feet in front of him. After a few hundred yards the tunnel dipped and they were walking in rank black water which varied from ankle to thigh depth. Underfoot there were sleepers, rusted track and stray wires. that caused the cursing men to stumble, sometimes measuring their length in the foul water. Then the track began to climb and they were clear of the water. But there were always rats, thousands of them, scuffling and squeaking, bright eyes sometimes caught in the torchlight. And every second Tom Price expected a sudden explosion and the thudding impact of a bullet as it struck his body.

They reached Oxford Circus station without meeting human life. The platform was as filthy and littered as the one by which they had entered the system and there were signs of past occupation. Captain Grant consulted the hand-drawn map he had brought and led them across the platform, through a maze of corridors and into another tunnel leading towards Green Park Station. It afforded no better going than the one they had left. There was water most of the way,

. sloshing round their feet and seeping through the walls, and streamers of a fern-like growth hung from the ceiling and touched their faces with soft damp fingers. An hour down here and no-one would ask how it was the rat-pack held out against the might of the P.D.F.

After a quarter mile the patrol came to a sudden halt. The tunnel ahead had caved in. Captain Grant ordered them back to Oxford Circus, back into the open air. Tom Price, first out, abandoned his torch and dropped to the ground, dragging great gulps of fresh air into his lungs. The devastated landscape seeming like heaven after the hell he had been through.

Captain Grant rested the patrol for half an hour then led them back to the headquarters at Hyde Park. It was still light when they returned. The patrol assumed,

quite naturally, that having made a show their Captain would be in no hurry to return down the tunnels. It was common knowledge that only a token effort was expected on the rat-hunt. But Grant had them back in that stinking maze of tunnels every day for the next six days, entering by a different station each time.

They might have mutinied, but for the fact that none were prepared to risk facing Captain Grant, let alone the combination of Grant and Sergeant Burley. The only good thing was that Grant did not seem anxious to engage the enemy. Even when, on the third day, they came across a camp in current use at Goodge Street Station and shot down those too old or crippled to escape, he declined to follow the others into the tunnels but contented himself with ordering the destruction of the camp.

More often than not Tom Price was leading torch. He became resigned to his death, sank into a bitter resentment that. Grant continued to torture him, would almost have welcomed the final bullet. Life held nothing for him but a continuous blinding fear. No-one was more surprised than he when, after the seven days, Captain Grant stood the patrol down and was not seen for two days. Faint hope glimmered in Price's breast. Perhaps Grant did not know, perhaps only suspected. Perhaps he might live after all. He went back to his cooking and tried not to think of the future.

When Captain Grant re-appeared he called the patrol together for a briefing. With him was Burley and another Sergeant, a stranger to Price about whose presence with the patrol he had occasionally wondered.

Grant began by drawing a rough diagram with a burnt stick on the wall of the underground headquarters, marking the position of various underground stations they had visited.

'We will not be going back down the tunnels,' Grant announced to a chorus of cheers. 'There is an easier way of dealing with the rat-pack. Dealing with them once and for all.' He indicated the Sergeant standing beside him. 'Sergeant Dennis here used to work in a quarry. He knows about explosives, that's why he's here. Now, from the time we've spent exploring the system we know that the rat-pack is confined to the central area by floods, tunnel cave-ins and the destruction of some of the stations above ground. We know they have fourteen possible exits, two of these being together at Warren Street.'

He indicated the position on his crude map, his audience now hanging on every word. 'The idea is that Sergeant Dennis, with our help, will blow up the entrances to all but one of the stations, thus bottling up the rat-pack. They then have two choices, make a break for it or die down their holes when we blow the last exit. Any questions?'

'Won't they scatter as soon as we start blowing the stations?' a man asked.

'No. We set all the charges, that should take us two days, then blow the lot together. Half the patrol remains at Piccadilly to wait for them to come out. They should have a turkey-shoot.'

'But how can we explode all the charges at exactly the same time, sir?' another asked. 'Sergeant Dennis will set all the charges. He will select men and show them how to detonate them. All the charges will be detonated at first light on the third day.'

There were no more questions. In the bustle of activity in the next two days Tom Price seemed to have been forgotten and he was not sorry for that. But he was roused with the others on the third day and headed out into the darkness to join the remainder of the patrol at Piccadilly Circus.

Two entrances were passable at the station. Captain Grant took half the men to one and Tom Price went with Sergeant Burley to cover the other. He huddled into his coat, grasping his rifle to his chest, shivering against the early morning cold.

As the sky lightened over the silent ruined city the distant explosive blasts were clearly heard, following upon each other at irregular intervals. But it was over an hour, well past full light, before Tom Price was startled into awareness as Captain Grant's patrol opened fire.

Then a small group of white faced, skeletal thin, ragged and desperate human rats burst up the steps of the underground station and into the light of day, momentarily blinded and providing simple targets. There were perhaps ten of them in that first group, only two women and no children, some of the men had shotguns but had no chance to, use them. The patrol opened up with a murderous fire cutting them down as they emerged. It was merciless slaughter.

Then there was silence but for muted screams and wailing from the darkness of the underground station. The patrol moved forward and fired a volley down the steps. Captain Grant came across and looked at the dead bodies dispassionately, mentally counting.

'That's seventeen in all,' he said to Sergeant Burley. 'There must be more still down there.'

'Do we go after them, sir?' Burley asked.

Grant shook his head. 'I think not. We'll seal them up down there. Where's Sergeant Dennis?'

Tom Price took no part in the carnage. He did not fire when the scarecrow figures appeared and when the patrol moved forward he remained where he was. There was just a possibility that one of the tunnel-dwellers might fire back. Only when Captain Grant came over did he join the group round the station entrance. He heard Captain Grant's call for Sergeant Dennis. Price was not squeamish but he could hear the wails and the screams from below ground and was suddenly and uncontrollably sick when he tried to imagine what it would be like to be buried alive down there.

Sergeant Burley must have had similar thoughts. For once he ventured to question his Captain's orders. 'They won't cause no trouble now, sir. We could let them out, take diem prisoner, eh?'

Captain Grant shrugged. 'Maybe they'd rather stay.'

'We could give 'em the chance, sir.'

'Very well.'

Sergeant Burley moved to the edge of the steps and shouted down. 'You lot. Leave your weapons and come out in single file. You won't be hurt. Hear me?'

The wailing died away and the patrol stood around in silence, waiting with interest for the result of Burley's humanitarian offer.

An old man appeared first, hands above his head, a wooden crucifix clasped in his right hand. His body was emaciated, what teeth he had were blacked and loose, his white beard was stained and matted. Dark eyes stared out of a cadaverous face and where the rags he wore exposed his body he was dirty and marked with sores. This then was the enemy, to fight this had the P.D.F.'s crack patrol been sent in.

Tom Price looked at Captain Grant. His face was twisted with a grimace of disgust, and there was something else evident, something that in another man, Price might have taken for pity.

Others followed the old man. Men and women, a few children. None in any better physical condition, than the leader. Fourteen walking skeletons appeared and stood before their captors, heads down, only dead apathy evident in their faces and posture.

'Any more of you down there?' Captain Grant asked. The old man shook his head slowly. 'Don't reckon so. We're all that's left.'

'Move over then,' Grant ordered. 'When we've finished here we'll find you food and clothes. Do as you're told and you'll come to no harm.'

The old man stared about him at the bodies of his dead companions, at the flies already blackening the splashes of blood on their filthy clothing. He said nothing.

They blew up the two entrances in Piccadilly and returned to headquarters. The captives were given food and drink, ordered to wash and bedded down for the night.

In the morning the old man was dead. The survivors of the rat-pack buried him themselves, with his crucifix.'

The patrol left London next day, heading back for Windsor Castle. Tom Price was bemused. Death had touched him with'

both hands but he had apparently escaped unscathed. He was not to know that he had been suspected by Captain Grant simply because Commander Simons had included his name in the men posted to the patrol and Grant could see no reason for it unless Price were a spy. But Price had not acted like a spy, only like a typically fearful non-combatant, and so he had ceased to be a matter for consideration.

Tom Price began to worry as they neared the Castle. He had nothing further to report to Simons about Peter Grant. The Captain had done nothing to arouse suspicion. He had carried out his task with what the President would no doubt consider was commendable ruthlessness and expedition, adding to his already formidable reputation. Price sincerely hoped that Simons would execute his plans against Captain Grant soon.

He would feel a little more comfortable when Peter Grant was dead.

President Wormley was in rare good humour, by the time the victorious patrol returned from London. The Lady Sarah had informed him of her pregnancy, and the

imminent prospect of fatherhood brought a new lightness to his steps, restored his faith in his manhood and even vested him with a faint aura of personal authority. The news that one of his young Captains had waged a brief and devastating campaign against the rat-pack, eliminating a source of minor annoyance, added to his new sense of wellbeing.

The President greeted the victor warmly and with some ceremony, in front of the whole court, awarded him a medal, plucked from the wide selection adorning his own breast.

If Wormley was pleased at Peter Grant's quick success and early return, no-one else was. It did not suit Commander Simons. He did not wish to make his move until Sarah Boyer's child was born and his control over the military was complete. It did not suit the courtiers who were jealous and mistrustful of Grant's rapid rise in favour. It did not suit General Blake, who foresaw that the more rapidly the star of his protégé rose, the faster it was likely to fall, and almost certainly it did not suit Sarah Boyer, who was aware of the antipathy towards her lover and who wished to preserve his life but not at the cost of failing to secure her own position and that of her child as Wormley's rightful heir.

In the circumstances it was inevitable that Peter Grant's stay at the Castle should be short. He was an embarrassment to everyone.

Sarah Boyer called General Blake to a meeting in her bedroom late one night soon after Peter Grant returned. For once she was modestly dressed, her pregnancy as yet barely evident. Her manner was confidential but businesslike.

'Sit down General Blake,' she invited. 'Pour yourself a drink. We have some serious things to talk about.'

'Yes, ma'am?' Blake enquired, pouring himself a liberal portion of whisky. He had 'a feeling he would be in need of it.

'I have to know where your loyalty lies, General, with me or with Simons.'

'With the President,' said Blake, carefully.

'Of course, of course,' Sarah said irritably. 'You're not a fool. You know what I'm talking about. The President is an old man, and ill. Do you fancy Simons as President?'

Blake shook his head vehemently. 'No, that I don't.'

'Then can I take it I have your support?'

'Yes, ma'am. I suppose you can.'

'Suppose isn't good enough. If I can't rely on you then I'll have to find someone else.'

Blake had known it would come to this, that eventually he would have to take sides.

He felt suddenly cold and sweat stood out on his forehead and moistened his palms.

'You can rely on me, ma'am,' he said thickly.

'Good. Now, Simons may try to use Captain Grant to bring me down, you understand?'

Blake understood very well. He nodded, staring into his glass.

'Captain Grant must be sent away. I understand that we

now have control of the south west. That means we can bring the Captain there back here as palace guard. Grant and his men can be sent north. He can take charge of the war against The Trader.'

'But the President may not want him to go,' Blake put in. 'Grant's in favour with him at the moment and the President might feel safer with Grant and his men here.'

'I'll persuade him he'll be safer still when Grant disposes of The Trader and the whole of England's ours.'

'Okay, but what about Simons?'

'Sod him. I've got more say with Wormley than he has. Especially since I'm pregnant. Anyway, what makes you think he'll want Peter around? He'll be glad to see him gone.'

'Maybe he will.'

'So that's it. Send for the Captain immediately. You suggest to the President that Grant goes north. I'll support you. There's one other thing.'

'Yes, ma'am?'

'Sooner or later we'll have to kill Simons.'

After his fulsome reception by the President, Peter Grant soon became aware of the depth of feeling against him in the Castle. He kept to himself, spending his time supervising and training his troops, certain they would soon be in action again.

Six days after his return, Sarah called him to her bedroom late at night. He went, for he had no choice, but it was against his better judgement. She sat him in a chair and poured him a drink.

'I'm pregnant, Peter,' she said. 'Did you know?'

Peter nodded. 'Everyone knows.'

She turned away from him. 'Even when we were lovers,

I still had to sleep with Wormley. The child is his.'

'Yes,' Peter replied. But he knew she was lying. Had she not herself told him Wormley was impotent?

'So you must go away again my love, for a while, in case someone starts to gossip. If they do, you might be in danger.'

Peter sipped his drink and watched her. She turned back to face him. 'You must be careful,' she said. 'Especially be careful of Simons and the C.R.G. He's ambitious, that man. You understand?'

Peter understood all too well. He was anxious to be gone. But he also wanted to know what plans she had to combat Simons' influence.

'If I'm in danger, so are you and the child,' he said. 'You will never be safe whilst Simons is alive.'

She smiled grimly. 'Don't worry about that, Peter. You can safely leave Simons to me.'

'If you say so, Sarah.'

She touched his dark beard gently with her fingers. 'Don't underestimate me, Peter.

I'm a pretty hard bitch, didn't you know?'

A far more disturbing meeting came a few days later. Sergeant Burley sought him out during a routine training exercise and asked for a quiet word.

When they were alone, he said: 'Commander Simons came to see me in my billet last night, sir.'

Peter stiffened. 'And?'

'He tried to recruit me as a spy for the C.R.G.'

'And what did you say?' Peter enquired softly.

'Said I would. Seemed the best thing to do.'

'You were very wise. What did he want you to do?'

'Watch you and the other Sergeants. Report anything and everything you did. Hinted he'd be specially interested in any secret meeting you had with General Blake or the Lady Sarah.'

'I see.'

'Thought you'd better know. But there's something else, only thought of it this morning. If he's approached me, well, I'm likely not the only one.'

'Probably not.'

'You remember Price, Tom Price? We thought he might be Simons spy. Well, during the winter, before we went after the rat-pack, he was sent off to Rochester camp. Supposed to sort out the kitchens there. Load of crap. He was sent there to find out about you. If there's anything he could've found out, then you're in trouble, sir.'

Peter's face hardened. If Price had traced Clive, or Richard or Peggy, and that would not have been hard, then Simons knew enough to have him killed. Why had he made no move?

'There was something he could have found out,' Peter said. And, then, because if Simons knew there was no reason why Burley should not, he added: 'Before I joined the old N.U.F. I was with two other youngsters. We ran into trouble at a farm in Kent one day. I killed two soldiers.'

" 'Bloody hell!' Burley exploded, 'they've got you by the short and curlyes!'

'Exactly. But Simons has apparently known for some time and he's done nothing about it. Perhaps he thinks the President might not agree to my death.'

'Maybe,' said Burley, doubtfully. Then he brightened and gave Peter a sly look. 'And maybe the Lady Sarah wouldn't agree either,' he suggested.

'I hope not,' Peter said. But he had no doubt that he could count on her support only as long as it served her interests.

He thought rapidly now, revising his plans. Knowing that Blake was too weak and unintelligent to act, and seeing that Sarah Boyer led by far the weaker faction, he had determined during the London action to wait his chance and throw in his lot with Simons and his secret police. One more promotion, and as a General he would have some power to

bargain with. Under Simons the regime might change direction, survive for longer. The news Burley brought changed that plan. There could be no safety in aligning oneself with a man who had clear evidence to justify your instant execution whenever he chose. Yet, without higher rank, without more power, he was of no great value to Sarah Boyer. He did not know how much time he had left. It was obvious that Simons would not wait long after the birth of the royal child. Peter had until then to gain his promotion. The sooner he was back in action the better.

'Sir?' Burley interrupted his Captain's thoughts.

'Yes?'

'I just want you to know, me and the lads, your old patrol, I've told them about it and they agree... we're with you. Whatever you decide to do is right by us.'

Peter found himself unusually touched by emotion. 'Thank you,' he said, honestly. 'But you realise you'd be risking your lives?'

'So what? There's fifteen of the old patrol still alive after two years. With some other Captain we'd be likely all dead. Anyway, who the hell wants the likes of Simons running things? Like I said, you decide, sod the army or anyone else, where you go, we go. If you'll take us, like.'

'Never fear,' Peter said, 'I'll take you.'

Burley seemed a little more at ease. 'What about Price, then?'

'What about him?'

'We thought we'd sort of remove him;'

'No. I think we'll be posted from here soon. When we go; we'll take him with us.'

'Why. The sneaky little bastard's dangerous,' Burley protested.

'We know him. If we kill him Simons will replace him with someone we don't know. Safer to have him with us, don't you think?'

'Yeah, suppose so,' said Sergeant Burley regretfully.

Peter Grant watched the barrel chested figure of his Sergeant striding away from him. Burley had brought him both a gift and burden, the gift of loyalty, the burden of responsibility. If he accepted the total allegiance of his old patrol, then he would have to accept responsibility for their lives.

For the first time he would have to plan not just for himself but also for others.

It was mid-summer when Captain Peter Grant led his column out of the grounds of Windsor Castle, heading north. He had been offered tanks and heavy field guns, indeed President Wormley would have granted him almost any wish, but Peter had declined, preferring to opt for greater manoeuvrability and speed of travel. There was also the added consideration that all the heavy armour was now manned by C.R.G. troops. He would have felt uncomfortable knowing the Simons secret police were trundling along behind him in a tank.

So he settled for two armed half-tracks and the usual selection of motor cycles, jeeps and trucks, enough to carry

all two-hundred of his men. It did not occur to Peter Grant that he should be daunted at the prospect of leading an army into battle for the first time, he not having seen

nineteen years. Yet, as he led his column north he was conscious of a sense of inevitability about events, as if he were a pawn in some game beyond his understanding.

He was unused to exercising his mind with the abstract. That he should do so now was a puzzle. Perhaps it was to do with the new relationship he had with the men of his old patrol. They rode in the leading jeep with him, others led the column on motor cycles, others flanked his vehicle, cocooning him protectively. He felt as if he were being led, helpless towards some unknown and therefore vaguely frightening destiny, and at the same time, that this was a period of learning, of training for some task yet to be set.

The mood stayed with him on the long journey. Strangely, he was not depressed by this new consciousness, rather he was comforted and relieved by the thought that was now certainty, that the future did not lie in his own hands. He could not view his own future with detachment, in the sure knowledge that he would live to fulfil the task allotted to him.

Simons might plot his death, but Simons too was a mere pawn in the game.

Chapter Eight

The journey from Windsor to the P.D.F. northern headquarters near Wakefield took four days. The column travelled across country to pick up the line of the old MI motorway just north of the ruins that had been St. Albans. Thereafter the going was easier. The regime had established petrol dumps along the major troop routes and each was guarded by a handful of soldiers. At some, rough wooden huts had been built or an old building taken back into use, achieving for these outposts a minor sense of permanence.

Even so, for many miles at a stretch there was no sign of human life. The population of Britain was less than it had been at any time during recorded history.

At the castle there had been no evidence of the effects of the drought of the previous year, which had continued over into this baking hot summer, but once out into the country there was evidence in plenty. The grasslands were yellow with thirst; the overgrown hedgerows sprawled thinly, showing brown ribs through the foliage. Ponds had dried up, rivers shrunk to a trickle. Trees had died, others had begun to shed wrinkled leaves early; the few inhabitants they saw were painfully thin and regarded the well fed soldiery with uninquiring hatred. They had been hungry for a long time. They saw few animals, but the insects seemed to have survived in force and were a constant source of annoyance.

The column had brought its own food, which was just as well, for there was precious little to be stolen on the way.

Peter Grant took note of the parlous state of the countryside and the people. If the drought continued beyond this year then Wormley, or whoever won the battle of intrigue to succeed him would be President of a dead kingdom, Lord only of Windsor Castle and millions of empty acres. He wondered if Simons knew, if he had plans to change the course of the Revolution, reduce its dependence on old outdated ways of life. He wondered what part he would play in the changes that would inevitably come.

Sergeant Burley and the men of Peter's old patrol noticed the change that occurred in him during those four days and debated it long, without coming to any firm conclusions.

Their Captain seemed distant, further removed from them than ever. He was given to long periods of silent introspection when they felt totally excluded. The most popular theory held that he was bored. It would be all right once the battle started. He was always on top form when a fight was in prospect.

They camped adjacent to the P.D.F. stronghold near Wakefield, centred round what had once been a country school, and Peter Grant went to greet the incumbent senior officer, Captain Walsh. He was a man of middle years and stolid conformity, glad of ranking company, eager for gossip from the Castle. In that at least he was disappointed. Grant monopolised the conversation with questions relating to the job allocated to him.

'This man they call The Trader, he has a name?'

'Name's Berry, Frank Berry.'

'How old is he, what's he like?'

Walsh shrugged. 'Fifties, I suppose. A live wire, always on the go. Shrewd bastard.'

'Any previous army experience?'

'Not that I know of. He does well enough though.'

'What size army does he have?'

'Difficult, that. In a way it depends on how hard we push him. I suppose he has about three hundred people but his permanent guard is only about thirty strong. The women fight as well, so he could put, say, two hundred into the field if he had to.'

'Well armed?'

'Oh, yes. They looted Caterick army camp long before we got up this far. There's tanks at Leeds, field guns, mortars, the lot.'

'But have they got anyone who can operate the heavy stuff?'

Walsh grinned. 'Nobody's ever tried to find out. Like a drink?'

Peter nodded acceptance. They were talking in his private room, once a headmaster's study, sitting in easy chairs. Walsh took a bottle of Whisky and two cups from a cupboard, poured strong measures, handed one to Grant and resumed his seat.

'We do all right here. If we run short of anything we raid The Trader's supply columns. He doesn't seem to mind too much, thinks it's a kind of tax I suppose.'

'You know I've been sent here especially to destroy him?' Peter said conversationally. 'I wish you luck,' Walsh replied. 'It won't be easy.'

'You said he'd fortified Leeds. They're not living in the city, are they?'

'No. They've taken over an old industrial estate on the outskirts, use it to store the goodies they've collected... and by heck they've got more stuff there than you'd dream of.'

'And they live in the industrial estate?'

'Some do, all the bosses. The rest are on the road, trading, or they live where they can.'

'Then most of his people must resent him and his cronies. If we really put pressure on them they might desert.'

'I doubt it. They do better than we do. He runs a typical old capitalist system. He cornered the market in goods up here, trades them for food, gold, or other goods, always making sure he gets a good profit on the deal. The harder his people work the more they get paid.'

'Paid? How does he pay them?'

'Food, guns, petrol, blankets, gold, anything they want.'

'And if they don't work?'

Walsh grinned. 'If they don't work they starve. But they do all the work and bloody hard. They do all right, they don't go short. Take it from me, they won't desert. The Trader, he does well by them and they know it.'

'Yes, but how hard would they fight for him? Would they die for him?'

Walsh drank deep, then stared up at the damp-stained ceiling. 'It's not like that son. They don't fight for him, they fight for themselves. He's the boss, he's the one who's stinking rich, but he's handed enough of the goodies around to make sure that if he goes they'll all lose. Told you he was a clever bastard.'

'What about the people in the communes, the people he trades with?'

'They support him to a man. You'll get no help there. We tax them, he doesn't, he trades with them more or less straight. When you cross our lines you're strictly on your own and likely to get swiped at every inch of the way.'

'And where is the line?'

'About three miles north of here. Nothing fixed about it, nothing to show. It's just that these days he doesn't trade south of that and unless we want to stock up on supplies we don't go further north. That's my job, hold the line.'

Peter grant thought for a moment, then he asked: 'Does Berry accept deserters? If people in a commune down here upped and left, crossed the line, would he take them in?'

'Certainly, if they could work. What've you got in mind?' 'Does he question them much?'

'Don't think so.'

'So I could probably infiltrate his headquarters with twenty or thirty of my men over a period of time.'

Captain Walsh chuckled into his glass. Peter looked at him and waited until his mirth subsided. 'Well?' he asked.

'You could do that, no trouble at all. No trouble to get 'em into his camp.' He laughed again at his private joke. 'Problem would be to get 'em out again.'

'Meaning what?' Peter asked.

'Meaning I've had six men desert to him this summer. Twenty-two in the year we've been here. You put your blokes in there and he'll set 'em to work, start paying 'em, and before you know it they'll realise they're onto a good thing. You could lose an army that way without him or you firing a shot.'

Peter sipped his drink, watched Walsh pour himself another. When Walsh had settled he began to question him again. 'You've been here a year, you know The Trader better than any. He must have a weak spot.'

Walsh lit a cigarette and, considered the point. 'His problem is, if he had to get his whole army together, it'd take him a day or two, several days, to do it. Your best chance is to crash into his headquarters before he's organised.'

'Despite the fact it's so well defended?'

'That's your problem, son. I'm just telling you what's best. Without his stock of goods he's nothing. Take that and the fighting's over, he's got nothing to trade with.'

'Surely he hasn't got everything in that one place?'

'There was a rumour he'd shifted some up into Scotland. I don't know about that, not sure. But he's got to have most of it in one place. He needs easy access to it. Besides he hasn't got enough men to guard dumps all over the countryside; we'd never, get any trading done.'

'Does he have any spies on our side of the line, will he find out that my army is here before we hit him?'

Walsh grinned confidentially. 'took, I'll tell you something just between you, me and the gatepost. Our own men trade with his people on the side, you can't stop it. You can bet your life he knows you're here, and why.'

'Then he'll have had time to assemble, his army and, organise the defence of his headquarters. So much for his weak spots;' said Peter bluntly.

Walsh waved his glass. 'You asked me, I've told you. If you want to destroy The Trader you've got to find a way to grab his stock. Your problem, son.'

'I apologise. You've been a great help.'

'S'all right, son. My pleasure. What'll you do?'

'I'll think about it.' Peter said.

For more than one reason Peter Grant was in no hurry to engage the enemy. The Trader could not hold his army together for too long or his trade would wither and, his power, diminish. His army, left in days of idleness; bereft of accustomed profit, would soon enough become

disillusioned and Berry would be under pressure to disband them, return them to their congenial life of individual advancement. By refraining from attack, Peter Grant hoped to promote apathy to the threat he posed. Apathy was always a good weapon against free will.

There was another, and equally cogent reason for delay.

Peter Grant had learnt his lesson, he was in no hurry to return to the Castle. Nothing but trouble awaited him there. So he ordered training exercises for his men and occasionally

organised a patrol to raid communes and supply lines within

The Trader's territory, saving his men from boredom, replenishing his supplies, and hopefully convincing his enemy that he had no intention of attempting an open attack.

The sun continued to scorch the countryside and drinking water became a problem.

Men began to fall sick with violent stomach pains. There were no medical facilities within the P.D.F. Sick or wounded men were left behind on the march,

in camp they were administered to by friends, if they had any.

They recovered or they died. There was a doctor at the Castle, one of the pampered couriers and he had drugs, but his services were, only for the elite. The soldier was expendable. Only when, from some distant memory, Peter Grant ordered all drinking water to be boiled before consumption did the sickness abate.

Not until the first light rains of autumn did Peter Grant wake a move against The Trader. By then he knew that his

ploy had worked. There was much more movement on the supply trails, business north of the line was getting back into full swing. Self interest had overcome caution.

The campaign began gently. Reconnaissance patrols went out day and night plotting the terrain, observing defences, locating sentry positions and establishing overland routes well away from the sparse population. A sense of excitement began to infuse the column and they noted with satisfaction that their commander had thrown off his introspective mood and was immersed in the planning of the battle to come. They did not understand his insistence that they had no communication with the men of the occupying army or the few local inhabitants, but they shrugged it off and did as they were told.

In three days Captain Grant put together a plan that was as foolproof as he could make it. The industrial estate was built on level ground and occupied some five acres.

To the south and west it faced open country commanded by the tanks and artillery of the defending force. To the east it was bordered by a man-made earth ridge which had once carried a railway line and to the north it connected with the remains of a housing estate.

The location of The Trader's camp largely decided the plan of attack. There was little future in advancing with

infantry across open ground commanded by tanks and artillery, nor in storming a well guarded and easily defensible ridge where the enemy had the advantage of height.

The only major problem that was evident in attacking through the derelict suburban area to the north was the fifteen foot high fence that surrounded the entire estate and to breach that they had the services of Sergeant Dennis who had had ample practice in the use of his improvised explosive devices against

the rat-pack in London. No doubt having covered the open ground and the major entrances to the estate, The Trader

considered himself safe. He had, after all, no reason on past performance to suspect the P.D.F. of tactical sophistication or executive brilliance. They had always favoured the budgeon over the rapier.

, Peter Grant planned to send two patrols of twenty men on a curved route north, setting them in ambush on the two

Main routes south to the industrial estate, the old dual-carriageways that encircled the city. No reinforcements would

Get through to The Trader unhampered once the battle began.

Another patrol of twenty, with an armed half-track, were despatched to a position in a brief hollow half a mile to the

south of the estate. Their function was to draw the fire of the defending artillery and hold their position for as long as they

could without being wiped out. The remainder of the force, with Peter Grant and his old patrol in the van, would infiltrate the ruined housing estate to the north of the

target, blow the surrounding fence and storm in. As a plan it had the merit of simplicity. But for once Peter Grant did not have things all his own way.

They set off on a dark, clouded but dry night, ideal for their purpose, and all units were in position ahead of time. The main force hid amongst the shadows of

the rotting and decaying houses north of the perimeter fence, waiting for the dawn. As the first lighting of the sky in the east warned of the coming day,

Sergeant Dennis moved forward alone to

place the charges. It was then that things began to go wrong.

The wild dog pack, thirty or more strong, struck suddenly out of the darkness, the leaders leaping upon the shadowy

hunched, figure of Sergeant Dennis, bared teeth aimed for his throat. The other dogs surrounded him, snarling and tearing

at his body. Dennis screamed his fear aloud, Peter Grant was instantly on his feet, Burley and a dozen men beside him.

Peter fired and his bullet smashed one of the dogs against the fence. The others took off in sudden cowardly flight, yelping their dismay at the unexpected turn of events.

Peter pulled Sergeant Dennis to his feet. 'Are you all right, man?' he asked.

'Christ... don't know...' Dennis was white and shaking with shock, blood streaming from his face and hands.

'Pull yourself together, get that explosive fixed before they're on us,' Peter ordered.'

Lights were going on within the estate there was the sound of doors opening and shouted enquiries., Dawn was

streaking the sky. Away to the south the machine gun on the half-track opened up, giving notice of the start of the attack. Instantly all lights behind the fence went out, a horn blew, orders were shouted. Dennis still stood staring at his bloodied hands. Peter hit him once with his open hand, a sharp blow across the face. 'Move yourself man, get that fence blown or we'll be cut to pieces!' Dennis dropped to his knee and began, to collect up the packaged explosive scattered during the attack by the dogs. Peter Grant retreated with his men, back into the shadows of the ruined buildings. There was a sudden deafening crash as the defending artillery opened fire on the half-track. It was rapidly becoming full light and to the left Peter heard running steps and a dozen armed men came into view inside the perimeter fence, heading towards the spot where Sergeant Dennis was absorbed in his task. Then they spotted him and the leader threw up his rifle and fired. Peter saw Sergeant Dennis look up, then the charge exploded in his hands blasting him to instant death and rending a gaping hole in the perimeter fence. The attackers stormed through the break, led by Peter Grant and Sergeant Burley, opening up a withering fire and cutting down the still stunned members of the defending patrol and forcing their way into the heart of The Traders camp. The very speed of their advance led them into trouble. Peter Grant had not calculated on the sheer size of the industrial estate and the complexity of buildings. A hundred men could lose themselves in the maze of roads between the offices and vast warehouses of the complex. The result was that Peter's men ran past defenders still entrenched in the buildings and came under devastating sniper fire. Men had to be left behind to contain the snipers whilst the remnants of his force pushed on across the estate. It was vital they took the heavy armament before the tanks were turned upon them. That part of the plan at least went well. Caught with their backs to the attackers, and already in a state of some confusion, the defending gunners stood little chance. Twenty minutes after the attack started, Peter Grant had deprived the enemy of their heaviest weapons. But that was only the beginning. Some of the defenders had escaped over the perimeter fence or through the gates. They now formed up and mounted a counter attack through the breach Sergeant Dennis had made at the cost of his life. The attack was repulsed, but not without loss. Then began the difficult and dangerous task of winking out the snipers from their entrenched positions. It took all morning to clear a quarter of the estate. Peter found himself regretting that he had not brought along a couple of the C.R.G. men from the Castle. He had tanks but no one to operate them. He called in the half-track and the other two patrols. By mid-afternoon the defenders were limited to eight buildings near the main entrance, most of them, perhaps forty, holed up in a large warehouse constructed of concrete blocks and asbestos, with huge entrance doors at one end. It was windowless

on the ground floor but from the upper floor the defenders commanded the surrounding area. The place was practically a fortress. Peter was becoming anxious. He had no taste for continuing the battle after dark. His men were tired and hungry and seemed unable to make any further impression on the defenders. They were taking casualties fast and morale was slipping. Somehow they had to take that warehouse before tiredness and continuing casualties reduced them to a condition where a night counter-attack might succeed. Peter called Sergeant Burley to him. 'There's some petrol tankers over by the gate,' he said. 'Get a man to bring a full one over.' Burley disappeared on his errand. A few minutes later he returned. 'Where d'you want it?' he asked. 'Line it up between those two buildings, keep it out of sight of the warehouse or they'll open up on it and blow us to pieces. When it's in place line up the half-track behind it. Oh, yes, and I want a brick.' 'What you going to do, sir?' Burley asked, puzzled. 'Watch,' Peter said. When the tanker arrived, Peter got into the driver's seat and engaged first gear, driving out into the road leading to the closed gate of the warehouse. He immediately came under fire. The defenders at least had no doubts as to what he intended. Bullets struck the cab, smashed the windscreen and clattered into the engine. It was getting dangerous. Peter dropped the brick on the accelerator, dived out of the driver's door and ran for cover, leaving the tanker to scream along in bottom gear under high revs, heading blindly for the warehouse doors. The defenders poured fire at it, then stopped abruptly as they realised the motorised bomb was too close to detonate safely. The tanker smashed down the huge doors of the warehouse and lumbered blindly inside. Then the machine gun on the half-track opened up, pouring a hail of bullets into the tanker. It exploded with shattering suddenness, sending a storm of flame round the inside of the building. There were no survivors. Even after that devastating blow, the defenders did not give up. They died where they fought, to the last man and, the last woman, apparently consumed by a bloody hatred of the attackers. It was dark before the last shot was fired. Peter Grant later counted the cost of his victory. Sixty two of the defenders had died. He had no way of knowing if The Trader was amongst them. He had lost seventy four of his own men dead or wounded beyond recovery, including four of his old patrol. The bloody battle had taught a severe lesson. War was not as simple as he had previously imagined. Captain Walsh arrived at the industrial estate the next day. It was his task to take command of the captured booty and arrange for its shipment south. It was no small job for the haul was a rich one.

Peter Grant sent a motor cycle courier to the Castle with a message informing the President of his latest victory and the cost. He also appended a request for a posting to the army in Wales, judging that a further period of absence from the Castle might best serve his interests.

In the days that followed the defeat of The Trader, Peter Grant slept badly and was afflicted with persistent and distressing dreams, waking in the early light, cold and sweating. He was tied naked to a stake in the burning sun, surrounded by silent children with emaciated bodies and angry accusing eyes. They had hunting knives in their hands. There was blood on the knives and on their hands and arms. They were his children. They had killed his body, yet he lived on, tormented by their hatred. Then again, he was seated on a magnificent throne, perched high on a clouded mountain top. A crowd of good honest people, for whom he had responsibility, came to him with humility and regret, bringing with them a prisoner who had committed a heinous crime and revelled in the doing of it. The prisoner was young, handsome, arrogant and strong, himself when younger, or perhaps his son. And the choice was his, to stand aside and condemn the prisoner or to show mercy but sacrifice himself. Except that he and the prisoner were one, a meld of good and evil, of passion and detachment, of spirituality and earthiness. And always the dream ended before decision was made.

One dream came most often. He woke, as a child, in a room that was cold and dark, knowing loneliness and fear. He ran out of that room to another that was warm and lit by a gentle light. There was a wide bed, softly covered, and a man and a woman asleep there. He climbed up onto the bed, snuggled down between them. They stirred in their sleep, making room for him, touching him with dreamy, loving fingers. He was swathed in warm, comforting acceptance. The loneliness and fear had gone, as if they had never been. And the dream-boy slept, at peace. Peter understood that he was being given hard options, shewn a reward. But in the daylight hours he blocked off his mind, fighting his destiny, as yet unready to face the unreality of truth. He was then untutored in faith, accepting as true only that which his limited human senses could perceive, correlate, quantify. He was the white hot sword before the quenching. Of the form, but incomplete.

Five days after he had left, the courier returned from the Castle bringing both more and less than Peter had anticipated.

President Wormley was wordily profuse in his praise. Captain Grant was promoted General for his services to the President and the Peoples Revolution. He was to proceed to Cardiff, to take command of the army there, his task to subdue the Red Dragons and liberate the people of Wales. But the men he had trained to his ways were to be left in command of Captain Walsh, to assist in the administration of the territory now freed of the capitalist enslavement of The Trader. He was to take only a small patrol with him as escort. General Grant was proclaimed a Hero of the

Revolution and his Welsh army would be made up to five hundred men. There was no criticism of the heavy losses incurred in the recent battle, no mention of those Heroes of the Revolution who had gone to a mass grave. Acclaim spread thin loses its flavour for donors and recipients alike.

Peter saw no reason to delay his departure. He left with the remaining fifteen men of his old patrol the following morning, heading south and west across country, taking two Land Rovers and a week's supply of food. Once on the journey, the dreams, no longer occurred. It was as if they had served their purpose, but if they had, Peter Grant had no idea what that purpose might have been.

The drought had broken at last. The rain lashed the travellers, churned the thin covering of earth and grass on the rapidly decaying roads to a glutinous mud, slowing them to walking pace. Before they reached Gloucester, President Wormley was dead.

Chapter Nine

The Lady Sarah gave birth to a boy child two days after the defeat of The Trader. She was attended by the doctor and her labour was short, if not pain-free. The child was physically perfect. President Wormley clasped it to his hollow chest, chucking its chin and mouthing childish nonsense, doting in his ignorance. Sarah demanded that she and the boy be given larger quarters and a special guard of the Peoples Defence Force under the personal command of General Blake, as befitted a Queen and her Prince. The President endorsed her whim and she felt safer and more confident thereafter. The news of Peter Grant's military success and subsequent promotion interested her only faintly, there were matters of more pressing urgency to consider. Sarah allowed herself only a short convalescence. She had to make her move before Simons acted. She called General Blake to her chamber. 'We have no more time,' she said. 'You must do it tonight.' Blake nodded acceptance. In the absence of Peter Grant he had steeled himself to the act, resigned himself to his commitment. 'You know where his quarters are?' Sarah asked. 'Yes. But he has guards, ma'am.' 'Then you'll have to dispose of them first... and quietly. Take six men, that should be enough.' 'Yes, ma'am. But what about the President, what do we tell him?' 'The truth. Simons was plotting to grab power. You confronted him, killed him when he tried to resist arrest.'

'But we don't have any evidence against him.'

Sarah waved the protest aside. 'When he's dead you arrest and torture a few of his cronies. Offer them their lives, they'll convict him for us.'

'And afterwards, ma'am? When Simons is replaced we could have the same trouble with the new bloke in a few years time.'

The Lady Sarah smiled. 'I don't think so. It's time I took a more active part in things. I shall command the C.R.G.'

'You!' Blake could not disguise his shock. 'But the President'll never agree...'

'The President will give me whatever I want. Then between us we'll control the armed forces. We'll hold the real power, you and I ... on behalf of the President, of course.'

'Of course,' General Blake agreed, hastily.

The Lady Sarah smiled to herself as she watched him leave. One could always rely on a whiff of power to anaesthetize fear, even in the craven.

When the corridors were dark, General Blake led his small execution squad to Commander Simons quarters. There were two guards on the outer door, regarding them with surprise rather than suspicion. Blake walked up to them and made a sign to his men. The two guards died clutching at the knives in their chest, last cries smothered by the hard hands of their murderers. General Blake led the rush of men into Simons quarters. But the rooms were empty and the rush petered out, the men looking to Blake for guidance, and he was slow to comprehend disaster.

Then Simons and his men were in front of them and firing, cutting them down as they hesitated. General Blake was thrown against a wall, bullet holes patterning his chest. He died still not understanding.

Simons left his men, ordering them to leave the carnage untouched, and went straight to the President. Arthur Wormley was asleep. Simons shook him into consciousness.

'What? . . . What is it? . . . Simons?'

'You must get dressed and come with me, sir.'

'Why? . . . What for?'

'General Blake, sir He's dead... You must get dressed and come.'

Wormley bestirred his thin limbs, stumbled to his closet and into his clothes. 'What's happened? Who killed him, Simons?' He enquired querulously.

'He was plotting to kill you, sir.'

'What? Another traitor? Blake? . . .'

'I'm afraid so, sir.'

Simons waited impatiently whilst the President dressed, then led him through the echoing corridors of the palace to his own quarters. Wormley stood aghast at the sight that met his eyes, then turned slowly to face his saviour.

'What was he doing here, in your quarters?' he asked. 'You and I had a secret meeting. He found out about it, came here with these assassins, killed the guards outside, shot you before I and my men overcame him. Very sad.'

'Shot me, what the hell are you talking about...'

Simons selected automatic fire, and aimed his rifle at the President's stomach. 'Very sad,' he said, and fired a short accurate burst.

Sarah Boyer woke suddenly as the light blazed on in her bedroom. Simons, was alone, standing by her bed, pointing a rifle at her. The shock numbed her brain.

'Blake is dead,' Simons announced.

He ripped back the bedcovers, pulled her to her feet, took the automatic pistol from under the pillow. Sarah struggled to adjust to this shattering turn of events. Her first thought was to bluster, threaten, but there was no point. Simons was here because he had won.

'He was a traitor, he tried to kill me,' he said.

'What happened?' Sarah asked at length.

'He bungled. You should have sent someone else.'

'Not me, I had nothing to do With it.'

Simons shrugged. 'As you wish.'

'Does the, President know?'

'Wormley is dead.'

So, it was over. No point in subtlety. 'You killed him;' Simons smiled. 'Not me, I had nothing to do with it.'

He had, a sense of humour, then. Perhaps there was hope after all. She walked across to her dressing table, sat, and began combing her hair. The long nightgown she wore, became her, hid a stomach still distended by the. birth, was cut low revealing breasts large with natures gift. She looked in the mirror and was reassured.

'The Revolution is in your hands then,' she said, not looking at him.

'So it seems.' He was stood by the dead fireplace, his rifle still pointing at her

'What do you intend for me?' Sarah asked.

'I intend to kill you.'

Sarah stood up and walked across the room to join him, waved him to a chair and sat opposite him on the settee. It was cold in the room but she did not wish to cover herself. The rifle was no longer pointing at her.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'If you intended that, I'd be dead by now.'

Simons smiled. 'Very astute,' he said.

'I have influence with the junior officers and that means influence with the men of the army. I'm more use to you by your side than in a grave.'

'True,' Simons agreed. And he waited.

Sarah took a cigarette from a silver box on the table between them and lit it, letting the smoke drift from her mouth.

'The Revolution needs a strong man,' she said, 'it was a pity you didn't come to me before.'

'I intended to destroy you,' Simons said bluntly. 'If you hadn't seen reason I would have. Even now, understand that there can be only one ruler.'

Sarah nodded. 'I understand. I'm capable of being loyal but I can't abide weakness.' She looked at him with frank, honest, lying eyes. 'You have me, and my loyalty. I want just one thing, the safety of my child.'

'Ah, yes. The child.'

'We can announce him as yours. He will grow up knowing no other father.'

'His father is known. No-one will believe he is mine.' 'They'll believe what they're told,' said Sarah tartly. Simons laughed. 'Indeed they will.. We have a bargain then' Saran bent forward, the better to show her' wares. 'We have a bargain,' she confirmed.'

Simons was not distracted. 'There is one other matter,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Get me a drink. Scotch.'"

She stood up obediently, poured him the drink, put the glass in his hand and resumed her seat. Simons seemed pleased at her compliance. His innocent brown eyes watched her.

'The matter I refer to is Peter Grant... General Grant perhaps I should call him, for the moment.'

Sarah looked away. 'What of him?' she asked.

'He is a dangerous man, in more ways than one. You do realise I'll have to have him killed?'

Her eyes returned to his face. 'Yes, she said, 'I suppose you will.'

When General Grant and his patrol arrived at the small P.D.F. staging post just outside the once town of Gloucester, a nervous civilian courier was waiting for him with an urgent message. Peter saw his men encamped and retired to the back of one of the Land Rovers.

The message was brief. It said: 'Wormley and Blake dead. Simons President., Run.' It was not signed. She was far too clever for that. Had she then harboured real feelings for him? \ or did she do this for some personal gain? It mattered not.

Peter Grant's career was ended. He must run or die.

Peter called Sergeant Burley to him and showed him the message. 'I must go. I wanted you and the patrol to know why,' he said. There was a time when he would not have bothered.

'It's not signed, sir,' Burley said. 'You sure it's not a con?' 'I recognise the writing.'

'Someone you can trust?'

'Not normally. But I think the message is genuine.'

'When were you planning to leave, sir?'

'Before dawn.'

'Where will you go?'

'I don't have much choice. I'll offer my services to the Red Dragons.' "

Burley scratched thoughtfully at his thick beard. 'They may not want you. They might kill you.'

'Which would you choose, certain death or possible death?'

'Simons will send men after you. You may not reach Wales.'

'He has no-one who could catch me, except you and my old patrol perhaps.'

'He wouldn't send us. He'd not trust us, would he?'

'Perhaps not.'

'He wouldn't trust anyone in the P.D.F. He'll send some of his own C.R.G. pigs from the Castle.'

'Yes. And I doubt if they'll be more than a day behind the messenger. That's why I have to leave tonight.', , 'You've got an hour or two. Don't go leaving before I've seen you again, sir, okay?'

Peter nodded. 'I'll need to get some things together.'

After Burley had left he busied himself with packing some essentials in a haversack; a compass, his captain's issue binoculars, matches, carborundum stone, maps, a water can, spare boots, a rainproof sleeping bag. He did not bother to , weight himself down with food, a lone hunter need never go hungry. He checked his rifle, packed ammunition, then set, to cleaning his already razor sharp and unsullied hunting knife.

Burley returned in the last light of the day, before the work was finished. 'I told the men,' he said. 'We had a meeting, a secret vote. We're going with you, all of us.'

'George, I'm very grateful but...' He had never used Burley's first name before. He did it now instinctively, shrugging off the past, changing their relationship for ever.

'Think about it, sir,' Burley insisted. 'We'll have more to offer the Red Dragons, a whole patrol, the best patrol in the P.D.F., instead of one man. We can take everything with us, the Land Rovers, food, guns, ammunition, a lot more to bargain with.'

'I can't do it. You don't need to risk your lives. You said yourself we don't know what sort of reception we'll get.'

'Okay. Put it another way,' Burley grinned. 'We're cowards. We reckon when Simons finds out you've gone he'll take it out on us. We ain't got much to look forward to. He could string the lot of us up out of spite. How many cigarettes'd you bet he won't?'

Peter hesitated. 'I don't know. But your chances are better staying here than going with me.'

'We don't think so. We've been loyal to you. We reckon you owe us something.'
And again, not so long before, that plea would have meant nothing to Peter Grant. Now a sense of responsibility for these men burdened Wm. Suppose Simons were to massacre them in a fit of pique? The man was capable of more than that, and he might regard them as a possible nucleus of disaffection. Even if he did not execute them at once, they might well not survive the next purge. But what hope could he offer them for the future? Could he say, 'Follow me. I have had a dream of glory. There is a hand in my back pushing on to great deeds and we are safe until the Plan is complete?' Hardly. Come to that, did he believe it himself in the cold light of day as he did in the persuasive darkness? Did he have the right to involve others in his own half-formed and fearful convictions?

'I can offer you nothing but danger and probable death,' he said. 'We would be hunted outlaws. If the Red Dragons won't have us, we'll be alone. Even if they do, how long can they survive against the P.D.F.? It might come to the same thing in the end if they take us or not. If you understand that, and still want to come, I shall be more than glad of your company'.

Burley beamed and rubbed his hands together. 'That's that then. When d'we leave?' Peter considered. 'At dawn. Better put a man two miles back down the Castle road. The C.R.G. will have already left Windsor and they may have chanced travelling at night. We'll set off as if we were bound for Cardiff, then turn north. That way the guard here will suspect nothing and we may throw Simons men off our track for a while.'

Burley made to leave. 'Lucky we weren't sent back to the Castle from Leeds, we'd have had trouble gettin' away then, wouldn't we?' he commented. .

'I asked for a transfer to the army in Wales.'

'Yeah? D'you know what was going to happen then?' 'No. It just seemed like a good idea.'

'Some of the lads, they're a bit superstitious like, they say you'll always come through, reckon you've got the Gods on your side.'

'I wish I had,' Peter said.

Tom Price deserted two days after General Grant had left the northern army and headed south, and therefore, gossip presumed, returning to Windsor to be feted by the President.

No better opportunity seemed likely to occur for Price to rid himself of Simons, Grant, and the claustrophobic life of the Revolution. It was a relatively short trip westwards cross country to North Wales, to the celtic homeland he had not seen since he was a child. He convinced himself that he deserted not through fear but from a primal urge to return to his roots. .

In fact Simons had bothered Wm not at all since he had left Windsor with the northern expeditionary force, being too immersed in intrigue closer to home and already

having all the information he needed on Peter Grant. And Grant himself had ignored insignificant old Tom Price, relegating Wm to a non-combatant role in the cookhouse. For that, Tom had been deeply grateful.

One thing, however, was certain. He would not for long be allowed to remain in peaceful obscurity, pursuing his harmless business transactions, making small contributions and large profit. Sooner or later Simons would recall him, set him to the dangerous work of spying again. Tom had had enough. He yearned for the open spaces, idealised in his mind the life of the free gentleman of the road, forgetting the cold, the wind, the hunger and the loneliness. Back in Wales, amongst his own people, he could roam unfettered by fear, seek companionship as he chose, leave the horror of war behind. His only regret was that he would be unable to take with him his entire stock of cigarettes and other valuables. There was a limit to what one man could carry. During the idle periods prior to the battle at the industrial estate, Tom had bribed one of the soldiers to teach him to ride a motor cycle. He was awkward and slow to learn, but in the end he gained a limited mastery over the machine. He also made up two packs and hid them away. At least he would leave the President's army better off than he had been when he joined it.

The attack on The Trader had served to delay his departure. Not until the now General Grant had left with his patrol had he been able to return to the original camp and put his plan into action. He uncovered his travelling packs from their hiding place, stole a motorcycle from the transport lines, pushed it a mile from the camp before daring to start it, then set off in noisy and uncertain fashion to find his freedom.

The machine bore its rider's abuse with fortitude until just beyond the sprawling ruins of Manchester, where it finally died. Tom Price abandoned, the motor cycle and with it, reluctantly, one of the packs. From then on, he walked.

It was late autumn now and the weather was unkind, bitter north east winds and lead-heavy rain. For a while the carrot of a new free life led him on but by the time he had a distant sight of the mountains of north Wales he had abandoned his pack, given up all thoughts of hygiene, was hungry, wet, tired and disgruntled. He whined complaints to a heedless sky and, occasionally roused to angry self-pity, cursed the fates that had forced him to such a pass.

He thought back to the comforts of Windsor Castle, the happy days of profiteering at Rochester base camp, and was tempted. But he had burnt his boats, to go back meant certain death.

It was a sad, thin-bodied, shivering and vermin-infested creature that dragged itself towards an imagined home, up into the foothills of the Welsh mountains

For most of the day they followed the wide and almost clear, path of an old dual carriageway north from Gloucester to the north west. Only once did they meet soldiers, at a temporary camp straddling the road near Shrewsbury. Peter's rank procured them petrol with a minimum of questions. The biggest delays were in

circumnavigating the towns, where roads were blocked by rusting vehicles and fallen masonry. Apart from the soldiers, they saw no sign of human life during the journey. If there were inhabitants, they kept well away from the road.

Sergeant Burley had ventured to voice aloud his doubt that they needed to travel so far north before entering Wales. Peter was adamant. They knew that the P.D.F. held the southern lowlands from the camp at Cardiff, and it was a patrol had he been able to return to the original camp and put his plan into action. He uncovered his travelling packs from their hiding place, stole a motorcycle from the transport lines, pushed it a mile from the camp before daring to start it, then set off in noisy and uncertain fashion to find his freedom.

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Sergeant Burley had ventured to voice aloud his doubt that they needed to travel so far north before entering Wales. Peter was adamant. They knew that the P.D.F. held the southern lowlands from the camp at Cardiff, and it was a reasonable bet that the Red Dragons would have their headquarters up in the almost impregnable area in the north west. He had no wish to give himself and his patrol up to a local commander, who might take the law into his own hands.

Nearer the headquarters they stood a better chance of talking to someone holding real authority, someone who might stay

their hand to listen to an explanation and an offer.

By the time night fell, they had reached a hill valley a few miles from the dead town of Llangollen, well into Red Dragon territory, and they had not been challenged. They made camp and set a heavy sentry guard.

The attack came in the grey time before the dawn, when Men are at their lowest ebb. Twenty heavily armed men of, President Simons Counter Revolutionary Guard struck suddenly and silently out of the shadows, bursting into the campsite and opening fire on the huddled bundles beneath the parked Land Rover. There was no movement in defence, no answering fire no scurry of escape, Then; as they hesitated, an unlikely owl hooted nearby. They realised the trap soon enough to know fear, but too late to respond. Out of the shadows from which they themselves had come a hail of bullets rained in upon them, and in a few brief seconds twenty men died. Peter ordered them stripped of their weapons. He sent men to collect their vehicles. The patrol spread into four Land Rovers and continued its journey into the hear of Wales, leaving bodies where they lay.

At noon, after making poor progress over the roads blocked by fallen trees, flooding, and the skeletons of abandoned vehicles, they stopped by the banks of the river Conway, in a tree-decked valley of surpassing autumn beauty. The sky was almost clear and a weak sun did its best to warm them, yet it was cold.

'What now?' Burley asked.

'We stop here,' Peter said.

'But we've seen no sign of them. They could be miles away.'

'Cut down a sapling. Tie a piece of white cloth to it, and set it up on the front of the leading Land Rover. Tell the men to put away their guns. They won't need them now.'

'Sir, there's not that many of these Red Dragons, they're spread pretty thin. We could be here weeks before they find us.'

'They know we're here.'

'We've seen nothing. What makes you think that?'

'Call it a hunch.'

'Sir, with all due respect and all that. . .'

Peter was looking up at the encircling hills. 'They're watching us,' he said.

The three horses were tethered close together at the lower edge of the conifer tree line. One of them was lathered and sweating from hard riding. The tack they wore was identical; rough hide reins, brief metal bits, saddles of partially treated leath-r stuffed with goat hair. To each saddle were strung two hide sheaths, in one an automatic rifle, in the other a dozen or so slate-tipped arrows, feathered in red.

The riders stood halfway down the mountain side, between a moss-stippled outcrop of rock and a stunted ash tree that was bent and twisted by age and hard living. The three were shoulder-close, looking down into the valley.

Book Two

The Red Dragons

They were dressed alike. Rough-woven' wool trousers, smocks of the same material held at the waist by leather belts, hand-made leather boots without heels, hooded sheepskin jackets worn wool innermost and stitched with narrow leather thongs. Their weapons were similar, long hunting knives worn at the belt, a short, but powerful horseman's bow, loose strung, hung across the back. Each wore on the breast of smock and sheepskin jacket the insignia of the blood-red two headed dragon.

In the centre of the three was the commanding figure of Chad, the negro warrior-priest., He stood beard-high above the other two, brown eyes troubled, black face glistening from his long ride. On his left stood Branwen, the 'Beautiful Raven', slim and lithe, an unlikely Amazon, pale face framed by black hair short-cropped for war. To the left stood the diminutive hunchbacked figure of Daniel, musician and seer,

his young-old face wrinkled and brown like a walnut kernel, the fingertips of his childlike right hand hardened and calloused by long practice at the short bow. Chad shifted position slightly, took the wooden cross, hung round his neck by a leather strip, in his right hand and held it, feeling its texture with his fingers. When he spoke, his voice was resonant and powerful, an orator's voice.

'So that is Peter Grant,' he said, his eyes fixed on the man stood apart from the others beside the river on the valley floor.

Branwen turned slightly to look up at his face. 'I don't trust them,' she said. 'We should kill them.'

Chad did not look at her, did not take his eyes from the 'man in the valley. 'But you are not sure, or you would not, have sent for me.'

'I sent for you because Daniel did not agree to his death. I still say we should kill them. This is war. We know of Peter Grant. We know what he has done, what he is.'

Chad looked at her now, spoke gently, as to a loved child who has innocently erred.

'We know what he is,' he said, 'but do we know what he will be?'

Branwen did not answer. She looked away, down the valley, for once uncertain.

Chad looked toward the dwarf. Daniel seemed not to have been listening. He was watching a wren darting about amongst the remaining leaves of the stunted ash tree, apparently immersed.

'Daniel?'

Eventually, and with evident regret, Daniel turned his attention to his priest and leader. He smiled, wrinkling his wrinkled face so that the piercing blue eyes almost disappeared in nut-brown folds. The smile was distant and impartial, touched with prescient sadness.

'What of Peter Grant, Daniel?' Chad asked patiently, 'what will he be?'

'He will be a hero,' said the dwarf. 'He is our death... and our saviour.'

Chapter One

The arrow flashed through the air and embedded itself with a dull 'thunk' in the log on which they were sitting, neatly dividing the slight space between them.

Burley leapt instantly to his feet, reaching for a rifle that was not there, but Peter Grant, did not move. 'Sit down, George,' he said. 'They don't intend to kill us.'

'You could have bloody well fooled me,' Burley said. But he resumed his seat. 'We would have been dead by now, if they wanted it that way,' Peter reassured him.

'Bloody bows and arrows!' said Burley, his dignity ruffled. 'Why not? Before long they'll be the best long range weapon we'll have.'

He plucked the arrow from the log and inspected it closely. It was beautifully balanced. The slate tip had frayed at the point as a result of the impact, but it was undoubtedly lethal. There was no sign of the archer.

'Where the hell are they?' Burley asked.

'Have patience,' Peter counselled. 'And when they come, remember that we're deserters seeking their help. We can't afford to seem arrogant.'

They did not hear the horse approach, but there she was, sitting straight-backed in the saddle some thirty yards away, watching them, waiting.

Burley's mouth dropped open at the sight of her. He had been expecting something else. The men of the patrol shared his astonishment. That she was a woman was shock enough, but manner of dress and armament was almost medieval.

What sort of army was this?

Peter eased himself to his feet and walked towards her. As he approached, his pace slowed until he came to a stop ten paces away. For a moment he could find no words. It was his mother's face he saw, as he had last seen her dead on the beach; the short hair lining an elfin face, the wide-set brown eyes, the gentle mouth, but firm closed in this girl, not open in silent protest as Abby Grant's had been.

She was appraising him calmly, feeling him for a weakness, a flaw. She was very beautiful. He did not doubt that she saw his hesitation, sensed his shock. Undoubtedly she would misunderstand. How could she do otherwise? He was faintly angry with himself for not showing better control.

'My name is Peter Grant,' he said.

She nodded. 'I know.' Her voice was gentle and melodic but her tone cool and distant. She did not offer her name.

'I have fifteen men, experienced soldiers. We are well armed and provisioned. We have come to join you, if you will have us.'

'You are extra mouths to feed, nothing more,' she said bluntly.

'We will more than earn our keep, I promise you.'

'That is to be seen. The decision is not mine. You should

know, I voted for your death.' Her teeth were small, very even, very white.

'Then I'm glad wiser counsels prevailed,' said Peter, wryly.

The girl flushed angrily, but she was mindful of her duty. She had already said more than she should. The decision had been made to let this arrogant killer live, she must abide by that with the best will she could muster. He was younger than she had expected and he hid his evil well, smiling boldly up at her as if he were an innocent . . . or a hopeful suitor.

She shuddered slightly at the thought, fascinated and repelled.

'Call your men. Tell them to leave everything here except food for one meal. You will all follow me,' she said imperiously.

'We have brought things you will find valuable. . . ' Peter began.

She cut him off with a gesture. 'It will all be collected.

Make sure your men are disarmed, then follow me.'

'One moment,' Peter said, as she would have turned her horse away. 'Can I know the name of the lady who wished me dead?'

'I am Branwen,' she said, 'I sit on the Guidance Council of the New Society.'

Peter inclined his head. 'A mere General salutes the beautiful Council member,' he said.

Branwen flashed her anger at him. 'You're no General. You're a deserter. So wipe that stupid smile off your face and move yourself unless you want to travel in the mountains after dark. . . And I doubt you're up to that.'

She dug her heels into the horse's flanks and galloped away, leaving Peter Grant staring after her. Burley appeared by his shoulder, breaking into his reverie.

'What was that all about sir?'

'I'm not quite sure,' Peter said. 'It seems they have had a meeting about us. She was one of those who, voted against.

Form the men up, we are to follow her.'

'But she went off like a bat out of hell!'

'She'll wait for us. She's got a temper that young lady.' 'Needs puttin' over a man's knee and a bit of manners

knockin' into her behind,' Burley grumbled.

'Maybe so,' Peter said, 'but if I were you I'd not be first in the queue to try it.'

Branwen was waiting impatiently for them by a stone bridge over the river. She led them at a murderously fast pace up a track that climbed zig-zag up the hillside. After a while she dismounted and walked her horse, but still made fast time, so that the patrol, unused to this kind of exercise, were soon sweating and panting from the exertion.' The track led round the top of the hill and down into a small treeless valley a

mile higher than the one they had left. After a while she stopped by a cave entrance and mounted again as she waited for the men to catch up. By then it was nearly dark. 'You will camp here for the night,' she ordered. 'I will return in the morning.'

'Aren't you staying with us?' Peter enquired.

Branwen grimaced maliciously. 'Frightened, of the dark?' she enquired. '

I wouldn't be, if you were here,' Peter said. His men chuck1ed lewdly into their beards.

She leant from the saddle and hit him hard across the face with the flat of her hand. Her mouth was clamped tight, her eyes blazing pin-points, her body shaking with anger. It seemed that anything this man did, anything he said, his every look and movement, was destined to infuriate her. It would have been wise of Chad to send someone else. Grant's arrogance, his impudence was beyond bearing. She wished she had hit him harder. He should learn now that she was a warrior, not one of his revolutionary sluts snivelling "in a kitchen and opening her legs at the crook of a finger.

The men of the patrol had stiffened at the blow, each man slighted at their leader's debasement. They waited in the certainty that his reply would be swift and devastating. The girl had gone too far. But Peter Grant was smiling, standing

at ease with hands in the pockets of his overcoat, apparently unmoved. . .

'You are right,' he said to the girl. 'It seems you raise the imp of mischief in me. I apologise.'

'You will do well to remember your manners,' Branwen said through clenched teeth.

'I will try,' he said solemnly. And before she could regain the initiative he turned his back to her and addressed his men. 'Into the cave. Bed down and light a fire.'

When he turned to look, Branwen had gone.

At dawn Peter was outside the cave, watching for her. The sky was clear. It was winter-cold, a lake of mist had flooded the valley bottom and here and there a tree-top showed above, stark conifer-green against the grey.

She was at first only a barely discernible swirl, then a moving, ill-defined impression of life, then she and her steed rose mist-clad from the valley like some figure of ancient legend, and it was a moment in which reality played no part.

It was primal magic, worked by the Great Artist, an illusion that was no illusion and which swamped the senses and left the watcher breathless and weak. Even a watcher who had thought all emotion, all feeling dead in him.

Now she was picking her way carefully along the steep rocky path towards him. And when she reined in and sat

looking at him, he could not speak for the ball of fire that lodged in his throat. There were beads of mist in her dark hair, catching the weak sunlight and sparkling like diamonds.

Suddenly Peter knew that he had been here before, that he had lived this moment, seen her rise like a goddess from the mist, loved her then as he did now. They were

locked together in an eternal dance of time, separated now and then as the music demanded but never apart, partnered as surely as if they shared a body. She was the woman who would always be his destiny, whether as mother, sister or lover, and she had no more choice in the matter than he.

'Are you ready?' Her voice was inexpressibly beautiful, low and husky, and quiet, as if in some way she had shared his dream.

Yet it was her voice that broke the spell. '

'We are ready, Branwen,' Peter said, savouring the touch of her name on his lips. She led them down into the mists of the valley, up the far hillside and onto a high moorland plain where the grass was coarse, where black peat pools and treacherously concealed bog waited to turn the foot of the unwary. A bitter wind scoured the plain, chilled the men to the bone, and the green-black hills for which they were heading seemed always as distant as when they started the journey. They followed a shallow tumbling stream. They drank from it, but sparsely, for the water was so cold it stunned the mouth. Now and then they disturbed a flock of wild sheep, but these and the small birds were all the life they saw.

It was mid-afternoon before they entered the jumble of hills that edged the plateau to the south. The going became easier, although by now the men were tired and hungry, their spirits low.

Then Branwen, who had spoken not a word since they left the cave, halted them at a tumble of rocks beside a fall of ice-green water. She went ahead a way and men, dressed as she was, appeared suddenly from among the boulders and greeted her. Then she beckoned Peter Grant and the patrol forward through a gully between the rocks, and they had their first sight of their new home.

The valley was perhaps four miles long and a mile wide, protected by an encircling ring of hills. At the furthest end was a lake fed by the streams that drained the high plateau they had just crossed. Trees bearded the upper slopes but on the valley floor the land was divided into neat fields which were clearly under regular cultivation. Even in early winter the valley looked fertile and lush. If they had needed confirmation that the drought had not touched Wales, here they had it. Houses were dotted about the valley, toy sized by distance, and at the lake edge was a cluster of such houses, a full village. There were boats on the lake, living figures in the fields, horses grazing, and smoke drifted upwards from chimney stacks to be diffused by the wind.

'This is Llyn Edno,' Branwen said. 'You will be staying here for a while.'

She led them down the mountain side and through the fields on the valley floor to the village. When they passed people at work Branwen was greeted with smiles and waves, the patrol with curious but not hostile stares. There seemed to be a disproportionate number of children in the village, they poured out of the houses and surrounded Branwen and the patrol with noise and laughter. At the lakeside Branwen sent the children packing and addressed herself to Peter Grant.

'Stay here. I shall be back soon.' She disappeared into the huddle of houses to emerge a few moments later attended by a gaggle of women carrying boxes of clothing. The women started a bonfire of wood on the lake shore. 'Branwen handed out crudely formed cakes of soap to the weary patrol. 'Take all your clothes off and wash,' she ordered. 'In the lake?' Peter asked. 'We'll risk the pollution,~ Branwen said. 'All you deserters are infested when you arrive and I'll not have you in the houses until you're clean.' 'But it's freezing!' Burley protested. 'Not quite.' The men of the patrol looked at the lead-grey waters without enthusiasm, then to Peter Grant for guidance. Burley said: 'You want us to strip off in front of all these women?' 'They'll see nothing they haven't seen before. They're here to burn those stinking rags you're wearing,' Branwen said. Peter took the lead, removed his clothing and ran out into the water, diving forward to immerse himself. The cold was a physical blow. He swam a few strokes, then found his feet and waded back to shore, lathering himself with the soap. With every sign of reluctance, the rest of the patrol followed suit. They rubbed down with rough woven towels in front of the bonfire and were each given a set of clothes, similar to those Branwen and the villagers wore, but lacking the red dragon insignia. 'And now, Branwen?' Peter asked. 'We have no one house big enough to accommodate you all: You will go with the women, each to a different house. where you will stay as part of the family.' Peter's hand was taken by an elderly woman who smiled encouragingly at him and led him through the darkening streets to a small house in the centre of the village. In the bustle of women sorting out which of the patrol they would take, Peter had no chance for a further word, with Branwen. The old woman and her equally elderly man were looking after two boisterous girls of about six or seven but they were hustled off to bed after Peter had been introduced and he was set by an open hearth and brought a huge bowl of lamb and vegetable stew. He could not remember ever having tasted such food. Beside it the banquet at Windsor Castle were cattle fodder, or so it seemed at that moment. After the meal the old woman, who had introduced herself as 'Gwyn', led him up to a small bedroom with a single wood-framed bed covered in sheepskin rugs. The long walk, the ice-cold dip and the hot food had done their work. Peter Grant slept more deeply, more soundly than on any night since he had killed his mother. The sun was high in the sky when Peter finally woke the next day.. He could not remember when he had felt quite so fit and well, so free of concern; Laid out beside the

bed with his own clothes were under-garments of a finer material and beside them a bowl of water, a towel and scissors. He washed, dressed and trimmed his beard and then went downstairs where old Gwyn was cooking in the kitchen, hampered by her two adopted daughters. The little girls pestered Peter with questions as he ate, and squabbled to sit on his knees. His own questions were answered freely and openly, it seemed there were no secrets to be kept from him and his men. Branwen, he was told, was away fighting. She would return sometime, or Daniel would come or perhaps even Chad, although his time was much occupied being priest as well as warrior and a member of the Guidance Council. Gwyn did not know what was intended for Peter and his patrol, he would be told in time, there was no hurry. As Peter finished his meal a young man came to the house and asked for him by his first name. He introduced himself as Gareth and said he was a peoples doctor. 'There is a meeting room near here, if you will gather your men together, I will examine them; he said. 'But they're not ill,' Peter replied. 'Perhaps not, Peter. But everyone is examined when they first arrive and at least once a year after that.' Peter walked round the village with him, collecting together his patrol and questioning him. Gareth was not a qualified doctor. There was a doctor and two nurses at their headquarters at Ffestiniog and they had trained others who were interested in simple community medicine. They had drugs but relied mainly on herbal cures learnt from books salvaged after the Great Death. When the patrol had gathered in the small community hall, Gareth examined them in turn, treating minor complaints on the spot. When he left Peter took the opportunity to talk to the men. 'We may have to sit it out here for a while,' he told them. 'It seems we're not expected to do anything but wait but if you get the chance to help with the work in the community, do it. These are good people. If anybody steps out of line they know what to expect. We will meet in this hall every day after breakfast. I shall organise battle training, we don't want to get soft. Any questions?' The men muttered amongst themselves and did not seem anxious to meet his eyes. It was Burley who spoke for them. 'Well, sir; he said, 'the lads got a bit worried. Well, they wondered, like. This girl Branwen . . . we've never known you back off from anything or anyone. . . but it seemed you wasn't too keen to deal with her like she deserved. . . ' 'You must understand something; Peter said. 'In this community men and women are equal. Branwen is a fighter first and a woman second. She holds high rank in the Red Dragons. Like us, she has a warrior's pride. We insulted her pride yesterday and it was right I should apologise. We must not make that mistake again. Did we come here to be farmers, or to fight? The Red Dragons will have us eventually but at the moment we're just deserters in their eyes. These people are being kind but they don't yet trust us and

who can blame them? So mind your manners and be patient. And one other thing. She doesn't know it yet, but Branwen will be my woman.'

And that was better, that was the Peter Grant they had always known, the leader they understood.

The next day was heralded by a violent rain storm and for the rest of the winter there were few days when the heavy-

laden clouds did not boil in over the hills and drench the valley. .

The weather held up battle training for days on end and Peter sensed that his men were slipping easily into the life of the village, becoming more used to dangling children in their arms than handling weapons. They were losing their fighting edge. At least the long days gave them all a chance to better understand the working of the community they had joined. There were eight other villages like Llyn Edno scattered about in the Welsh mountains, not all as large but all self supporting and if need be, independent. And then there was Ffestiniog, where the Guidance Council sat.

In Llyn Edno, apart from nursing mothers, there were very few men or women between the ages of fifteen and forty, they were all in the ranks of the Red Dragons. Yet there was no conscription, all were volunteers and whilst they were away, the old ones looked after the young. Sometimes a mother or father, or both, would return and that was a signal for feasting and singing and dancing. Just once during that winter came the report of a death and the whole village, related or not, mourned.

The Welsh community had early made a decision to speed their own social regression, recognising that they could. Not for long survive by scavaging in the debris of the past. At first the community had been small and they survived better than most because they were in the main hill people, peasants used to a hard life and therefore with less to lose, better able to withstand the cultural shock of the sudden demise of the industrial society. They did not have to return to the land, they had never left it.

As others joined this nucleus, people from the towns and coastal lowlands, then, as the Revolution spread in England, deserters and refugees, they found comfort and hope in the intelligent simplicity of the new social order and they' took

it to their hearts. The new society was conceived of instinct and born of acceptance. Each village had a substantial degree of autonomy. There were no police, just a priest and an elder who together dealt in public with any breaches of the in written. code. There was no theft because there was no personal ownership and no-one had more than the next. If a woman wanted a bed or a chair for her house the community provided it at her hint that it was required. The schools taught reading" writing, simple mathematics and survival crafts. Such crimes as there were reflected only basic human frailty, idleness, a loss of temper, vanity. The punishments were simple,

humane, and apparently totally effective. A miscreant might be temporarily ostracised or asked to make public apology, or undertake an extra period of prayer. In exceptional cases. a person would be escorted to the border and invited to try his or her luck

with the Revolution. It hardly ever came to that.

These were a religious people; The priest held a service in the village hall, in the evening of every fourth day and the entire community attended on an unofficial rota system so that all attended at least one service in four. There was nothing to distinguish the priest but the simple wooden cross round his neck and he did his share of work amongst the people. Here, amongst the survivors, the church also survived and flourished, stripped of its wealth, pomp and political ties, now totally ecumenical and gospel-primitive.

The few leaders there were seemed to have been chosen by acclaim. There was Madoc, Speaker of the Guidance Council; Chad, council member, senior priest and war leader; Daniel, cultural protector, social planner and warrior. Then there, were five war leaders, like Branwen, who held command in the field. Somehow those few held this whole widely dispersed community of about one thousand people together by suggesting rather than ordering, by seeking common acceptance rather than the power of compulsion. Only in the aftermath of catastrophe could such a society have emerged or survived.

Exactly how long this society would survive was a matter of great concern to Peter Grant. One thing was clear, if all the villages were situated as was Llyn Edno, then they were indefensible. If the P.D.F. ever entered this valley they were lost. Clearly it must be the policy of the, defenders to fight on enemy ground, hitting hard at. any intrusion into their territory, relying on the mountainous country to aid them.

Peter and his men saw little or nothing of the Red Dragons.

Days passed in endless procession and Branwen did not return. The rain became an everyday fact of life, eventually something to be discounted. Peter found work for himself, spent long hours talking with Gwyn and the old man or with others in the village, leading his men in battle training or telling wildly untrue stories of his adventures to Meurig and Gwenda, the adopted daughters of the house. He joined in the feasting singing and religious celebrations of the day selected by the Priest to commemorate the birth of Christ, although the religious significance of the celebration largely escaped him. He was never bored but always fretting at the inactivity; and Branwen was never, far from his thoughts.

Then, late in the winter, when spring waited eager on the days, Tom Price was brought into the village.

'We can't have him here; Buckley said.

'He's deserted, what more can you ask of him?' Peter countered.
 'He's Simons' spy.'
 'He was.'
 'Maybe he still is. You think it's coincidence he just turned up here, where we are?'
 'We left him near Leeds. If he deserted from there and took the shortest route, this is where he'd land up.'
 'If they accept him he'll be able to go back and give Simons a run-down on the whole set-up here, including everything he'd want to know about the Red Dragons. He'd destroy them and us.'
 'We have no status here, George. We can't take the law into our own hands. The only thing we can do is to warn them about him, after that, it's up to the village.'
 'Sir, the man's a born liar. He'll wheedle round them unless we lean on him a bit, get the truth first.'
 'You may be right. Perhaps we should arrange to speak to him alone.'
 'Tonight?'
 'Yes.'
 'He's in a house three down from me. As soon as it's dark I'll take him down to the lakeside by the jetty. Just you and me, eh?'
 'Yes,' Peter said. 'Just the two of us.'
 Tom Price knelt down on a grassy bank beside the Conway river, cupped his hands into the water and drank. When he reluctantly got to his feet to continue his journey he was faced by three men and two girls wearing the outlandish uniform of the Red Dragons.

'Bore da!' he said uncertainly, 'when he had recovered from the first shock. He had prepared his pitifully few words of Welsh, thinking that it would stand him in good stead to identify his origins at once.
 His plan rapidly backfired on him. One of the girls stepped forward. 'Beth ydy'ch enw chi? O ble rydych chi'n dod?' she asked. And Price was lost.
 'Ah, well,' he said. 'I've been away a long time, see.'
 Thereafter things went reasonably well and his spirits rose. It seemed they were well used to collecting up refugees from the Revolution. He was asked a few questions, deprived of his rifle, given food and drink and led off into the bills.
 He was with the Red Dragon patrol for several months before one of the men took him to the village at Llyn Edno. There, having suffered the indignity of a 'cold wash in the Lake and seeing his perfectly good clothes burnt and replaced with others, he was taken to a house and made most welcome. He was only faintly disconcerted when the old woman told him, anxious he should feel at home, that there were other newcomers in the village.

In the afternoon he emerged from the house to look round his new surroundings. He liked everything he saw until he recognised Sergeant Burley. That threw him into a blue funk.
 He ducked out of sight and returned to the house, reasonably certain that Burley had not seen him. Pleading fatigue he took to his bedroom. He could make no sense of it. But where Burley was Peter Grant was sure to be, they were dog and master. And what could Grant be doing here? He was the golden boy of the Revolution, already a legend in the P.D.F. for his ruthless pursuit of military success, recently promoted General. It was inconceivable that such a man would have deserted.

There was only one answer. Grant and Burley were here as spies. Grant had done a similar thing when he took The Priory, way back in his career, or so rumour said. What should Tom Price do now? He could not hope to avoid them for long. He had to have a story ready, he could hardly tell them the truth, that he had deserted the P.D.F. If he did, they would have to kill him in case he informed on them to the Red Dragons.. Tears of frustration marked lines down his newly washed face and were absorbed in his straggling beard. It was so bloody unfair. No matter how hard he tried; fate always had some dirty trick up its sleeve.
 He was not given long to brood. As soon as darkness fell, the old woman brought Burley to his bedroom. 'Look here now, Tom,' she said, 'here's a friend of yours,' and she smiled her way out of the room, leaving them alone.
 'Good old Tom Price,' Burley said genially. 'Fancy meeting you here.'
 'What d'you want?' said Tom, shrinking into the covers.
 'Just a chat, me old mate. Just a chat about old times. Why don't you get up and get dressed? There's someone else wants to meet you.'
 Tom Price had not the slightest doubt who that was. 'I'm ill,' he said plaintively, 'I can't move, see.'
 Burley was the size of a barn door, looked more ape-like than ever in the flickering light, of the tallow candle. He grinned and walked towards the bed. 'You come, with my help or without it. Take your pick.'
 So Tom Price dressed and, went out into the black night with Burley, shivering from fear as well as the sudden cold.
 Burley led him to the lakeside, to where fishing dinghys lay prow first into a jetty, like piglets to a sow. And there was Peter Grant.
 'Why are you here, Price?' Grant asked.
 'He knows he's for it, sir,' Burley said, 'he's shit scared.'
 To Price, Grant's voice sounded like the knell of doom.
 'I'm on your side, sir,' he whispered ingratiatingly, looking around anxiously for listening ears. 'Same as always.'
 'And what is my side, Price?'

'The Peoples Revolution, sir. I was 'sent here as an undercover agent, just like you. Only no-one told me you'd be here, sir, or I'd have gone somewhere else. ...'

'I'll bet,' said Burley, laconically.

'You're telling me you're a spy for Simons?'

'Yes, sir. Absolutely right. Tom, he said, you go in there, he said, you'll be just the man for this, being Welsh he meant, see?'

Grant looked as if he had an unpleasant smell under his nose. 'Price,' he said, 'you really are a nasty piece 'of work.'

'Eh?' Tom was totally confused.

'The villagers will let him go,' Burley said. 'But he knows too much, don't he, sir?'

Peter Grant nodded reluctantly. Burley wandered away into the dark as Tom Price spluttered into speech.

'What's going on, don't you believe me? It's the truth, I told you the truth, man.' He was getting desperate now.

'I believe you,' Peter said, 'that's the trouble.'

Price inched forward and raised his hands in supplication.

'What's wrong, sir? I don't understand. ...'

Burley came up behind him, lifting a reversed heavy wooden oar in his hands as if it were a toy. Tom Price had told just one lie too many. Burley's chest heaved as he swung the oar over his head and brought it down on Price's skull, smashing bone into brain, cutting off his last speech.

Tom Price died instantly, without pain, but also without understanding; discarded by the fate he bemoaned, his part in history played, his catalytic function complete.

They bound his body, weighted it, rowed it out into the lake and consigned it to the black water.

The following morning the priest and the community leader, one of the older women, convened a public meeting in the village hall. At Peter's insistence, he and Burley told exactly the truth. So far as they were concerned, Tom Price was a casualty of war.

There being no precedent for a crime like this, judgment was deferred. Spring gave way to summer' and life returned to normal but Peter could not but notice that when he re--turned to the house at night, old Gwyn was distant" making clear her disapproval. Then, as the village began to reap its harvest from the valley fields, Daniel arrived.

Peter Grant had been told about him, but even so his first sight of the wizened face of the dwarf was a shock. He had seen this face before, he knew this man. They had met somewhere, sometime. But they were strangers, making formal introductions and acknowledgements.

'Do you ride a horse, Peter?' Daniel asked.

'A little is enough. Let us ride together. We'll talk.'

The day was clouded but for once it did not rain. Daniel

led them at a walk up the hillside, out. of consideration for Peter's inexperience in the saddle. He stopped at a large flat rock half-way up the track, from where the valley was laid out before them as if for inspection. They dismounted and sat together on the rock.

'You caused much heart-searching -among us, Pete' Daniel said

'Why?'

'Never before has such a high ranking officer in I the Revolutionary Army defected to, us; not to mention a complete patrol.'

'I imagine not.'

'Then, we knew about you. We have our sources of information. You were known as being implacably opposed to all we stood for, or so it seemed.'

'It was true, at that time. I had no reason to be otherwise. It was a matter of survival.'

'And now?'

Peter hesitated. He could not articulate his dreams; not even to this gentle little man.

'Now I think the village is worth protecting. I don't know why. But I would fight for them now, not for myself.'

'What of your men?'

'I have watched them become absorbed into the life of the village. They are still loyal to Die, but they are no longer my men, they are yours. I have to tell you though, they've lost their fighting edge through sitting idle so long.'

Daniel smiled at him and nodded understandingly. 'You have shown patience during your long-examination.'

'Examination? We have been asked no questions, put to no test, done nothing but laze about and waste our time.'

'Not so,' Daniel said. 'We ask few questions because questions beget lies. Better observe a man, judge him by his deeds rather than his words. It takes a little longer but it is the surer method. They had to be sure of you, it was important.'

'They, not you?'

'Not me. And you did so well. You showed tolerance and kindness, a respect for the villagers that had not been expected. Then you killed that unfortunate little man.'

'And no doubt you know why.'

'You thought him a traitor.',.

'He was. He was one of Simons' spies. I suppose you know Simons is President now, no-one has ever bothered to ask me things like that.'

'There was no need. I told you we have our sources of information. Once Simons emerged with power in his hands Wormley had little chance of survival. We knew about. Price too. A weak ineffectual little man, harmless once identified.'

'Nut harmless.'

'Oh yes. Quite harmless. He had deserted you know. He never intended to go back to them.' "

'That's not true, Daniel. He told us he was here to spy for Simons, told us to our faces.'

'Of course. What else could he do? It must have been a terrible shock to see you in the village. No doubt he assumed you were here to spy yourselves and being weak, sought to assure you he was on your side.'

'Daniel, it was not that way. Price knew that Simons suspected me, he knew I was due to fall one day. How could he think Simons had entrusted me to come here and spy for him?'

'He was a little man, Peter, and very frightened. He had hardly any time to think things out. I promise you he had deserted them, he was coming home at last, as he thought. You killed him for nothing.'

'Peter was silent for a long while. Daniel, having prepared the way, moved on to his next objective. 'Did you know,' he said gently, 'that Tom Price was on the beach that day? He saw you kill your mother.'

Chapter Two

Afterwards, Peter could remember nothing of the rest of that day. It was a total blank, as if he had suffered a temporary death. Daniel must have taken him back to the house and seen him put to bed, for when he once again became conscious of his surroundings it was, morning and the dwarf was sat beside the bed, watching him anxiously.

'Do you 'feel better?' Daniel asked.

It was a long while before Peter replied. There was a pain in his chest and a hollow feeling in his stomach that was not simply hunger.

'No,' he said in a dead voice.

'It had to be done, you had to be told but believe me, I took no pleasure in the telling,' said Daniel earnestly. You had to face it, had to face the fact that others knew or you would have been of no use to us.'

'Does Branwen know?' Peter asked suddenly.

'Yes. We have no secrets here. She understands, as we all do '

Peter felt suddenly sick. 'There is nothing to understand. I loved her. I looked for her all those years and when I found her I killed her.'

'She did not die in vain, Peter. She gave you a parting gift. She armed you to survive. The knowledge that you had killed her deprived you of fear, made you nearly invincible. It was necessary and no blame attaches to you.'

'I don't want your pity, Daniel,' said Peter tightly.

'I pity all heroes' said Daniel. And seeing puzzlement in Peter's strained face he went on quickly: 'When you decided to come to us, how did you think you would aid us?'

'I brought guns,' Peter said bitterly, 'and fingers to pull the triggers. I'm a killer. It's my only talent.'

'It may be your prime talent at the moment but you have others and before God calls you, you will have cause to use them all.'

'You talk in riddles, Daniel. Who are you? How do you know so much about me?'

The dwarf shifted uneasily on his chair. 'I am of no account,' he said, 'my talent is music. Perhaps one day I shall play for you.'

Peter shook his head in bewilderment. The man was as elusive as an imp. 'What will you do with me?' he asked. .

'You would like to join the Red Dragons, I think.'

'Better I kill for you than for Simons.'

'It is time to leave here. You and your men must appear before the Guidance Council and a decision will then be made. If you are well enough we will leave today.'

'What's wrong with me will never be cured. I detest myself, Daniel, but then, since you know everything else, I suppose you know that too.'

'Yes. It is a most hopeful sign. It shows you are already on the way to a complete recovery. Now, I will leave you to dress. We should leave soon, it is a long ride to Ffestiniog.'

'Daniel...'

The tiny hunched figure hesitated by the door. 'Yes?'

'Shall I see Branwen again?'

'Why, yes,' Daniel said. 'How could you not, if she is to bear your child?'

The journey across the mountains to Ffestiniog took them three days, less because of the length of journey and the rough terrain than the inexpert horsemanship of Peter Grant and his men. They had taken food for the journey and at night they slept in hide tents. The ground was hard on them after months of soft living and they were afflicted with muscle pains that lasted through the days and disturbed their nights.

Peter had recovered much of his mental equilibrium but he

was left anxious and uncertain. For the first time in many years he felt vulnerable. Daniel seemed disinclined to enter into discussion, but he did admit that the murder of Tom Price would tell against them with the Council. The New Community killed only in the extreme necessity of war and then with acute regret. Despite this, he seemed confident of the outcome, but whether this meant acceptance or denial for Peter Grant he would not say.

It seemed that every time they did speak, Branwen's name was on Peter's lips. He was anxious to gauge her reaction to the information that he had killed his own mother. Daniel became short on the subject. Eventually he gave way, to a rare burst of temper.

'God man!' he exploded, 'can't you forget her for a second?'

'I'm sorry, Daniel,' Peter said, 'I hadn't realised.'

Daniel dropped his reins, put both hands over his face and let his horse find its own way whilst he recovered himself.

Then he eased back to join Peter and made a gesture of submission.

'It is I who should apologise. No woman has ever loved me, but I once loved a woman and I should have remembered how much it hurts. I should have shown more compassion. I have the advantage of being ugly and deformed so I know that my love is always doomed to be rejected. You, poor man, are beautiful, so hope and doubt combine to torture you. Forgive me.'

And Peter could find nothing to say. He pulled out of the line of men and dropped to the back. There he let the tears go, angry because now that his shield of secret guilt had gone, he was as vulnerable to emotion as any other man.

They came down from the mountains of Snowdonia into the vale of Ffestiniog, arriving at the village of Tan-y-Grisian in the late afternoon. Daniel arranged for them to be quartered in the village, then disappeared.

Tan-y-Grisian was of similar size to Llyn Edno but situated near the encircling hills at the head of a much larger valley, seeming to cower between the dramatic black scars of the old open-cast slate quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog and the twin threats, of the Llyn Stwlan and Tan-y-Grisian reservoirs where man-made dams held back water enough to have scoured the valley to its bedrock.

Mid-morning the following day Daniel returned with Branwen and Chad. The warrior priest made an immediate impression on Peter Grant. His face had a nobility and his eyes an inner peace that at once denoted strength and spirituality. What he thought of Peter could not be told at a glance. Both he and Branwen looked tired and drawn.

'When you meet the Council, Peter,' Chad said, 'answer their questions as truthfully as you have answered all others since your arrival. That is all that will be required of you.'

Branwen stepped forward, her face a blank. 'I shall speak against you,' she said, 'someone has to. I volunteered.'

Peter regarded her solemnly but said nothing. The girl seemed unable to meet his yes. Daniel was stood to one side, his diminutive hunchbacked figure almost lost in a sheepskin coat that was too large for him by far. There was a sad half-smile on his face, as if he were savouring some bitter-sweet memory of his own.

'It is time,' Chad said.

They rode out of the village along a grass-covered road, through a brief copse of half grown conifers planted in box shape which told that nature had no part in their presence there, then past the concrete dam to follow a road that led round the lake to a low oblong building, faced with stone, that looked out upon the wind-rippled water. They tethered their horses at the rear of the building and walked round to the impressive front entrance above which the words 'Central Electricity Generating Board. Ffestiniog Power Station.' were still clearly to be seen.

Chad led the Way. On their left as they entered was a large control room. Dust had long settled on the desk and wall monitors and the once shining dial faces. To the right was an even larger room with a great vaulted ceiling, housing massive engines long since dead, their function already forgotten.

Chad took them down two flights of stairs and into a side room where two armed soldiers of the Red Dragons waited. 'You will remain here until you are called,' he said to Peter.

Peter nodded and the three left him to his own thoughts and the company of the two soldiers who were very obviously an escort party should his plea to the council fail. No sound came from the other room. After what seemed an age, Daniel appeared at the door by which he had earlier left the room, and ushered him through.

The room was not large. It must at one time have been a store of some kind for the walls were shelved to the high ceiling and there were marks on the floor-where other standing shelves had been, removed presumably to create space when it was converted to its present use. The room was lit by pale electric light. On a low platform at one end were trestle tables covered with a red cloth behind which sat twelve of the thirteen members of the Guidance Council, included amongst who were Branwen and Chad. There was no other furniture in the room, nowhere 'for the applicant to sit. Daniel led Peter to a central position in front of the council, left him and took 'his seat on the platform. An elderly grey bearded man stood up and smiled a greeting.

'I am Madoc,' he said. 'I have the honour to be spokesman for the Council. We have already heard arguments for and against the acceptance of you and your men into the New Society. We should now like to put some questions to you, would you mind?'

'Certainly not,' Peter said.

'Then tell us why you came here,' Madoc suggested, resuming his seat.

'I came as a fugitive. Had I stayed in England I would have been killed. My men came with me through loyalty.'

'You do not say that you came from free choice because you preferred freedom to tyranny?' "

'No. I knew nothing of the New Society. I was warned that President Simons had ordered my death, so I ran. I came here because I was nearer to Wales than Scotland when I got the news.'

'It seems that you do yourself less than justice,' Madoc commented.

'You know my past,' Peter said. 'There are no excuses for what I have done. I simply tell the truth as I see it.'

'Since you arrived, what opinions have you formed?' Madoc asked.

'I told Daniel,' Peter replied. 'Before, I fought for myself. Now I see that here I have something else to fight for, the survival of the New Society. It's a worthier cause than my own survival.'

'Tell me, Peter,' Madoc said " 'how do you think you can help us?'

'I have a talent for fighting. Now I have a cause. You would not regret taking me.'

'You seem confident we will.'

'Perhaps none of us here have as much freedom of action as we think.'

The council members leaned forward in interest. 'Exactly what do you mean?' Madoc asked.

Peter hesitated, but once started there seemed no point in not telling the whole truth. 'I have had this feeling, well before I decided to desert the P.D.F., I had this feeling that everything I was, everything I did, all my experiences were a kind of training, a preparation for some test yet to come. I can explain it no better than that. It is as if there is a hand at my back, pushing me on. Since fate has led me here I can only assume it is here I shall be put to the test. If that is so, then you would be bound to accept me.'

The Council relaxed. Many faces turned towards Daniel at the end of the row. He was staring up at the ceiling, a rather smug expression on his face.

Branwen stood. Her face was pale but her eyes blazed.

'How many people have you killed, Peter Grant?' she asked.

'I never kept count,' Peter replied.

'Nor cared, I'll warrant.'

'No. After I had killed my mother I had no emotion left in me. I thought I was dead inside. And I was, until I came here.' .

There were knowing smiles among the Council but Branwen flushed with anger, bringing colour to her face, making her more beautiful than ever.

'So, we are to believe that in one short winter you have ceased to be a heartless killer and have become a dedicated fighter for freedom, is that it?'

'You asked questions. I answered truthfully. It is for you to interpret, not me.'

'How is it then that even after this remarkable transformation you killed a man; a pathetic, harmless creature who came to us for sanctuary? Or did you not count Tom Price either?'

'I thought he was a spy and therefore dangerous, not to me especially, but to you, to us all. I considered it an act of war.

I was wrong. I am guilty of his murder.'

'And you expect us to let into our ranks someone who deals so casually with the life of another?'

'I am what I am, what I was intended to be. What point is there in my making excuses for myself?'

'No,' Branwen agreed bitterly, 'much easier to blame God, or in your case, fate! One last question, then. You said you were warned that Simons intended to kill you. How were you warned?'

'By letter. A courier was waiting when we arrived at Gloucester.'

'On your way to Cardiff to lead your army against us?'

'Yes.'

'And if the warning had not come you would have done that, waged war on us for Simons?'

'I imagine so.'

'Thank you. Who sent you the warning?'

'Sarah Boyer, ex-President Wormley's woman.'

'And now President Simons woman.'

Peter shrugged. 'I don't know. It would not surprise me.'

'Why should she warn you?'

'I don't know.'

. 'Come now, Grant,' Branwen said viciously. 'It was well known that you were her. . . her gigolo and that she had a child by you. Do you deny it?'

Her voice had risen almost to a scream. As Peter was about to reply, Daniel stood and interrupted. 'I suggest,' he said, 'that this line of questioning, if necessary at all, should wait until the two young people concerned are alone one night in a single tent on some mountain top, well out of hearing of others.'

A chuckle of agreement rippled amongst the Council members. Madoc stood, smiling broadly. 'I concur,' he said. 'We shall now vote. All for acceptance indicate in the usual manner.'

Ten hands slapped down on the table and remained to be counted. Branwen sat tight-mouthed, hands in her lap. Madoc brought his own hand down to join the others. 'It is agreed,' he said.

Then Chad stood. 'Peter Grant, you have been accepted into the New Society. If it is your wish you and your men will be welcomed into the Red Dragons. However, you must first undergo a period of training. In the meantime, Daniel will take a day or two to show you around. k will be the last relaxation you will have for some time. Do you accept?'

'I accept,' Peter said.

The meeting broke up and the Council members, with the notable exception of Branwen, clustered round him to shake his hand and bid him welcome amongst them. The banging of a door marked Branwen's exit from the room and she took with her any pleasure Peter might have derived from the moment. He rode back down to the village with Chad and Daniel, in a new atmosphere of companionship. 'How long is the training to be?' he asked. 'A few days only. You are all soldiers. It is only necessary for you to learn the different tactics that mountain fighting requires and to put on an edge of fitness.' They rode in silence for a few more paces. Then Peter said: 'Can you tell me why it is Branwen hates me as much as she does? You and the rest of the Council know as much about me as she does, but you don't hate me. Did I kill someone she knows?' The other two laughed. 'Quite the contrary,' Chad said. 'I don't understand. . . ' 'Neither does she,' Daniel said wryly. 'You said that she'd bear my child, Daniel. How, is that possible if she hates me?' Daniel turned in resignation to Chad. 'You see what I've had to put up with? Is it any wonder I lost patience? And now I have two more days of it!' He sighed deeply. 'May God give me strength!' Peter saw nothing of Branwen for the next two days. The dwarf Daniel became his constant companion, leading him through the labyrinth of rooms, passages and stairs in the power station that now served a purpose far from the intention of its builders. There were eight vast floors beneath ground level, and a use had been found for every inch of space. In one vast room was a library and art collection, where, amongst other duties the three incumbents were engaged in bringing a written history up to date. They detained Peter, plying him with questions about the growth of the Revolution, avidly noting his replies. There was a school-room for the children of the village, a hospital of fifty beds with adjacent rooms for surgery, gynaecology and emergency care. The hospital had drugs and surgical instruments and one section was devoted entirely to the investigation and preparation of herbal remedies. Three of the floors were used entirely as storerooms for tinned food, drugs, weapons, clothing, tools, matches, salt and a hundred and one other items in quantities beyond the counting. Half of one floor was devoted to what Daniel described as 'survival research' and the workers there were engaged in a constant battle to reproduce for themselves items which had previously been taken for granted but the manufacture of which now presented new problems: string, paper, matches, glass, bricks, iron, fine cloth and much more. In another section was a room which was hung with rich tapestries. On a raised dais at one end was an altar table and behind it on the wall a huge painting of Christ crucified. Because of its size it could, only be described as a cathedral and there was seating for at least five hundred people. In a room off the cathedral a committee made up from members of the Guidance Council sat to decide social policy, arbitrate in

disputes and postulate the future social construction of the New Society, recognising the need for constant growth and change. -

The men and women working in the complex shared a devotion to the cause of the New Society and, despite the huge stocks available to them, a total determination not to be reliant on the finite benefits bequeathed by the civilization they had replaced. No greater contrast could be found with the limited vision of the Wormley regime. Here there was hope, more than that, determination that something new and more worthwhile could be built out of chaos.

Daniel was an informed and witty guide and the two days passed quickly despite Peter's anxiety about Branwen and his itch to see action again. On the last evening the women of the village came to stitch the two-headed dragon insignia on the doublets and sheepskin coats of Peter Grant and his men. Daniel issued, them with rifles, knives, and bows. The transition had been made. They had joined the Red Dragons. Shortly after dawn the following morning Peter paraded his men in the centre of the village as Daniel had instructed him. Branwen, Daniel and another war leader appeared and the patrol was split in three. To Peter's considerable surprise he was included in those allocated to Branwen. By her look it was no choice of hers. An equal number of experienced Red Dragon soldiers made up the training patrol, to act as instructors. As the sun struggled to rise over the surrounding mountains they saddled up and moved off in single file, Branwen leading. They took no food, only a hide tent and blankets apiece and the minimum of culinary equipment. The Red Dragons lived off the land or they went hungry.

They turned off the main track, up into the mountains, and by noon Peter was totally lost. They continued to climb until they were well above the tree level, then rounded a mountain side and rode onto a plateau of coarse grass pimped with rock and divided by shallow fast-flowing streams. Branwen reined in and beckoned Peter forward. 'It wasn't my idea that I should be your tutor, Grant,' she said, 'but since I am, get one thing clear in your mind. You might have been a general in the P.D.F. but here you are just another soldier.'

'I expected nothing else, Branwen,' he said, adding her name only for the pleasure of saying it.

'Very well. Are you hungry?'

'A little,' Peter said, puzzled at the question.

Branwen pointed across the plateau to where a scattering of wild sheep stippled the green. 'Take out two of the older rams. No guns.'

'But I hardly know how to use the bow,' Peter protested. 'Try,' Branwen suggested. The mountain sheep were eight generations wild. They were wary and remarkably fleet. Not being prepared to return with new born lambs or ewes in milk, Peter found that even approaching up-wind he had the greatest difficulty in getting within bowshot. Without the fieldcraft training he had done in England he would have had to face defeat. His horsemanship was still inept and he

knew from the start that riding his quarry down and shooting from the saddle was out of the question. He was conscious of Branwen and the others watching him from a knoll and he was bitterly angry with her for inflicting this humiliation on him. When, finally, he managed to get in a shot with the bow he only succeeded in grazing his wrist with the bowstring and sending the arrow very wide of its intended target. He bit back his anger and frustration, determined that her plan to humiliate him should fail. But by now the sun was dipping at alarming speed towards the horizon.

As the sun set, Peter killed one ram, a long throw with his knife from cover, but he had a long frustrating wait before that moment and the mist and dark were coming in fast in tandem. He slung the ram across his shoulders, walked to his hobbled horse and returned to the patrol. His own men smiled at him ruefully.

'Didn't want to die, those sheep, sir,' one of them said.

Branwen rounded on the man fiercely.. 'His name is Peter Grant. He is a soldier like you, you've no call to address him

as "sir". And another thing, I didn't send him out there to humiliate him, I did it to prove to you all that fighting in the mountains is not easy" If you can't kill sheep, how can you expect to kill men? None of you would have done as well.'

'But we weren't laughing at him, Branwen,' the man protested.

'Then see you don't,' she said sharply.

There was, Peter thought, no understanding women. The next few days were sheer torture. At dawn Branwen had

them up and running for miles with a blanket containing stones tied to their backs.

They practised with the bows for hours, on foot and in the saddle, until their arms ached and their fingers were raw. Fieldcraft came easily to them and they fared even better with the rifle to which they were used but firing from the saddle was new. With the knife Peter at least was at home, there was nothing he could be taught about the use of that weapon. At the end of three days they were , pounds lighter, bruised and aching, but their horsemanship had improved beyond recognition and they were at least competent with all the weapons available to them.'"

As they sat over roasted mutton on that third night Branwen announced that their training was finished.

'What now?' Peter asked.

'We move south. We fight.'

'We're in no real condition to fight,' Peter said. 'We're a mass of aches and pains.'

Branwen licked deliciously at her fingers. 'You were soft. You'll get over it by the time we get there, it'll take us six . days.'

And she was right in her prediction. Despite the cold damp mists of autumn, aches and pains disappeared, fingers raw from the bowstring hardened as their bodies became accustomed to' this new and harsh life on the long ride south. As the days passed Branwen's attitude towards Peter Grant changed'. She was no longer angry at the very sight of him, but apart from giving necessary orders, she still barely spoke to him and late one night, as he returned to the camp from guard duties, he passed her

tent and heard her crying. He wanted desperately to enter, take her in his arms, put the world right for her. But that would have assaulted her pride, made matters worse. The object of the patrol was to harass a P.D.F. outpost near Swansea, from where the Revolutionary Forces mounted raids up into the hills, but when they arrived the stockaded camp was deserted. Having assured themselves that this was

so, they entered the camp. The evacuation had clearly been completed some time ago and nothing of value had been left

behind. Branwen was exultant.

'Evan said he had made it hard on them. It seems they had no stomach for more fighting.'

'Are there any more outposts like this?' Peter asked.

'Yes. They've established a foothold in the mountains at Aberdare, east of here.'

'So there are no P.D.F. forces north or east of here?'

'No. Not alive anyway.'

'I don't like it Branwen. I can't see any reason why they should withdraw. They have more men in Wales now than they ever had before. Can we go to Aberdare, see if they're still there?'

'You're worrying like an old woman. They've been on the retreat all winter. We've given them a bloody nose and they're licking their wounds.'

'Perhaps. You say they've been less active this winter?' 'Yes. By spring we could hardly find a patrol to attack. . .
cowards!'

'I don't like it Branwen. There is something very wrong about all this. Can we go to Aberdare?'

Branwen shrugged. 'We might as well. We'll be wasting our time here.'

When they arrived at the camp at Aberdare the next day they found a Red Dragon patrol in occupation and Daniel and Chad waiting for them. A conference was held in one of the abandoned wooden buildings and Branwen made no objection when Peter was included.

'I think we have all realised that the P.D.F. are pulling out of Wales,' Chad began. 'The question is why?'

'Have they abandoned the base at Cardiff?' Peter asked.

'Yes. And they've taken everything with them. It was no sudden decision.' His black face was creased with worry.

Only Daniel seemed unconcerned. 'You can't have heroes without battles,' he said.

'What do you mean, Daniel?' Chad asked, towering above the dwarf and looking down to speak to him.

'Exactly what I say. The Revolutionary Forces are gathering like locusts. behind their own borders. When they take wing it will be in a final attempt to destroy us . . .' his face wrinkled up like a mosaic as he grinned. 'Fortunately we have a hero. I suggest you put him to work.'

Chapter Three

President Simons was by no means displeased with his first year in office. With the assistance of Sarah Boyer he had

secured a stranglehold on the army. He had infiltrated his C.R.G. men into the military at all ranks and had himself taken the title of Commander-in-Chief, Revolutionary Defence Forces.

Sarah had proved remarkably docile and co-operative. Seemingly she had accepted her defeat and was content to spend her time with her child or playing the grand lady. He seldom went to her bed, his tastes did not often run to women, but when he did she made a point of discovering what pleased him and providing it.

Simons now ruled the whole of England, and his rule was tighter than that of President Wormley had been. Knowing that people were starving because of the drought, and anticipating riot, he broke out the huge food stores Wormley had accumulated and distributed them as gifts to the people. He dealt- in the same way with the stores captured from The Trader. The gesture bought him, if not acceptance, at least the temporary acquiescence of the people. And it bought him time.

The desertion of his spy Tom Price was a matter of only minor irritation, but the escape of Peter Grant was quite another matter. He had most strongly suspected Sarah Boyer of warning him and had sent Ranning, his second-in-command, to Gloucester to find the evidence. Ranning had found the traitor who had taken the message but he had run at the sight of the C.R.G. men and had been cut down before they realised who he was.

Sarah Bover had evidenced only indifference at the news of Peter Grant's escape, commenting that he would die eventually when they took Wales. Ranning regarded her guilt as certain and when the news of Peter Grant's massacre of the C.R.G. patrol arrived he had been beside himself with rage, putting their deaths down to her account, almost demanding her life. But Simons had stayed his hand. Dear, dear, David Ranning was jealous of her of course, but she might yet have value, he had thought, and so it proved. Now the way the two of them bickered and carped at one another amused him, and reassured him. Whilst the two people nearest to him were at each other's throats he had nothing to fear from either.

In the spring following Peter Grant's escape, Simons set about re-organising his armed forces. He had lost the only two senior officers he had possessed who had any battle experience, Blake and Grant" and the remaining choice was limited. In particular he wanted an early success in Wales. It seemed to him that no progress at all had been made in that war and he wished to follow up his political triumph of the food distribution with a similar one in the military field. Also he wanted the death of Peter Grant. But there was more than that. He was not unintelligent and he realised that the

weapons of war he commanded had a limited life. When the ammunition was gone the rabble from Scotland and Wales' would fall upon him. Faced with that prospect he , had no choice but to secure the whole of the' British Isles before time caught up with him.

Simons 'recalled Captain Dicks from his command in the South' West and promoted him General. He then sent Dick's and his own second-in-command, Ranning, with two hundred men each, up into the Cumberland mountains. The instructions he gave the two officers was simply that they should experiment with mountain fighting and close combat techniques. When those men were trained, more would be sent.

In time Simons began to denude the army in Wales and finally, in the early autumn he withdrew them altogether, sending them up to the training area. Come the spring, he would have a thousand men mountain-trained. The Red Dragons would be unable to stand against them, they would be destroyed and the victorious army would march into Wales.

And President Simons would be at their head.

'They won't attack until the spring,' Peter said.

'How can you be sure?' Chad asked.

'Listen to him,' Daniel grumbled, 'he knows.'

Chad smiled wearily. 'I thought you were the. one with foresight,' he said.

'My job's nearly done. There's just the fighting left now. But I'll tell you one last thing. You should call a full meeting of the Guidance Council at once.'

'Why?'

'Whoever heard of a common soldier being a national hero?' said the dwarf scornfully.

'Branwen?' Chad asked.

She shrugged. 'I've never known Daniel to be Wrong.' She bent down to take the dwarf's crinkled face in her hands.

'You don't know what you've done to me,' she said, sadly, and kissed him on the fore-head.

He took her hands and held them. 'It is time now, Branwen,' he said. 'You have denied yourself and him for long enough.'

'Then it is agreed,' Chad said. He turned to Peter. 'Peter Grant,' he said, 'you were not sent here to take orders but

to give them. I have long felt the unhappy dichotomy of my position, both warrior and priest. I shall be happy to surrender the former function. As of now you have

command of the Red Dragons, subject only to the agreement of the Guidance Council.' 'They'll agree,' said Daniel laconically.' And then to Peter, irritably, 'Come on, come on. Tell him you accept and let's get started.'

'I have no choice,' Peter said, 'I never did have. I accept. . .

but Chad. . .'

'Yes?'

'You will stay with us?'

'If you wish. To be honest I would find it hard to settle to my duties whilst you were fighting the war.'

'Thank you,' Peter said. 'Then, as Daniel so rightly pointed out, there are things to be done.'

Before they left Aberdare Peter ordered small patrols to infiltrate across the border and try to discover the whereabouts of the P.D.F. army. He sent others to the villages nearest the border to warn them of impending attack and to arrange for a permanent watch on every mountain pass that lay-open to the border.

The four of them returned to Ffestiniog, - travelling alone, stopping only once during each day to kill food. At night, after the meal, they retired, each to their own hide rent, to awake at dawn and continue the journey.

The going told on Daniel, he was not young and he tired quickly. Still the others heard his wooden flute as they' lay in the cold blackness of their tents, bundled ID their clothes and sheepskin covers. In the silent isolation of the mountains the simple throaty sound of the flute took on a magic quality, invading the emotions of the listeners. Daniel was a natural musical genius, a sorcerer with a wand of sound. He did not play recognisable tunes with neat delineations and repetitions, rather he painted pictures with his music. The gentle cedences evoked images of the purple mountains; of the circling hawk; of the wooded valley on a windless summer day; of sweet drifting woodsmoke and blood-red sunsets. Of such exquisite beauty and sadness were the images, such a depth of praise and spiritual longing was there in the playing that the listeners felt at once privileged and humble, knowing that through his music Daniel bared his soul.

On their last night in the mountains Branwen came to Peter's tent. She crawled in and pulled the hide flap down behind her, her face an indistinct blur in the darkness.

Daniel was playing, lost in his private and beautiful world. . .

'You know, Branwen,' Peter said. 'I love that little man, I really do.'

'So do we all,' Branwen said softly.

'The sad thing is, he doesn't think anyone does love him. How can he know so much and yet not know that?'

'Perhaps it is his cross, along with his ugliness and deformity. But he has great gifts and from those to whom much is given much is demanded.'

'Then much will be demanded of us as well.'

'I have no doubt.'

She. was kneeling beside him in the close confines of the tent, he could smell the fragrance of her body. He reached out, fumbled for her hand and held it. 'You are my love,' he said.

'Yes.'

'I'll remake the bed so that we're comfortable.'

She stopped him with a slight pressure on his hand. 'Did you love her?' Suddenly her voice had an edge to it her hand was shaking slightly. . .

'Who?' Peter asked.

'Oh, there've been that many, have there? I meant that. . .

I meant Sarah Boyer, she had your child.'

'It is possible the child is mine,' Peter admitted, 'but not certain.' .

'You haven't answered my question. Do you love her, did you?'

'No. Before I came to Wales I was not capable of loving anything or anyone.'

'Then why did you have to . . .'

Peter shrugged in the darkness. 'She ordered me to her bed and I was in no position to disobey. Nor did I particularly wish to. She might have been useful to me, she was in fact. Remember, you and I had not met, things were different then.' .

Branwen was silent for a moment. Then she said, 'I don't really like you very much, Peter Grant.'

'There has never been very much of me that anybody would like,' Peter said. 'I am what I am and there is nothing I can do about it now.' .

They removed their heavy clothing in silent unison and snuggled naked beneath the piled bedclothes.'

'How strange life is,' Branwen said. 'It appears we can love someone even if we don't like them.'

Peter stroked her gently. 'I wouldn't know about that,' he said. 'I've never loved anyone before.'

'Nor will you again Peter Grant. I warn you I am jealous and possessive. Make a fool of me and you're likely to finish up with a dagger in your ribs.'

But he kissed the threat from her lips and soon they were lost in each other, unaware that, Daniel had ceased to play.

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They arrived at Ffestiniog in mid-morning, soaked to the skin by the rain that had fallen non-stop since the early hours. They went straight to the power station and dried themselves off as the rest of the Council gathered.

Peter Grant was again left in the ante-room whilst the Council deliberated but this time there was no guard and the wait was not so long. Daniel ushered him in and Peter saw that the tables on the dias were now in the form of a square and that a place was vacant for him beside Branwen. Peter stood behind his chair and waited.

Madoc toyed with his grey beard and beamed on him on avuncular fashion. 'Peter, the Guidance Council has unanimously endorsed your elevation to Commander of the Red Dragons. With the appointment goes a seat on this Council. Welcome amongst us.'

The other members drummed their knuckles on the table in agreement. Branwen held back his chair and Peter sat. 'Thank you all,' Peter said. 'You may be certain my loyalty and my life will be' given to the cause of the New Society.'

'You have had several days to consider the position,' Madoc said. 'Can you now give us your assessment of the military . situation?'

'Yes, Madoc. But first I must ask you something. Do you accept that we face crisis, that the very existence of the New Society is at stake?'

'Yes,' Madoc said. 'It is clear some major offensive is being planned.'

'Then will you make this known to the people and make every effort to step up recruitment to the Red Dragons?'

'That we will do, but we cannot conscript people. You understand that would be contrary to everything we stand for.'

'Very well. How many soldiers will I be able to field by next spring, do you think?'

Madoc spread his hands in a gesture of doubt. 'Perhaps another three hundred, say seven hundred in all, men and women.'

'Then we will have to abandon the two southernmost villages and pull back in the north west mountains centred on Ffestiniog here. We cannot defend a larger area.'

'That would come hard,' Madoc said.

'Simons intends to crush us. I doubt he will field an army of less than a thousand men. He is not the fool that Wormley was. I do not have the ,sight, as Daniel does, but I think I know what the army he pulled out of Cardiff is doing. They are training in mountain fighting, along with the northern army. He will not fall into the trap of burdening himself with tanks and heavy guns, this battle will be fought on foot and it will be harder than anything the Red Dragons have yet experienced.'

'How will he attack, and where?' Madoc asked.

'We cannot be sure. If I were he, I'd drive straight for Llyn Edno, then on here. If he took Ffestiniog the battle would be over because the villages are not defensible.

'Then how do we stop, them?'

'I cannot answer that yet. For now we need to strengthen the Red Dragons, set up guard posts along our borders and send patrols out to probe the enemy lines and try to locate their army. We'll need warning of their coming.'

'How long d'you think we have, Peter?' Madoc asked. 'Simons will be in no hurry. His officers will have to learn

mountain fighting by trial and error before they can teach the men. Spring at the earliest, we must be ready by then, . but more likely he will come with the summer.'

Madoc looked round the assembled company. 'Any matters you wish to raise?' he asked. No-one indicated. Madoc looked across to Peter. 'Peter, our future is in your hands. Make your decision. We will support you as best we can.'

Chad stood then and raised his hands. The Council members dropped their heads and closed their eyes. Chad Prayed : 'Lord, protect and guide us, show us your mercy. We ask your blessing upon our defence and upon our Commander, Peter Grant. Make of him, O Lord, your strong right arm, that through him your people may survive to glorify your name. Amen.'

'Amen,' the company repeated.

Peter and Branwen were seldom apart during that winter. They worked as a team, supervising the building of watch

towers on the borders, the maintenance of patrols, the training of new recruits, the gathering of intelligence and the

distribution of extra arms and equipment. They. seemed to be always. on the move, always travelling from one place to

another. The weather was unkind but they barely noticed, engrossed in work by day and each other by night.

Chad went south to oversee the evacuation of the villages that were to be abandoned.

Daniel took charge of intelligence

operations and spent all his time on the border. They all came together on one selected day in mid-winter, to celebrate Christmas. -One day was all they could afford. Chad

held a service in the chapel at Llyn Edno, during which he blessed the union of Peter and Branwen. The simple words seemed to put a seal on their relationship. Peter had

no belief in God, but every belief in the black priest, and Branwen's happiness was evident.

Soon after the celebration Daniel was able to tell them that an army of at least a thousand men were encamped and training to the north, in Cumberland. Thereupon the northern . border guard was strengthened and the intelligence operation - homed in on the enemy camp site. By the spring they knew that Dicks and Ranning were the

commanders, that a huge number of vehicles had been collected for their transport and that Simons himself was to lead the attack. It was a formidable line-up and against it, allowing for guard duties, sickness, and couriers, the Red Dragons could expect to have an active fighting force of some five hundred and fifty men and women. It was evident from the start that open battle was out of the question.

Spring fattened into summer and still Simons army stayed in camp. The defenders began to feel that he was playing cat and mouse with them. Peter and Branwen remained in Llyn Edno for much of the time and had it not been for the shadow of war hanging over them it would have been an idyllic summer.

Then, when the first sniff of autumn was in the air, judging that the defenders were stale from the months of waiting, Simons moved, revealing an almost frightening organisational ability in the speed with which he transported his army to the Welsh border.

They encamped just west of Llangollen, poised to strike at the heart of Wales.

Peter held a council of war with Chad, Daniel and Branwen in the village hall at Llyn Edno on the morning that news of

Simons arrival at Llangollen was brought to them. They leant over a table spread with maps.

'I had hoped. up to the last moment that he might split his forces,' said Peter grimly, 'but he's too clever for that. He will go all out to take this village, then push on to Ffestiniog.'

'We could cut out some of his column,' Chad suggested; 'keep nibbling at his tail.'

'He will expect that. I tell you, the man's no fool. We would lose more men than we killed.'

'What then?' Branwen asked.

'We must give him what he wants, give him this village.'

There was a chorus of shocked dissent. Peter raised his hand. 'Consider,' he said. 'We cannot stop him taking Llyn

Edno. We cannot fight a pitched battle and guerrilla tactics will not thin his forces to a marked extent before he gets

here. Llyn Edno is indefensible, we can turn that to our advantage - if we give up the village.'

Chad was looking away, out of the window, brown eyes sombre. -'It is as well you came,' he said. 'I could never have ordered this village to surrender. I would have insisted we fought to the death.'

'We may well have to yet,' Peter said. 'but Llyn Edno will not surrender, it will write itself into history. Once Simons enters this valley, he has lost, provided only that we can persuade him to camp here overnight.'

'How do we do that?' Branwen asked.

'By holding him back so that he does not take the village until sunset. We must put up a hard fight, make certain he thinks we were trying to defend it, and our retreat must be a chaos, as if we were broken.'

'Then what?'

'Then Llyn Edno will take its revenge. I want every gallon of petrol we can lay our hands on brought here and the village evacuated immediately.'

'Petrol?' Chad and Branwen chorused.

Peter explained.

Chad and Branwen looked horrified but Daniel went off into a huge peal of laughter, clutching his sides, tears running down his nut brown wrinkled face, his tiny body shaking with the excess of mirth. The others, Peter included, stared at him in amazement.

'Don't you see?' he spluttered. 'It's so beautifully simple, we made a mistake when we ordered our society. . . .' He dissolved into laughter again..

'What mistake?' Chad asked.

'Oh. . . well. . . we . . . we eliminated evil. That's why we needed him,' pointing at Peter, 'poor boy, he had, to go through hell for us . . . go through hell so we could lean on his sins, fight evil and win . . . which of us would have, could have devised a plan like that?' And now his laughter had turned to tears. 'We did that to him . . . God forgive us . . . without him we would have been lost. . . but what a price he paid.. . for us ! '

The dwarf leant forward over the table, supporting himself with his hands, tears streaming from eyes tight shut. Peter moved to him and took him in his arms, holding him as if he were a distressed child. 'Daniel,' he said, 'it was not so bad, I was deprived of feeling during those years and anyway, even now I do not believe as you do.

Nonetheless, when the battle is won, I shall demand something of you.'

Daniel looked up enquiringly into the young face of the hero. 'How could I deny you?' he said.

'I shall want your secrets. That is my price. I want to know how it is you know things that others do not.'

The dwarf nodded slowly, stood away from Peter and composed himself. 'You shall know,' he promised.

It took President Simons and his army two days, two days of ambush, sniping and sudden brief but vicious flank attacks, to get within striking distance of Llyn Edno. By then he had lost just over a hundred men and as far as he could tell not one of the Red Dragons had been killed. Yet he was exultant. The price had so far been small. He would gladly have sacrificed the whole of this army to take Wales.

Peter Grant, on the other hand, was not well pleased. He had hoped to take a greater toll of the enemy whilst they pushed forward into the mountains. They had given them no peace, harried them every moment of the day and night, made sentry duty certain death, cut off stragglers, sniped into the ranks of the marching men, and when

the terrain permitted, he, Branwen, Daniel and Chad had led cavalry charges, cutting through the double columns of soldiers, wreaking devastation amongst them, gone before they could recover. Even so, the Revolutionary Army marched implacably on, like some giant centipede barely noticing a leg cut from here or there, intent upon its goal, the destruction of Llyn Edno.

At dawn on the third day Simons was a bare three miles from the village. If he were to be detained until dusk, the Red Dragons would, have to commit themselves to a major assault. Simons was not approaching the valley from, the north, across the high plateaux as Peter had first done, but from the east, the lower end where the lake shallowed and hesitated before shrinking into a marshy area drained by a river which plummeted down a waterfall where the valley narrowed. It was here that a stand had to be made, in the steep rocky defile where the narrow path meandered beside the rushing water.

Peter committed four hundred of his force to the attack, secreting them amongst the rocks and stunted trees on both sides of the path. This was no place for horses, here the fighting would be hand to hand.

Simons recognised the natural trap and disregarded it. Llyn Edno had to be taken. But he dropped back into the ruck of his troops, ostensibly to spread cheer and boost morale.

The first devastating burst of fire from the defenders decimated the front half of the 'Column. Before the rest of the army had taken cover another fifty had died. Then Simons saw them, four figures on horseback up on the skyline by the top of the waterfall. He took out his treasured binoculars. One was a girl, another a huge negro, another a dwarf and sitting there, proud as a peacock, Peter Grant. Simons smiled with grim satisfaction. With the revolutionary army dug in and recovered from the initial shock of the ambush, the battle was at stalemate. Ground was taken, then lost, then taken again. The Red Dragons were taking casualties now and this gave heart to the attackers. By mid afternoon they were moving slowly but surely forward and upwards, pushing the defenders back. There were a hundred short, bloody, hand to hand battles, a man or a woman died, and another rock was taken.

As the sun dipped at last below the skyline the Revolutionary army broke over the lip of the valley without opposition, Simons arrived in time to see that those Red Dragons who had survived were in full flight, running, scrambling onto horses, running for their lives.

'Cowards!' he screamed after them, 'Cowards!'

It was black night.

The victorious invaders had taken Llyn Edno but their Commander had permitted no celebration, no cooking fires, no lights. The cowards were not yet destroyed. Sentries were posted.

Then, when all others slept, the sentries died, quickly and silently, ignorant to the last of the coming of their end Fireflies appeared on the lower slopes of the valley, first one, then twenty, then a hundred.. They danced forward, closing in on the village.

Then they took flight, soaring into the air, describing arcs of beauty, falling into the village.

After a while small flames appeared, growing, spreading, leaping. Then there were shouts of enquiry, of dismay, oaths, orders. Men appeared on the streets of the village, more orders were shouted and more men appeared.

Then, shattering the silence, a fusillade of bullets struck the village, aimed not at the hundreds of milling soldiers but at the roofs of the houses. A house exploded in a blinding sheet of flame' as the petrol hidden in its loft ignited.

A second house exploded, a third and the village was a cauldron of fire as the chain reaction spread from house to house. Flaming debris flew in the air and landed amongst the rough tents surrounding the village. They caught fire, unnoticed in the greater holocaust of flame.

The village was gone, lost to the primal force of fire, a vast sea of flame in which all life was seared into sudden painful death.

Out of the darkness of the hills, into the bright unnatural light that Llyn Edno provided in its death throes, came the horse-soldiers of the Red Dragons, driving into the bemused ranks of the survivors, cutting them down at will.

By dawn there was nothing left to do but hunt stragglers in the hills. An army had died.

Simons was dead. So were seven hundred men of the Peoples Defence Force. So were one hundred and fifty men and women of the Red Dragons. Heroes do not bring peace, but death. It is the way of heroes.

In Windsor Castle, Sarah Boyer still slept, unaware that she was Queen. Beside her was her boy-child, knowing nothing of his paternity or his birthright.

On a hill overlooking the dead village of Llyn Edno, four riders stopped for a last look at the valley, smouldering still from the murder that had been done. They were Peter and Branwen and Chad and Daniel the dwarf.

The victory was theirs and they were rightly sad. There was a fifth human life there. An embryo that had clung to existence through the war, showing early evidence of the tenacity it had inherited.

Peter Grant was twenty-one years of age.

It was ten years since the Great Death.

From the cover

FIVE YEARS. AFTER THE. GREAT DEATH...

and throughout Britain small groups of survivors are banding together to relearn long-forgotten skills. Among them are the authoritarian National Unity Force, whose self-styled President, Arthur Wormley, now lives like a king in Windsor Castle; the Rat Pack, who live in the London Underground; the primitive capitalist community in the north whose leader is known simply as the Trader; and the Red Dragons, guerrillas dedicated to preventing the spread of NUF power to Wales. In this gripping sequel to the first SURVIVORS novel, Peter Grant joins President Wormley's army after the shooting of his mother, Abby, and is caught in a political conflict that could mean the death or life of a reborn world.

John Eyers is an author and playwright, and has contributed over the years to many TV series such as Special Branch, Hunter's Walk, Public Eye, Armchair Theatre, New Scotland Yard, Crown Court, Z Cars and The Sweeney. Mr Eyers is 38 and lives with his wife and three children in Cornwall.

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