

A person wearing a blue patterned coat with white cuffs is shown from the side, holding two wooden muskets horizontally. The background is dark and out of focus. The text is overlaid on the image.

The Musketeers of Haven

A science fiction story

By M S Lawson

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Other books by this author

Claire Takes On The Galaxy (ebook, published on the web site Dreame, 2019)

Darth Vader – The good guy who lost (non-fiction ebook, 2018)

A Planet for Emily (ebook, 2017)

Disgraced in all of Koala Bay (ebook, 2016)

The Zen of Being Grumpy (non-fiction published by Connor Court, 2013)

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Obstacles

Some writers acknowledge help in writing their books, I can only point to self-imposed obstacles, notably the temptations of the computer games produced by the Swedish game developer Paradox. *Hearts of Iron IV* (World War II grand strategy) and its various mods, as well as *Stellaris* (space empires strategy) and *Imperator: Rome* (grand strategy in the Roman world), occupied time which I should have spent on this book. Curse you Paradox. The venerable *Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games) – never could get into Civs V or VI - also chewed up a lot of time, as did *They Are Billions* by Polish developer Numantian Games. A dishonourable mention must also go to Lion Shield's *Kingdoms and Castles*. Curse you computer game developers; curse you all.

Genesis

Some years ago a sub-editor of the newspaper I worked on asked me, apropos of not much - America was invading somewhere or other at the time - if I thought any war could ever be described as just. Puzzled over why the question should be asked of me, I responded that I didn't think any war could be labelled "just", but there had been wars that could not be avoided.

Prologue

The sudden appearance of a huge ring of metal in mid-distance earth orbit initially caused confusion, then concern, then puzzlement and, finally, curiosity. How had it been placed there and who or what had placed it? More importantly, why had it been placed there? A scan of the electromagnetic frequencies showed that The Ring – it was simply known as The Ring – was broadcasting the same statement over and over in all of the earth’s major languages.

“Use this device to visit our planet. You may live there, mine and farm it, but do not disturb us.”

A probe was sent through The Ring. It vanished then returned hours later with pictures of a world much like Earth but with no cities, civilisations or sentient species. More probes were sent, until one found a building in the uplands of a continent in the planet’s temperate zone. This huge structure was suspected of being connected to the ring in that both were featureless and made the same amount of sense.

A party of earnest young scientists was sent. After checking carefully for nasty diseases, they landed on the surface and walked around the structure, as big as four football stadiums arranged in a square, and about as tall. All of the outer walls and the roof were made of concrete-like material. They measured and studied and wrote dramatic bulletins about their attempts to make contact with whatever alien intelligence was inside/behind the structure and The Ring. They found that the structure was hollow and gave off a small amount of heat. Weak, varying electromagnetic fields were detected. Obviously, something was happening inside the structure, which extended well underground, but what?

The one visible feature in the structure was a single door – actually a slab of metal that was about the size and shape of a door for a human and set at ground level, but without doorknob, door knocker or doorbell. The space behind it was hollow, as near as they could tell. They knocked on the door. No response. They pounded on it. Nothing. The expedition had a hammer. This was fetched and, after some agonising over exactly what constituted an aggressive act, it was used to bash the door. The hammer left no mark but made the metal ring like a gong. That brought a response, in the form of a message sent on the same frequency as the message from the gate.

“We asked not to be disturbed. Use the rest of the planet as you wish but leave us alone.”

Well, okay, if the aliens wanted to be left alone that was cool, albeit unsociable. But why wouldn't these creatures communicate? Fiction was full of Aliens who dismissed humans as primitive layabouts or lectured them about their wasteful ways. Other fictional aliens worked for decades to subvert human society to their own ends, or who skipped that boring subversion process in favour of blowing stuff up. Now that was communication. What could anyone do about aliens who invited humans to a whole new planet and then did not want to communicate at all?

Academics were consulted and, after much discussion and conferencing, came up with an answer that suited them. The aliens did not consider humans worthy of their time because the human race had not paid enough attention to fixing all the problems of the moment – poor minority rights, domestic violence, gender inequality, reduction in biodiversity and environmental degradation. The answer must be to build a community on the new world – now named Haven – that would show-case human abilities in sustainable economic activity, living peacefully and in creating a nurturing, caring, non-violent environment for their children, with inclusive decision making and respect for the rights of all. A few sceptics pointed out that the messages did not indicate that the aliens thought the humans unworthy, only that they wanted to be left alone. Perhaps, the sceptics speculated, the aliens just wanted humans on the planet to prevent anyone else settling there and making a nuisance of themselves. These sceptics were promptly condemned by right thinking academics for spreading “misinformation” and shunned.

More people arrived at Haven and set up a settlement by a river on a fertile plain about two hour's drive by electric car from the structure. They built a road from the resulting city, called just Haven City, to the structure. There was a small gorge just beside the structure with a river at the bottom of it, so the road required a bridge. Having undertaken such intrusive work on the peaceful natural landscape, the humans decided they might as well extend the same road out to a large summer camp where they sent their children to have constructive, sustainable fun. Later they put in a road junction with the joining road going out to a launch and receive site for rockets from Earth in the hills above the structure.

With that work done the governing committee realised that they might as well build a visitors centre across the road from the structure. They cut the grass, after some debate about whether grass cutting intruded too much on the environment, put in a car park, picnic tables and benches and then got on with the job of living in a

peaceful, sustainable community without net emissions, and with full consultation on such matters as which set of toilets transgender individuals should use. Machines were brought in to do the work for what was mostly a community full of academics who had a whole world to investigate in a non-invasive way. A Haven Executive Office (words such as authority or department were considered too dominative, and the term colony was right out) was set up on Earth to organise delivery of more machines and parts through a network of orbital stations, present the settlement to the world and provide support to the ethical decision making process on Haven.

One early, major crisis occurred when the emissions free, sustainable energy network of unsightly wind turbines and square kilometres of photovoltaic arrays, plus some truly colossal batteries, could not be made to produce enough electricity for the colony. Worse, it occasionally failed to produce any electricity at all. After various academics finished justifying this failure on the basis that the theory was not wrong, just the execution of it, and that green energy still ruled, Earth sent a whole nuclear reactor.

This was not one of the huge reactors with gigantic water cooling towers and rooms full of computers, but a standardised, small scale reactor – an adaption of the type used on nuclear submarines for many years, and about the same size as one of those vessels. It was installed, encased in concrete and all working parts were sealed. The builders told the settlers to connect power cables to it, instruct the reactor's operating system to make up any shortfall from the renewable energy network, but not to mess with the machinery. 'Don't open the inspection hatches or you'll void the warranty big-time', they were told. 'We'll be back in five years to change the fuel rods.'

This new installation was sited well away from Haven City and never mentioned in public announcements. It was evidence that renewable energy networks did not work as idealists endlessly declared that they should, therefore it was part of a big-energy conspiracy which should not be acknowledged.

Another self-induced crisis was the introduction of horses. The use of such animals – for which there was no local equivalent - would be a fun way to get around and interact with the landscape in a not-very-invasive way, especially when tourists finally came to the planet. But what about the rights of the horses? Did they want to hang out on another planet? Could they be made to eat the local grass species? What about the dung the horses produced? Would the Haven ecosystem break up that dung or would it just sit there providing ideal breeding places for the local flies? These and other questions were answered and horses introduced, but the tourists to undertake treks using these horses never arrived. Tourism in all its forms was deemed to be far

too invasive for Haven's fragile ecosystems. Some settlers took up horse riding and that was tolerated, just.

Apart from these crises the settlers got on with the job of proving themselves worthy of alien attention with sustainable practices, a caring and consultative approach to community life and a nurturing approach to raising children. The children for their part wandered around the new world, exchanged bootleg copies of media programs they were not allowed to access, wished that they could attend concerts and fantasised about eating hamburgers. Only meat substitutes derived from plants were permitted on Haven. When they became older they adopted the odd habit of hiking up into the hills and howling at Haven's two moons, much as wolves might howl in earth's forests. 'It's just something to do,' they told their parents.

Such eccentricities, however, did not interfere with the main business of the settlement being run in an ethical, non-judgemental, inclusive way as a community at peace with itself and the universe. Conflicts were resolved through discussion and the children were taught that violence was never the answer to any question. For above all the settlement would be at peace.

The aliens in the structure would somehow see all this virtue, so the theory went, conclude that the humans were worthy of their time and come out to play. As the older settlers frequently told themselves, what could possibly go wrong?

Chapter One – Hating Gideon

The angel found Gideon, not threshing wheat secretly but hiding from his colleagues in the Haven Executive Office behind a computer screen and told him his mission was to rescue the people of Haven from the Midianites.

“Why me?” asked Gideon, “for I am the least of my people – I’m a contractor here, not even a staff member, and they all hate me.”

“You’re a soldier aren’t you?” said the angel of the Lord, “so get busy.”

Gideon Swift was not just hated by his colleagues at the Haven Executive Office, he was loathed, despised and reviled to the point where he had become interested in seeing just how bad it could get.

He got a strong taste of what was to come, and of the general staff culture, on his first day as a contractor when he arrived to find some of the employees staging a protest sit-in in the foyer of their own office over the issue of using the pronouns he

and she in personnel contracts. This was considered to be categorising individuals into genders and that was bad.

“What do we want?” shouted one bearded you man in a Tee shirt on his feet in front of a half a dozen mostly youthful protestors, waving banners reading “Gender is fluid” and “Gender is a choice.”.

“No labels in contracts!” they shouted back.

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

The noise was deafening.

“Is it often like this?” Gideon asked of the 50s-something lady sitting behind the reception desk. She wore a floral print dress with a circle of flowers on top of lank, blonde hair that made her look as if she could have stepped straight from a flower power protest of the 1960s. A sign on her desk read:

“First contact facilitator, not receptionist, you judgemental arseholes.”

This facilitator-not-receptionist shrugged but did not smile. “Most days,” she said. “But you can see their point. Transgender people can be offended by the use of he or she.”

“Guess,” said Gideon, who wasn’t going to pick a fight on his first day. “I’m Gideon Swift here as an IT contractor. I’ve an appointment with your HR people.”

As soon a Gideon mentioned his name the facilitator-not-receptionist’s attitude changed from indifference to icy hostility.

“Oh you’re the baby killer,” she hissed at him.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, you’re a baby killer, a soldier.”

“A reservist quartermaster sergeant, and we don’t mistreat babies in stores,” said Gideon evenly. It was fashionable at the time among the fringe dwellers of social media to revile soldiers as “baby killers” - the worst accusation that anyone could think of. Soldiers supported totalitarian regimes and were trained to kill, so they were obviously all bad, or so their reasoning went. This accusation had been hurled at Gideon before but to have it hissed at him by a not-receptionist on his first day in a new contract was taking abuse to the next level. He later realised that he was lucky that the protestors did not hear the receptionist above their own chanting or notice her hissing, otherwise he might have had to flee for his life.

“What do we want?”

“No labels in contracts!”

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

“Maybe if you just let me through and tell me the office to go to,” said Gideon.

The not-receptionist flung a visitor’s identity card at him, spat “fifth floor, room 503” and buzzed him through the security gate.

The HR person Gideon found in room 503 was at least not overtly hostile and had the grace to acknowledge that Gideon might have a problem, as she showed him to his desk.

“There was real trouble about you being hired,” she told him. “Everyone’s past employment histories are disclosed as part of our transparency directives and your CV says you’re a soldier.”

“Sure,” Gideon shrugged. “I did a year full time and been active in the reserves as part of deal in which the army paid for my education. I was deployed once to count bandages for a relief operation. Now I’m a quartermaster sergeant.”

“Okay..” said the PR lady. “What is a quartermaster?”

“Keeps the stores. Gets the right equipment to the right people at the right time.”

“Including guns?”

“Oh yes, guns and ammunition.”

“I see,” she said distantly. “In fact, we almost had a full strike over Dr Benson the HEO director hiring you, the moment the committees found out you were a soldier.”

“A strike? But if it’s that much of a problem why hire me at all? There are plenty of others who do what I do who aren’t in the reserves.”

“That’s what we told Dr Benson but he insisted that you be hired anyway, and you specifically.”

“I’ve heard of Dr Benson but why, on earth, would he take any interest in me? I’ve never met the man?”

“We were curious about that too,” said the HR person. “Here is your desk.” She walked off quickly, glad to be shot of her embarrassing companion.

Once seated at his desk, Gideon’s next interaction with his colleagues was when a woman appeared in front of him, arms folded. She had long, red hair and a figure that reminded Gideon he was newly single, but the woman’s hostile stare told him that flirting was not on the agenda.

“Baby killer!” spat red haired and marched off, shoulders back.

“Nice to chat,” Gideon called after her. He was not a man to wilt because others thought badly of him, which was just as well as all his new colleagues considered him a waste of office space. As the protest in the foyer indicated, those who gravitated to the HEO were attracted by the thought of a new world free of big

energy conspiracies, and shadowy, sinister government forces. As far as these activist types were concerned Gideon's humble role in the military was in the same category as the leaders of black op teams (they knew that phrase at least) which, they imagined, slaughtered villages full of innocent people for ill-defined purposes. Like the HR person they had no idea what the terms quartermaster or sergeant meant.

If he left anything on the desk it was taken and smashed (a coffee cup) or taken, "baby killer" written on it in big, red letters and returned (a family photograph). Conversation stopped whenever he entered the lunchroom, and they would all turn to look at him.

"Killed any babies today, soldier," sneered one bearded man, his hair in a bun.

"My rank is sergeant," replied Gideon calmly, "and not so far today. Weekly parade is on Wednesdays. I'll see what I can do then."

As rational discussion, or tolerance of dissent were not part of the DNA of the office, his only option was to turn the other cheek. Any attempts by him to, say, sneer back or smash photos in return would result in instant denunciations and give his many enemies (the whole staff) a good reason to ask for him to be sacked.

The men were bad - Gideon came to associate beards with trouble - but the women could be worse. If three activist women gathered together, they seemed to reach a critical mass of meanness, and shout angry comments at him as they passed his desk. His response was to smile and wave.

"Nice to have this conversation," he would say.

His colleagues were so mean to him that Gideon became morbidly curious about just how far this meanness would go. He recalled reading of someone living in a Latin American country where most government functions had broken down, and the writer had become interested in seeing just how bad conditions could get. So it was with him at the HEO.

The part-time soldier liked the occasional cup of coffee. Blameless though that would be in any other office, at the Haven Executive Office it proved a real problem. Coffee was banned as, apart from adverse health effects on those who drank it, the steam contributed to indoor pollution. He brought in some instant coffee of his own - he was no coffee connoisseur - only for the offending material to be taken off him and replaced with a formal warning about his failure to respect the rights of others. He framed this warning and put it on his desk, but the frame was smashed when he wasn't there, and he was handed another for failing to take official warnings seriously.

Unlike the previous warning, Gideon received the second in an interview with the head of the workplace rights committee – the committee that all the others, even HR, were afraid of.

“Your behaviour shows that you don’t respect warnings about the rights of others,” she said.

“On the contrary, keeping the warning framed on my desk shows that I wanted to be reminded of it at all times.”

“Nonsense,” snapped the committee head. “We know how recalcitrants and military types like yourself think.”

“If you hate me so much because I’ve been somewhere near the army, why don’t you get rid of me? I’m just a contractor, not even a staff member.”

“If it was up to me, you’d be gone,” said the woman. “Having a trained killer in the office sends entirely the wrong message about peaceful co-existence, but we’ve been told you have to stay.”

“Really, who told you this?”

“Never mind, baby killer,” said the committee head. “But we don’t have to put up with your extremist attitudes.”

“Okay,” said Gideon, stifling a laugh. He knew from the biographies on the intranet that the committee head had done a Masters in Marxist Theory and actively encouraged people not to vote in elections. Voting for politicians only encouraged them. Best to tear down the whole rotten, corrupt, exploitive system and replace it with something Marxist, where citizens were servants of the state and their electoral choices were guided. Being called extremist by her struck Gideon as funny.

“No, humph” (he put a hand to his mouth) “extremist, humph” (his shoulders shook) “attitudes”. He finished with a fixed grin. The committee head glared at him. She was extremely good looking in a naturalist sort of way, but Gideon was so preoccupied with not laughing that he did not trust himself to make the traditional response to complete rejection “I guess a fuck is out of the question”. This was just as well, he thought later, as it might have tipped the committee head over the edge.

That head left muttering about failure to conform and closed the door to the conference room just as Gideon lost control. He covered his mouth so that the office would not be aware that he was laughing, but his sides shook and tears ran down his cheeks. It was fully ten minutes before he had recovered enough to creep back to his desk. But even then, whenever he thought about being reprimanded for his “extremist behaviour” he had to suppress chuckles. His workmates glared at him suspiciously.

The easiest part to bear of this discrimination was not being invited to any of the seminars held in the office meeting rooms with titles such as ‘asserting your

rights' or 'toleration in the workplace', or the endless meetings of this or that workplace committee, which were a major feature of the HEO. These committees had some say in how the place was run, but all Gideon knew about these meetings was when he passed glass-fronted meeting rooms full of earnest people deep in discussion. Sometimes there might be a diagram on an overhead display, at other times these meetings would be addressed by someone standing up, which seemed serious. Then he would get to the open plan area, where the work was done, to find it almost empty. The meeting rooms were full and the work area empty.

What could they be discussing? Given how the staff behaved towards him he was almost curious to know if he featured in the seminar on workplace toleration, but not curious enough to attend. What he would not do was reward this bizarre behaviour by seeking forgiveness, or trying to fit in. The soldier was a man of his own mind.

Instead it had the opposite effect. If his colleagues thought their behaviour was the answer to anything, well, stuff them. Although he had a strong interest in military history, he had never really identified himself as a soldier, or thought much about military life. It had been a means of paying for his education and he was working out his time. He had turned down, with polite thanks suggestions that he apply for officer training. Now, if they were going to spit on him, he would spit right back metaphorically. Maybe he would take that officer training course?

Harder to take was the sarcasm from those who were meant to be briefing him on his job. He had been called in as a contract IT trouble shooter but after a week was still unsure what he was supposed to be doing there.

"What system am I meant to be looking at?" he asked a bearded individual in his first meeting.

"I dunno, baby killer. We don't have any guided missiles that need targeting."

"Ooookay, but you guys called me in for some reason, and you're paying me. Is there anything you want me to do while I'm here?"

"Comm systems for the colony," muttered beard, obviously gritting his teeth. "There's a problem."

In between being abused, Gideon looked at those systems and, as he was good at what he did, he realised that the real problem with the settlement communications was that no-one seemed to be communicating. A substantial flow of data ranging from texts and tweets through to long documentaries on how the non-violent approach was really making a difference and, more usefully, information on the environment of a whole, new planet usually flowed out of Haven through satellites on either side of the star gate and down to a receiving station on Earth. Emails and

entertainment went the other way. The torrent of data flowing out from Haven had shrunk to a trickle and no-one knew why.

Gideon checked the equipment at the earth end. He contacted the separate organisation that ran the satellites and launched the rockets. It had none of the staff politics of the HEO and its IT people assured Gideon that they had looked closely at their equipment. Everything was in order. Gideon could not raise anyone on the Haven side of the gate but managed to check the equipment remotely. No problem. He intercepted a few of the files sent from Haven, only to find that they were encrypted. The only part he could read was a header “for the director’s eyes only”. Hmmm!

On a hunch, Gideon monitored the main Haven web site and realised that although the site was being updated regularly it was with old news or with statements from the HEO office. Comments and queries which required a response from someone on Haven were being palmed off. However, there was nothing in any of the news feeds and nothing on the staff bulletin boards to suggest trouble on Haven. What was going on?

He could not discuss his suspicions with anyone. As far as he could tell most of the staff members were too busy attending workplace committee meetings to notice that there was very little news from Haven. In any case, they were hardly likely to listen to a word he had to say. Gideon did the only thing he could and wrote an email to the director outlining his suspicions. After that he was reduced to drumming his fingers on his desk, wondering what to do next.

Gideon had graduated from finger drumming to going through the Haven web site for clues about what might be happening there, when a staff member spoke to him.

“Baby killer,” she snapped. It was the same woman who had spat on him on the first day. “The director wants to see you in his office.”

“Dr Benson wants to see me?”

“Maybe he wants to sack the extremist baby killer,” she snarled, and walked away.

“Love you too,” said Gideon, absently.

As it was not safe to leave anything behind, he closed his IT connection and put his water bottle – the only thing he kept on his desk - into the small backpack he used. If he was going to be sacked, he could simply walk out and be damned to them all. He was a contractor, anyway. As he left the few staff members not at meetings jeered.

“The baby killer’s going,” chortled one.

“I’ll treasure every moment of being with you guys,” said Gideon.

Dr Benson looked every inch the aging activist that he was. His flowing white hair was tied back in a ponytail, weathered skin indicated long nights camped in the open to prevent development or logging. His tee shirt did little to hide his many tattoos. On different shelves of his cluttered office were souvenirs of his many attempts to subvert the exploitative, capitalist system. There was a picture of a young Dr Benson lying in front of a bulldozer, and another of him being chained to a tree. On one wall was a framed doctorate awarded for environmental studies. Gideon understood that his research had been genuinely ground breaking.

“Sit down please,” he said. His tone was not friendly but it was not hostile, which placed him streets ahead of any other staff member in his dealings with Gideon. At least the sacking would be civilised. Gideon sat.

“Coffee? I’m told you’re a coffee man?”

“Well, yes I am,” said Gideon, taken aback. “But doesn’t coffee steam violate some directive or other?”

“Yes, it does,” said Benson, “but I won’t tell if you don’t.” The chairman brought out two cups, hot water, milk and Gideon’s confiscated jar of instant coffee. “I used your own coffee. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I guess not.” The soldier saw that his cup had already been poured. He added milk, he did not take sugar, and drank it gratefully. There was a slight metallic flavour to it, but he put that down to the herbal tea that had no doubt previously been drunk out of the cup.

“The staff have been making life difficult for you,” said the chairman.

“You could say that. Reading between the lines they seem to have a set against soldiers.” Gideon took another sip of coffee. That metallic flavour was more pronounced, but it seemed rude to point this out.

“I don’t like soldiers much myself,” said Benson. Gideon thought the chairman was eying him curiously. “But I have need of them.”

“What?”

Dr Benson got out of his chair and paced up and down, hands clasped behind his back. Instead of the calm executive director he had been, he became agitated, stopping every now and then at the door to listen as he lectured. Unlike almost all other officers in the HEO the director’s office did not have a glass front on the corridor. Instead it had an impressive window view out onto a canyon of skyscrapers. Dr Benson touched a button on his desk and that window was masked by blinds.

“When Russia was hit by a major famine in 1920,” said Benson, pacing, “Lenin re-introduced markets. Farmers could sell their produce and be taxed on what they earned. Bolsheviks of the time thought that it was a betrayal of socialist principals, but it worked for a period and that’s all I wanted our people to do – bend their principles for just a while and in response to a crisis – just a temporary fix. But I just couldn’t get them to do it.”

“What is this man talking about?” thought Gideon.

“As your email indicates you’ve realised that our communications problem has nothing to do with the equipment or software. The problem is that Haven City is not communicating, and that failure is due to the settlement being under attack.”

“Say what?” thought Gideon, and he realised that he could not speak or move. Then he remembered the metallic flavour in the coffee.

“I know you can hear and understand me,” said Benson taking the coffee cup before it fell out of Gideon’s fingers, “and for what it’s worth I’m sorry I’ve had to do this, but I’m desperate - at my wits end. Haven has been invaded by thousands of creatures with very basic technology – just swords, spears and shields. Our people have taken to calling them Midis, short for the Midianites of the bible. The situation calls for military intervention and so I’m violating all my principles and sending you to Haven, in the next mission.”

Gideon noted this as if it was an item of business in an exceptionally boring meeting agenda.

“I’ve chosen you not because your name is Gideon – yes, I know about the Bible story - but because you’re a soldier I could get into the office, and then use my powers as director to switch you onto the mission lists. I spoke with someone in your unit who said you turned down officer training. I’m not sure what that means, but it sounds like you’re the best of those I could shanghai into this mission. Only one other is a soldier. The rest have criminal records and that might do.”

“Criminal records? What on earth did Benson think that soldiers did?” Gideon later realised that the chairman did not understand the difference. Both groups were occasionally violent, so they were both the same in his mind.

“I’ve had to put this all together at the very last moment. I know there are supposed to be ways to hire mercenaries, but I have no idea how to do that. I begged the Haven committee to see sense and ask governments for help. All I wanted for them was to drop their non-violent approach for a short while, and get governments to call in those teams with guns and hoods that shoot people..”

“SAS or SEAL teams, maybe Delta forces or Marine Commandos? Paratroopers or marines if you want more of a crowd,” thought Gideon, in his drugged state.

“Those people could have dealt with the Midis easily. No need for massacres, just a little strong action now would save a lot of grief later. But even when our own people were being massacred..”

“WHAT!”

“.. the committee could not see the sense of calling in the military. The matter was debated for hours and then even my governing committee here forbade me from taking any action. Non-violent resistance to enslavement was the only solution, they told me.”

“Enslavement? Was this guy for real?”

“I’ve now done the only thing I could even begin to think of and found some people who know about guns and violence, including you as a soldier.”

“Yeah, right! A reservist quartermaster sergeant,” thought Gideon, “as if I’m going to be of any use in a front line.”

“I’m sending you and the others ostensibly as part of the negotiating team to provide security. The negotiating team won’t know anything about you until you all get to the rocket port on Haven, but I’ve managed to buy three hunting rifles with ammunition which I’ve hidden in pods full of the equipment needed to fix the fictional communications problems we’ve been having with Haven City. You may be too late. We’ve lost contact with the whole city. Last we heard the children had been shipped off to a summer place they use, well away from the city itself. But we don’t know what happened to the adults. I want you and your team..”

“My team? People I’ve never met with no equipment beyond a few sports-store rifles to do something I’m not trained for and have been shanghaied into.”

“.. to do whatever it takes to restore order and defeat these Midis, or at least make them see that violence is not the approach.”

If Gideon had been able to in his drugged state, he would have laughed at the last statement. He was aware that Benson was standing beside him with something in his hand.

“I said I don’t like soldiers and I don’t. I loathe what they stand for, but I have real need for one, fuck you all.”

Darkness descended.

Chapter Two – Grievous Ordeal

“We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind.”

Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 1940.

Gideon became aware that he was staring at a ceiling. Then he realised he had no idea where he was. The last thing he remembered was a speech by Benson who had slipped him a drug in his coffee. How weird was that? Well it was all over now. No doubt Benson had been arrested and Gideon was home in bed, the Haven Executive Office a bad memory. But he did not remember a concrete ceiling at home.

He looked down – he could move his eyes but could barely stir his head – and realised that he was in some sort of capsule, with a mask over his mouth and a tube down his throat. The tube was, in turn, attached to a fixture on the side of the capsule. More tubes were attached to his arm, and electrodes taped to his chest and head. Hospital then. When did hospitals have concrete ceilings and why was this sort of treatment thought necessary for a case of drugging? Unless.. but how could Benson have gotten a drugged person through the launch administration people – a completely separate group from the executive office?

The mask and tube had become uncomfortable. Gideon found that he could move his arms and, with considerable effort he pushed the mask up, over his face. The breathing tube followed. He took several relieved breaths then let the tube and mask drop over the side of his capsule. He pulled the tubes and electrodes from his body. There, that should bring the nurses. No-one came. With considerable difficulty, he swung his legs over the side of the capsule and levered himself upright – to find that he was in a parking garage or, to be strictly accurate, in a space that reminded him strongly of a parking garage. It had the same blank concrete walls and columns, floor and ceiling. No decoration at all. Unlike a parking garage, however, there did not seem to be a way for cars to get in and out, just a door at one end.

He looked around. There were five other capsules and, to judge from the movement, people were struggling to get out of all of them. Gideon was one of the first up. To his left was a man with straggly red hair and beard and a fierce number of tattoos on the bits of the skin Gideon could see. He was also about the size and shape of a small gorilla. Someone to be wary of. To his right was a man with long, dark hair, a spade beard and the look of an all-in wrestler. He managed to stand and fixed the reserve sergeant with his beady eyes.

“You the shit in charge of this fuck-up,” he growled.

Charming!

“Don’t think anyone’s in charge,” said Gideon, grabbing the side of his crib for support. He did not think this was the time to mention Dr Benson’s speech and comment about ‘his team’. He became aware that he was wearing socks but no shoes. What happened to his shoes? For that matter, what had happened to his clothes. They were all wearing one-piece technician overalls.

“Where the fuck are we?” said the red-haired man.

Gideon noticed a tall figure standing in the shade of a pillar, at the far end of concrete space.

“You beside the pillar,” he called, pointing. “You know what’s going on?”

The figure took two paces forward, emerging from the shadow. It was humanoid in basic form with two hands, two legs and a head and dressed in a blue, luminous suit, but his face was a wrinkled ellipse, like the cross section of a gridiron football, with two dark eyes that never blinked, a thin mouth and a vast, curved prominence of a nose. The creature towered over the humans and was considerably broader.

“What the fuck is that,” said the charmer.

“Whatever it is, it ain’t human,” said the redhaired man.

“What’s going on, honeys?” said a female voice. Gideon turned to see an Asian female who might politely be called chunky emerging from her capsule. Beside her was a small dark man who chose not to say anything. As Gideon later discovered, he rarely said anything at all.

“Hey, shithead,” called the charmer. “Call the boss down here to tell us what’s happening?”

The creature said nothing.

“I’m talking to you!”

This also produced zero result.

“I guess we’re not in Kansas anymore, honeys?” said the female.

Gideon had to agree. The capsules they had been in had Haven Executive Office stencilled in large letters on the side, as well as a ‘Keep upright at all times’ supplemented with an arrow that pointed in the right direction. They had been offloaded on arrival and brought to this place, wherever it was. He then noticed another, small capsule with COMMS stencilled on the side, behind his own pod. He flipped open the top of this to find that it contained a few items of equipment which Gideon couldn’t identify plus a notice headed “Confiscation”.

The notice was a form that had been filled in by what amounted to an inspection officer, who must have gone through the box before it was loaded aboard the space ship. The form included a series of small boxes with a one line label beside

each. The box labelled “dangerous implements” was ticked and beside that was written “three rifles”. Another box for dangerous goods was ticked with “30 boxes of ammunition” written beside it. At the bottom of the form in a space marked comments, the same official had written “incident referred to police for investigation”.

“So much for Benson’s carefully-planned fight back,” thought Gideon, but at least it confirmed the director’s story and what he had suspected. “We’re in Haven,” he said to the others, loudly.

“What?” said the red haired man. “You don’t buy that load of crap that Benson-dude handed us, do you?”

“Haven? You’re shitting me,” said the Asian girl. “I was thinking about moving to another city and now I’m on a different planet?”

“I’ve had enough of this,” said the wrestler-type and he marched over to the tall creature. Although the wrestler type was a tall man he was full head shorter than the creature, which tilted its head to look at him. As that was the only movement the creature had made since emerging from the pillar, Gideon suspected that it was mechanical, or perhaps bio-mechanical, rather than flesh and blood.

“Listen, shit-head, call your head guy down here now.”

No result.

Charmer grabbed the creature’s clothes in both hands and hauled. The cloth moved a little, the creature did not.

“Fuck, we’ve got rights. Get your guy down here.”

By then Gideon had recovered enough to notice more of his surroundings including a distant, rhythmic clanging sound, as if a bell was being hit, every few seconds by a heavy mallet. Gideon had watched the news reports from Haven in the early days, before the place had become a settlement dedicated to political correctness, and he realised where they might be.

“We’re in that Alien structure on Haven. We’re inside it.”

“WHAT?” said the red-haired man. “You mean that big place they found? The one with the aliens inside who didn’t want to know us.”

“At a guess. Pretty sure there’s nothing like this in Haven City,” said Gideon, indicating his surroundings. “All their large areas have windows, and I think someone’s knocking on the structure front door.”

“Yeah, how do you know that?”

“Just listen to the sound? Can’t you hear it?”

“Oh yeah,” said the red-haired man after a pause. “Couldn’t hear over Boothie shouting.”

Boothie, for Boothroyd, had indeed been screaming obscenities at the android for precisely no result.

“So, what’re we going to do, honey,” said the Asian woman. Her name was Honey because she called everyone honey.

“Well, when Boothie stops shouting at our friendly neighbourhood android,” said Gideon, “I’ll try.”

“Hey, Boothfuck,” yelled the red-haired man. “Let this guy have a go.”

Boothroyd looked around and snarled but stopped shouting. He pushed the creature, hard. It did not move.

Gideon walked up to the android, still a little unsteady. The creature moved its head slightly to look at him.

“We know we’re in the big structure we have seen, but we don’t know what we are doing here. We are here against our will. We also know that someone is hitting the entrance door - panel. Can we talk to the person in charge please?”

The android stared at Gideon with its deep, dark eyes for what seemed an age then abruptly stood to one side and held out a hand, fingers extended, towards the room’s one door. Gideon walked towards it, android following.

“Don’t forget us,” yelled the red-haired man.

“I won’t,” Gideon called over his shoulder.

Beyond the door was another corridor then a lift which took him up to the receiving room of ‘The Witches’, as Gideon promptly dubbed them.

They never thought of any name other than The Witches. They had the same long, pointed faces and very prominent, beaky nose of the android and so resembled the popular idea of witches. Unlike that popular image, however, they wore bright red, flowing robes akin to an Indian sari with a gold trim and a hood. When Gideon entered the reception room and saw them for the first time they were seated on high backed, ornate chairs on a dais, as if they were three queens receiving the commoner earthman, an impression reinforced by the room’s rich, red carpeting, small trees in gigantic pots of earth at either end of the dais and walls lined with an impressive number of portraits of witches all in slightly different poses. All he could see of the creatures was their faces and, when he first saw them, they all had their eyes shut and appeared to be humming.

Gideon stood there for a few moments waiting for them to acknowledge his existence and then coughed discreetly. Three pairs of eyes snapped open to stare at the impertinent human.

“You are the leader of the group below?” said the middle witch. She spoke with a slight English accent.

“I cannot be called a leader, as I only just met the others.”

“We read the messages from the leader of the first party that referred to you and the others as the soldier party.”

“I don’t know anything about a first party. I am a soldier of a sort,” said Gideon. “But I only just met the others.”

“You are a soldier?”

“Yes, ma’am, of a sort.”

“Why have your people not defended us?”

“Um, excuse me - we were supposed to defend you?”

“We need protection from them. Look!”

With a slight movement of one shoulder the witch indicated the back wall. Gideon turned around to see the wall dissolve into a 3-D image of hominid creatures somewhat shorter and slighter than Gideon working a medieval-style battering ram - a tree trunk slung by ropes from a primitive wooden frame with solid wood wheels. Their skin was pale and the heads had the same basic structure of that of a human, with two eyes, a nose and mouth but their features were coarse and they had no hair or eyebrows. The creatures wore leather pants and jackets without arms or buttons, giving them a passing resemblance to off-duty bikers, as well as a strip of black cloth tied around the necks. Another of these creatures, dressed in a similar fashion but with a strip of red cloth around his neck and waving a sword sat on one of the cross bars of the battering ram, encouraging the others, or so Gideon supposed. The repeated thumping of this ram, one end sharpened, was the rhythmic knocking he had heard down in the parking-garage room. The target was the metal panel the first scientist-explorers had knocked on when trying to communicate with the inhabitants of the structure.

“These must be the Midis Benson was talking about,” thought Gideon. Individually they did not look formidable.

“Can you show me more? What is behind the battering ram?”

“What did you call it?”

“A battering ram. It’s very primitive.”

The picture shifted to the human-made road beside the structure with the tourist centre and a small car park on the other side of the road. Gideon had seen pictures of the structure, the tourist centre and its surroundings, as had almost everyone on earth, but this view included Midis. Besides the group working the ram, there were three parties of similar size that he could see, playing a game involving dice. The relief crews, Gideon surmised. Spears, shields and conical helmets were stacked by each group. Taller Midis with swords by their sides and red cloths around their necks sat

separately, watching the battering ram action. On the other side of the visitor's centre more Midis were working on what looked like catapults. This military force had apparently set up camp in the visitor's centre with the overflow being housed in makeshift tents and lean-tos between the centre and a grove of trees.

"Who are these creatures? Do you know?"

"They have come from another planet and have been bred to attack us," the middle witch said.

"But when humans, my people, first came here," said Gideon, "there was no sign of these creatures."

"We think they have been bred in secret on this planet by our bitter enemy. He has bred them and then let them loose. Now they are here."

"Is that why you're in this place? Is it built for defence against attacks by these creatures?"

"This is our home, built to sustain us and not for 'defence', as you say. We have long lost all arts of violence. We live in peace. Our enemy, who wants to stop our important work, has also forgotten all the arts of violence, but he has copied enough of these primitive creatures you see to overcome your colony and make this battering ram as you call it."

"This enemy of yours also doesn't know anything about violence but knows enough about everything else to breed these creatures," said Gideon, puzzled, "but those creatures only know enough to build a battering ram?"

"We invited your people to settle here because you are advanced but have not lost the arts of violence," said the middle witch. "We thought you would be violent when our enemy came, and we would be left in peace."

"You invited Earth people here so that they would provide military security for your home?"

"Military security.... Yes, that's what we wanted from the humans."

"But you didn't tell us that. You didn't tell us anything. Just to settle here and leave you alone."

"We thought if humans came here they would naturally protect themselves. If we started speaking then we would be faced with endless questions about the universe and its physical laws, as well as other matters in which we have no interest."

"After reading the messages generated by the first group to come in your ship we are glad we kept silent," said the witch on Gideon's right. It was the first time, either of the other two had spoken. "The messages talked about opening a dialog on the environment. What do we care about the environment? We don't go outside."

“There was talk of gender equality,” said the Witch on the left. The three witches looked at one another. “What use is gender equality to us? We only have one gender.”

Gideon almost laughed over that.

“We do not want to talk to humans if they are going to lecture us about these things,” said the middle witch. “We want to concentrate on our real work here. The reason why we set up this community.”

“Can I ask what is the real work you do here?”

“We meditate on the structure of space-time itself.. we intend to become beings of pure energy imprinted on the structure of space time and free to roam the galaxy.”

“I see,” said Gideon, although he didn’t. He had taken some physics courses and was pretty sure that human scientists didn’t know anything about imprinting themselves on space time. However, that was an issue for the future.

“If you want military protection then you can just ask for it,” he said aloud. “Let me talk to the governments on earth and they will send soldiers who will have more firepower – more violence - in one weapon, than the whole group out there. Your troubles will end.”

Gideon knew it would be far more difficult than that. His message would be unpalatable to various groups, notably those that controlled the Haven Executive Office. Academics and the HEO had constructed an image of the aliens and a purpose for the community which had been dogma for decades. All that was not about to be overturned by a few words from a reserve quartermaster sergeant. Then there was the problem of earth’s governments sending soldiers to fight on another planet with little confirmed information on the political situation which had caused the Midis to pound on The Witches’ front door. Admittedly he could parade The Witches, and the Midis had attacked and killed humans, if the HEO could be made to drop its passivist principles long enough to admit this. But decisions would not be made overnight and the teams still had to be assembled and sent through the gateway. It would take days, at least, assuming that the United Nations did not insist on sending a fact-finding mission first.

“You cannot call back to your planet, or go back there,” said the middle witch, interrupting Gideon’s train of thought.

“What? Why not?”

“Because the gate has been shut. We put both ends in place, now not even we can access or use it. The gate is shut.”

“These powerful enemies of yours have shut the gate, against your will? How could they do that? It’s your gate.”

“They have interfered with its control systems. We can’t work out what has been done. Fixing it may take months.”

“You guys got hacked?”

“Hacked?”

“An earth term for another party shutting you out of your own control system. You’re working on regaining control?”

“We will, but that noise makes concentrating difficult. It is very distracting. We want it to stop.”

“It would be distracting – just to be clear, nothing can come from earth and nothing can return to earth from here?”

“For now, no,” said the left hand witch.

“And this first group of humans you speak of – the ones that came through in the same ship as us but left us behind, where did they get to?”

“We cannot track individual groups, but as far as we know they went to Haven City, and their messages spoke of a new attempt to open negotiations,” said the middle witch. “When they went, we had our manual androids,” she indicated the android that had come in with him, “go to your rocket ship place and remove the pods with the soldier team. The negotiating team did not want to wake the soldier team. They sent messages back to your planet saying it was no solution, and that no-one had asked for soldiers. But we decided we needed the soldier team. We needed protection.”

“I see. You had the pods brought here, then these creatures came and started thumping on the side of your home with this ram?”

“Yes.”

“We decided to wake you up and speak to you directly,” said the right hand, non-environmentalist witch. “We want the noise to stop and these creatures to go away.”

The others nodded assent.

“Me to stop them?” said Gideon and he pointed at the image which had reverted back to the battering ram and its crew. When he raised his arm, even though he was pointing in the opposite direction, the witch trio reared back in their chairs as if he was about to strike them. Gideon noticed this, lowered his hand and put both hand in his pockets. “Sorry, pointing upsets you?”

The trio visibly relaxed.

“Don’t raise arms,” said the middle witch. “It is a primal gesture for us. We know nothing of violence but raising arms to us indicates aggression.”

“Okay – anyway, if you want to stop this ram, do you have access to your roof?”

“Yes, of course,” said the right-hand witch. “We can go outside we just have no need to. The environment is messy and full of sharp things and little creatures that buzz.”

“Then I may be able to stop this ram, but it’ll mean hurting and even killing a few of the creatures.”

“These are our enemies,” said the middle witch. “We would not hurt them but they are attacking us. If you have to hurt and kill to make them go away, then that is what must be done.”

“How can you do it?” said the right-hand witch. “Can you attack the ram’s operating system?”

“Hack it? No, it’s way too primitive for that. I was thinking more along the lines of whether you had anything heavy I can drop from the roof?”

Chapter Three - Blood

In 1862 the soon-to-be chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismark, spoke to the Prussian Parliament about the unification of German territories. “Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided”, he told the Parliament, “but by iron and blood”.

Some time later, Gideon was on the roof with the rest of the “soldier party” and two of the security androids who had brought up the heavy blocks he had asked for. The Witches did not have heavy stones lying around. Instead they instructed the android to show Gideon to another room back on ground level which contained a 3D virtual reality user interface he could operate to specify the size and shape of what he wished to make. Another part of the interface looked at the properties of the materials that made up those shapes. Gideon had not dealt with 3D printers, but The Witches’ arrangement seemed like a vastly more sophisticated version of such printers on earth. After a couple of tries he managed some hefty concrete-like blocks plus a number of round balls – he was thinking of cannon balls when he asked for them – of the same material. He thought he would see if the androids could be persuaded to throw them.

It was late summer on the plateau where the structure was situated, and it was a nice day – warm enough for the Midis on the battering ram to take off their tunics as they continued to pound away at the door. From the top of the structure the humans had a glorious view of the forests that surrounded it on three sides. To the East, hard

by The Witches home was a gorge with a river, small enough to be a creek, at the bottom. That gorge was crossed by a single-span truss bridge – a bridge where the supporting steel beams were on the top as well as the sides. Supported by two large, concrete pillars the bridge was wide enough for two lanes of traffic. Beyond that was a grassy plain broken by occasional clumps of woods including one close to the edge of the gorge on the far side.

The road crossing the bridge ran from Haven City somewhere to the East up to the plateau, across the bridge and then past the structure's Southern edge with the tourist centre cum Midi HQ just on the other side. The road then ran to the Summer camp which was about two days walk further on. A single intersection to the West of the structure linked that main road with another running North to the rocket pad, where the descent capsule carrying Gideon and his small party had landed. Gideon thought he could see the top of the launch pad control building. He would investigate later. For the moment, he had assembled his group near the south east edge of the structure just out of sight of the Midi encampment and the tourist centre. The distant, rhythmic thudding of the Midi battering ram, which was almost directly below, floated up to them.

“Okay, guys, here's the thing,” he told the group. “Like the rest of you I was basically shanghaied into coming here – drugged, stuffed in a box and shot into space, because the HEO head knew as much as The Witches or anyone else seems to know about fighting, and he needed fighters to counter the threat. The trouble is he got us which includes me, a quartermaster sergeant in the reserves...”

“Oh great,” sneered Boothroyd. “We need special forces and we get a fucking part-time stores clerk.”

“Thanks for that,” said Gideon. “What are you bringing to the party then? How did you end up here?”

“None of your business, fuck head.”

Gideon thought that Boothroyd was just as charming as his colleagues back at HEO, albeit much more direct in his abuse.

“I'm Monster,” said the red-haired man. “That's what my cycle brothers called me. Boothie here and me were hired as drivers, as part of ex-con rehab program the HEO suddenly got real enthusiastic about. I was a sergeant-at-arms for the Pythons, but some discipline work got caught on camera.”

Gideon had heard of the Pythons and was impressed.

“I killed my husband because he was cheating on me,” said Honey. “I got four years from a women judge then got work release as a cleaner as part of the same program for the HEO. That Dr Benson dude was nice to me.”

“Name is Colin,” said the small, dark-haired man. “Couldn’t get a job then HEO suddenly hired me as a clerk. Still haven’t worked out the systems. I was a soldier.”

“What branch of service? What unit?” asked Gideon.

“Field kitchen. Didn’t like it much.”

“But you did basic training, right?”

“Yeah, guess.”

Gideon thought that “his team” was not exactly promising material but that could not be helped now.

“I am just about to initiate a violent act against another species,” he told them. “You guys don’t have to be part of this. The Witches, the inhabitants of this structure, have asked me to stop the creatures below from banging on their front door, so that’s what I’m going to do. But it means starting a fight with an alien species without the approval of our governments.”

“Wait,” said Honey, “witches like in magic ‘n shit.”

“No, no, it’s just my name for them. They look something like our image of witches. They have agreed to meet you all and feed us” (Gideon was not sure what they would be fed, but the supply of food had been discussed), “and that means it’s a mercenary act. I’m about to institute violence in expectation of a reward.”

“That’s what I got in jail for,” sneered Boothroyd. “Why is it up to us, anyway? Call up earth and tell ‘em to send some of those special forces shits – it’s their job, let them do it.”

“For once, Boothie’s got a point,” said Monster. “It’s not our problem.” The others nodded.

“Well, it is our problem,” said Gideon. “We’ve got to survive here a while.” He told them about the gate being closed and communication with earth being cut off.

“You mean, these witches, who put up this star gate, got hacked by their enemies?” said Honey. “So, the gate doesn’t work anymore?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“They’re gunna un-hack it, right?”

“They said they would, but they also said the work would proceed a lot faster if the noise would stop,” said Gideon

“But, Honey, what are we supposed to do about the creatures, what-ever they are down there,” said Honey. “I killed my husband with a gun and made myself a nice dinner afterwards, but I haven’t got a gun with me.”

“Let me worry about that for now. The witches were able to supply some munitions and a workforce, of sorts. You’ve seen the androids bring stuff up. Sam!”

“Yes!”

The humans started. Sam was the same android who had been there when they work up – at least, the humans thought he was the same one. They all looked identical. But now he spoke, using much the same voice and accent as The Witches.

“I asked the Witches to give me two of their lifting androids for a while and allow them to respond to my commands – but only to my voice commands.”

“They call him, Sam?” asked Honey

“No, that’s my name for him. Sam security man. The other’s Fred ‘cause Fred goes with Sam. Let’s get them working.”

Gideon went to the side and peered over to see exactly where the battering ram was then he had Sam place one of the concrete blocks on the spot. The block had been printed with handholds in the side and the android lifted one with no difficulty at all.

“Okay, step on the block holding the next block like so,” Gideon gestured, “hold it out a little.”

Sam held out the block as ordered.

“Command?” he asked after a while. He did not seem bothered by having to hold the heavy block at arms length. He just wanted to know what to do next.

Gideon hesitated. When the various authorities on Earth were told about what he intended to do, which involved putting members of an alien species at risk – and it would get back to Earth sooner or later – he would be asked tough questions. Never mind that the Midis had been killing and enslaving humans, what right did he have to be violent in return? Why had he not simply waited for The Witches to unhack the gate and then requested instructions? All that would sound so simple to anyone who was not inside a building with a Midi battering ram hammering at the door, and with catapults being set up within easy shot of the walls. He could be in trouble, perhaps a lot of trouble. Then he thought of the meanness and near irrational hatred he had experienced at the HEO just for being a soldier. Stuff them.

“Release the block; let go,” said Gideon opening his hands to demonstrate.

The block dropped out of sight and a moment later there was an audible snap and shouting from below. The pounding noise stopped. The witches had provided Gideon with a single plastic sheet which showed a three-dimensional picture of the scene. Gideon and his little band crowded around that sheet to watch the action while remaining well out of sight. The concrete block had missed the Midi officer with the red band tied around his neck shouting encouragement while sitting on the cross bar – shame that, thought Gideon - but had struck the battering ram square on and had snapped the leather ties that held it to the frame. Repairs would be required, but they would not be difficult.

“Drop several more quickly,” said Gideon, “but not in the same place.”

“Not in the same place?” asked Sam.

“Throw the next one out a little, like this,” he gestured.

Sam complied, and this time the block fell square on the centre cross piece, which the Midi officer had vacated, shaking the whole structure. Two more blocks, including one that went through the front cross piece, completed its ruin. By that time the shouting of the Midi battering ram team, who had spotted Sam on the roof of the structure, had shaken the other Midis out of their lethargy. Warriors with light hunting bows ran forward. Others with shields, spears and swords formed up. Gideon did not know what the men-at-arms hoped to achieve but the bows were a worry.

“Sam! Fred! Move back. Everyone take a few paces back.”

After a few seconds several arrows shot into sight above the roof and fell with a clatter on the roof, some way short of Gideon’s party.

“Those guys are shooting at us?” The disbelief was evident in Honey’s voice.

“Well, yeah,” said Gideon. “I said we were about to get into a fight. You don’t have to be involved. You can go back to the pods. The Witches have agreed that anyone who wants out will be given enough food to walk to the summer camp – about two days on foot from here.”

“Yeah?” said Boothroyd, as another volley of arrows arced over to clatter harmlessly on the roof. “We can just walk out of this fucked-up mess?”

“Sure, but we gotta get rid of the Midis outside first. Speaking of which..” Gideon had noted that one of the catapults he had seen earlier had been finished and was being wheeled around. “Sam! Fred! More work. Grab some of those concrete balls..” Honey sniggered. “Everyone else grab a ball or two and follow me.”

Skirting the area where the arrows had been falling they peeked over the edge of the roof further West. “Fred and Sam, see the moving machine.” Gideon pointed. “The creatures are pushing it. Start throwing these” he held up the ball of concrete, “at those machines”.

“Throw?” said Sam.

Gideon mimed throwing. “..So that it goes through the air and hits the machine.”

Sam threw. The projectile, somewhat larger than a baseball and heavier and harder than a cricket ball, hit the main cross piece of the siege engine with a ‘thwack!’ the humans could hear up on the roof, cracking the wood. A creditable throw. Another ball thrown by Fred knocked one of the crew over. The Midi lay very still. The rest retreated, leaving their machine behind. The bowmen left off firing at an empty roof to race to the new trouble spot, only to run into a concrete barrage. Two died before the others elected to move out of range.

First blood and round one to the humans. There were plenty more rounds to go.

Chapter Four

So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, 'Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.' Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

- Judges, Chapter 7

“So whadda you want us to do again?” asked Monster.

They were back in their parking garage-like dormitory crouched around a map scratched in the concrete floor by a pen Gideon had kept in his work satchel. He had found the satchel which also contained his laptop and water bottle crammed into a compartment of his pod. He had had it with him when he went into Dr Benson’s office.

Gideon took a deep breath. Everything was being improvised. After the first incident, the Midis had set up a second catapult out of range of the ball throwing Androids and had managed to hit the side of the structure a couple of times. This bothered the witches more than the thumping from the battering ram had done, prompting an immediate meeting with their military advisor. By then the Midis had quit for the night but when Gideon pointed out that they would probably start again in the morning and he could see another catapult being built they became visibly upset. What could he do to stop these contraptions?

“We’re being lowered off the roof at the back of the structure by another of the lifting androids,” he told his little group. “There’s not many of the Midis out front. They knew they’d have to stay here a while to bust in, and there’s been no opposition until today, so they’ve got troops for the siege equipment and some muscle with spears and swords. That’s it. Even today all they saw was androids who chucked stuff. They haven’t bothered with outposts to keep an eye on the sides or rear of the structure, as far as I can see, and not even much of a guard at the camp. The last thing they will expect is an attack.”

“Attack by us, yeah right!” sneered Boothroyd. “What a fuck-up this is gonna be.”

“Once we’re all down we circle to the left,” said Gideon, ignoring Bothroyd, “That is left facing outwards away from the gorge, or to the East and then to the

South for those who bother about compass directions. Fred and Sam will carry most of our stuff including some of the concrete balls and jars with the incendiary stuff in them, and we'll have swords and knives.”

Each item in their tiny arsenal had required an exhausting palaver between Gideon and The Witches' interface, which had been profoundly ignorant of anything that could blow up, cut, shoot or even hit. Finally, he had extracted knives and short swords for each of them plus two jars of flammable material which, Gideon suspected, was closely related to gasoline. Just as the concrete balls were not actually concrete, however, the swords and knives were not actually metal. They were still as hard as steel and had an edge so sharp that the humans were concerned about cutting themselves, but the implements were made of some sort of polymer. The Witches may not know anything about violence and warfare, but they were good chemists, Gideon decided.

Despite the weapons, Gideon had no intention of allowing his little band of supposed soldiers to use them unless they had to. The use of a sword was a skill which none of them had and would take many hours of hard training to acquire, if they had anyone to teach them. They had practised chopping with them – Boothroyd sneeringly distained to be involved. Gideon had ended the last session by pointing out that if they were ever trapped into using one then they should trust to what might be their greater weight and strength, as the Midis seem generally smaller, to batter their opponent's guard down and run away before their opponents figured out the humans didn't know what they were doing.

The knives were a different proposition and might be of use in disposing of sentries. In fact, both Gideon and Colin had been shown briefly how to use knives as part of their basic training, and Gideon tried to pass on what he could remember of this. Boothroyd's eyes gleamed when he saw the knives. After the single training session, he hid his knife, claiming that he had lost it. As there was nowhere in their bare dormitory to lose a knife, and Boothroyd was obviously lying, this was tiresome. The two androids, under Gideon's direction and with Monster making unhelpful comments, forced the man to give up the weapon.

The two Androids were in a different category as they were both very strong but were puzzled by the notion of fighting with swords or knives. Eventually Gideon had two polymer spears made for them and taught them to move and thrust on command. All they could do was thrust at waist height. Blocking or evading was not on the agenda, at least not in the few hours they had, but at least they could thrust hard and repeatedly without tiring. With any luck they would get to the catapults, set them on fire and return, without meeting any Midis.

“We turn left,” said Honey, looking doubtfully at the map, “and start walking?”

“Yep. Follow my lead. Keep low until we get to the tree line which is not far, then we circle round to the South, close to the Midi camp, keeping quiet. Then we find the two catapults, empty the jars full of whatever the witches have given us onto them, and set them alight. Then we circle back the way we came and get hauled back on the roof. If you get separated just race off into the trees and lay low until the excitement dies away. Then circle back, call out, and the droid will lift you up. Just don’t lose sight of the structure and remember the basic elements of the map - structure, tourist centre, road, gorge.”

“Whaddabout sentries?” asked Monster.

“Let’s get there and see exactly where the sentries are. With any luck, we can light up the catapults and leave without having to bother with the sentries, so let’s just get there first.”

Gideon knew he had to keep it very simple for his untrained group. Even moving to a set location in starlight – the planet’s two moons had the same phases as the earth’s moon and both were now waning crescents – despite obvious landmarks that would be difficult to lose sight of, might present problems for them. Gideon had received some training in movement by night, as had Colin, but the former field kitchen operative remembered far less if any of the skill, and his mind had become disordered by Honey. The two had hit it off straight away, although this did not seem to involve any talking on Colin’s part. In the few hours the humans had been given limited access to other parts of the structure besides their bleak dormitory, the couple had disappeared twice then returned with Honey beaming and Colin looking flustered but pleased.

Gideon had too much on his mind and was too exhausted by the need to organise his little band to give the matter much thought and their behaviour was certainly easier to bear than the blood feud between Monster and Boothroyd. This had something to do with a mix up in deliveries when they were both drivers for the HEO, as well as two men taking a rabid dislike to one another.

“Vipers are a pack of fucking goons,” said Boothroyd, apropos of not much.

“We wouldn’t have a shithead like you,” responded Monster. “We’ve got standards.”

A couple more insults and the two gentlemen started fighting. Gideon had to use Sam and Fred to drag them to separate corners of their bleak dormitory, where they fumed, occasionally throwing insults at one another.

They were a happy crew.

“Maybe it’s like that really old film where a bunch of criminals are turned into soldiers and sent on a mission?” said Honey in the downtime before their night raid. She had just returned from one of her assignments with Colin and was in a good mood.

“You mean the Dirty Dozen?” said Gideon. “We’re the Dirty Half Dozen? Yeah, right. Being a soldier is about teamwork and discipline. Criminals don’t like discipline and you can’t turn your back on them. The Nazis used criminals in one unit and their behaviour was so bad that even SS officers in Russia complained, and if the SS in Russia thought the unit was going too far it was in a whole new level of evil.”

Some time before midnight, the little band, including Sam and Fred and a third android, assembled on the Northern edge of the structure roof. The third android had been assigned specifically to the job of letting them down from the roof using a cable that had been produced from somewhere.

“We’ll hand out weapons once we’re all down,” said Gideon

“Right!” said Boothroyd.

“And this is what you get,” said Gideon, throwing a bag at Boothroyd’s feet.

“What’s this?”

“A few days-worth of that bread stuff The Witches have been giving us, with their compliments, plus a water bottle. The third android here will wait one hour after we’ve gone and then let you down, and you can go whichever way you want. My suggestion would be to follow the road thataway,” Gideon pointed West. “A couple of days out is a Summer camp. A lot of the kids and their teachers have gone there.”

“You’re turning me loose, shithead? You’ve got no right to turn me loose. Who put you in charge?”

“The Witches,” said Gideon. “They gave me this stuff to give to you, accepting what I told them that that you’ve been nothing but an abusive liability since we woke up. Beyond that they simply do not care. Humans are a closed book to them.”

“See ya around Boothfuck” sneered Monster.

“Monster, you go down first and keep watch, now,” snapped Gideon. The former biker wrapped the cable around him and, after pausing for a last sneer at Boothroyd, abseiled off as if he had been doing it his whole life. “Then Honey, Colin, Sam and Fred. New guy”, that was the name of the third android, “grab Boothroyd here.” Gideon gestured at his own upper arm, and the android’s three finger hand clamped over the former driver’s arm.

“Gimme a knife to defend myself with, fuck head,” said Boothroyd after struggling fruitlessly against the android.

“So, you can stab us in the back? No way. There are none of the big predators like tigers and lions in these parts. The only real danger out there is the Midis and if you have any sense you’ll head West – that is along the road away from the structure - and never meet them. You were never going to pay any attention to me. It was always ‘fuck me’. Alright, fuck me. I’m not saying you’re wrong to say that, but I am saying that if you think that way why not go somewhere else.”

“Then you’re just gonna be the Witches’ bitch? Whadda you owe them?”

“Nothing, but they’re way more fun than the guys at the HEO. Keep him here,” he told the New Guy android, “for one hour then lower him off the side. If he starts yelling, then throw him over without the cable.” These instructions had already been rehearsed with Sam acting as an interpreter, otherwise they would have been far too complicated.

Lowering Honey and Colin from the roof proved a saga, as the New Guy had only one hand free, but they managed. Fred and Sam lowered themselves hand over hand without any comment. That left Gideon who elected to abseil but with nothing like the skill of Monster.

“See you around, Boothroyd,” he said as he went over the edge.

“You haven’t heard the last of me.”

Gideon later thought that if he had ordered Boothroyd to be dropped over the side then and there, a lot of trouble would have been avoided.

Chapter Five - Luck

“Yes, I know he is a good general,” declared the Emperor Napoleon, when discussing whether to promote an officer. “But is he lucky? Give me lucky generals.”

“No more Boothroyd,” said Honey when Gideon got to the bottom.

“Hope not. Let’s get on,” the soldier replied.

They walked on in silence, as Gideon had requested. It was the first time they had been outside the Structure, but the landscape was not all that different to parts of Earth. The grass was brownish rather than bright green and the trees were slim and pine-like, interspersed with straggly bushes that could have been difficult to get through but for the fact that they grew in clumps, leaving natural, wandering paths between them.

The erratic path they were forced to take could have made navigation difficult but the Midi sentries kept two fires burning in front of the visitor’s centre. Gideon

simply had to keep the fires on his left until he got past the dark mass of the visitor's centre, then turn left to walk behind it. The two catapults would then be ahead and to his right, behind the centre. The only sentries were the ones making navigation easier for the human raiders by keeping fires alight. The human party did not encounter anyone.

Before going behind the centre, the soldier had his small group stand and watch for a minute. All seemed quiet. The Midi sentries were trying to keep awake watching the front of the structure. Then Gideon noticed that Honey and Colin were holding hands.

"Will you two stop holding hands," he whispered. "This is meant to be a military operation, not a lover's stroll." Honey smiled and shrugged her shoulders but gently shook off Colin's hand. Colin, as usual, said nothing. "Weapons out, guys." The men opted to keep knives in their hands. Honey decided to keep her sword at the ready, lying on her right shoulder.

When they got to the catapults they found another sentry, just as bored as the two in front of the structure, standing twenty paces or so in front of the devices that he was meant to be protecting, facing outwards. Gideon's little band found that it could wend its way through the undergrowth behind the Midi with minimal precautions.

"Take him out?" whispered Monster when they got to the catapults.

"Not yet," whispered Gideon. "When these light up he'll come rushing over. Come in behind him then."

Monster nodded and crept off into the darkness while Gideon, Honey and Colin poured the flammable liquid they had bought over the bare timber frames of the catapults. Gideon noted that the timber used in the two completed and one unassembled siege engines seemed surprisingly well finished. They used Monster's cigarette lighter, which had been found in his personal effects, to set off the liquid, then stood to one side watching the flames take hold, until even the sentry noticed that something was wrong. He ran up, spear at the ready, yelling in alarm but was pointing the wrong way. Monster crept up behind the Midi, as the creature stood yelling, wrapped an arm around him and used the other to bury a knife in its back. The former biker took the creature's shield and spear and joined the others.

"Time to go," said Gideon. The yelling and light brought the sentries from the main camp and these were joined by others who had seemingly rolled out of bed to take in the show. As far as Gideon could see, no-one in the growing crowd of onlookers was wondering why the catapults had suddenly caught fire. There was no move to grab arms and form strong patrols to scour the area. He thought that the

Midis might not have the long history of raiding and sabotage, of which even the least military humans were aware. Maybe that meant the humans could simply walk back the way they had come, unhindered? It was not to be.

While walking to the catapults, the humans had unknowingly walked between the tourist centre, which housed a lot of Midis, and one of the camp's designated bathroom areas in some bushes. They had not bumped into any of the creatures answering a call of nature coming out, but on their way back one of the taller, stronger officer-class Midis with a red band around his neck – which they soon started calling “Red Bands” as opposed to the “Black Band” soldiers - happened to be at the bathroom area. He saw the bonfire and walked towards it, straight into the two leading humans, Colin and Honey.

He just loomed up out of the darkness, Honey said later. Reacting quickly the Midi drew the knife which was another mark of his rank and stabbed Colin. Honey shrieked, swung her sword which she still carried across her shoulder with two brawny arms, and neatly severed the Midi's head from its body.

“Jehoshaphat!” exclaimed Monster.

Honey knelt beside Colin but there was nothing to be done. He was already gone. She stood up again, just as Gideon noted that a trio of the Midis, drifting in to watch the unscheduled night time entertainment, had diverted to see what the yelling and group of unfamiliar figures were about.

“Honey, I'm sorry about Colin but we've attracting a lot of attention. It's time to go.”

“I'm not going no place,” said Honey. Gideon was taller than Honey but now she seem to glare down at him with eyes that glittered in the firelight and a sword that gleamed, blood dripping from its edges. “This woman has listened to men long enough. Time to get to work.” With that she shrieked “for Colin” and charged at the inquisitive trio. All she knew about using the sword was swinging it but that proved good enough. The first Midi lost his head to a hefty swipe, as Gideon and Monster looked on, stunned. The second backed away clutching for the weapon left by its bed before being decapitated. The third turned to run, squealing for all it was worth, but wasn't able to outrun Honey.

“Chick's gone nuclear!” said Monster.

She paused and turned. “Are you men coming to the party?” she asked, sword up, her two hands just fitting around the handle. The crowd that had gathered for the bonfire had now turned to see what the noise was about. Two of the Red Band Midis, as Gideon could just see in the light of the bonfire, had produced knives, the rest had nothing in their hands and were eyeing the action uncertainly. The Midis had mostly

rolled out of wherever they had been sleeping and had wandered over to watch the fire, Gideon realised, without bothering to bring their weapons. Humans had previously proved as harmless as earth sheep and a few rocks from the structure did not mean much. Why bring along heavy implements?

Gideon made an instant decision. Time seen to slow. “Sam, one side of Honey, half pace back and start thrusting!” He grabbed the Android, as Honey jogged off, gathering pace. The Midis watched her come, bemused. “Monster, same with Fred on the other side. Half pace back. Push him there. We protect the rear.” Gideon raised his sword. “Charge!”

“She rides with me,” said the biker, getting the idea. He drew his sword with one hand and put his other hand on Fred. “Charge!”

They started running, just as Honey, now also running full tilt, crashed into the Midi crowd. Two heads flew immediately. A Red Hand with a knife, use to compliant humans, held up a hand with a knife in it commanding her to stop and submit. Instead of swinging her sword, Honey thrust it instead, screaming “Colin!” as it bit deep. She kicked at the now gurgling Red Hand to unstick the sword and the creature dropped to the ground, spurting blood. Just as humans and androids arrived, yelling.

Sam went to the left of Honey, Fred to the right, where they were pushed by Gideon and Monster, then they started thrusting – a regular back and thrust motion as they had been taught – at anything that came within range of their makeshift spears. Predictable but effective. Honey kept moving, swinging at any Midis within range. Gideon grabbed Monster who showed signs of wanting to wade in to the crowd himself.

“Protect the rear, keep them off Honey!” he said. Monster nodded.

Then the battle proper started.

A Red Band Midi with a knife appeared to Gideon’s right intent on knifing someone in the back.

“Kill! Kill!” yelled Gideon. It was something to yell. He thrust hard at the Midi who reared back and tried to block the thrust with his knife, but the edge of Gideon’s sword still found the creature’s throat. The Midi fell away, clutching at spurting blood. Another Midi, a Black Band appeared. Gideon swung at him, yelling “Kill! Kill!”. The Midi, who had no weapon at all, jerked away, avoiding the sword but falling over the still twitching Red Band body. Gideon was aware of Monster beside him yelling “Pythons” and swinging his sword. Honey was yelling “for Colin!” Then the humans became aware that the crowd was shredding, the Midis scattering in all

directions, squealing. With no victims in range, Honey also started running. None would escape.

Gideon looked around and realised that they were close to the visitor's centre and the Midi camp. This was a collection of shelters ranging from lean-tos through to odd-shaped canvas structures on the gorge side of the visitor's centre.

"Honey make for the bridge," Gideon shrieked. "Road ahead. Follow that."

He thought that Honey would go around the camp. No. Midis were in there, grabbing weapons and that could not be allowed. She waded straight in, Fred and Sam by her side, stabbing repeatedly, even when there was nothing to stab at, scattering canvas, wood, pots and pans and assorted camp gear in front of them. Another Midi lost his head. They hit the road. Honey spotted a group of Midis, some with weapons, that had been rallied by a Red Hand to face the raging monster that had suddenly appeared. She was having none of it.

"For Colin," she shrieked.

"Kill! Kill!" yelled Gideon and Monster, pushing Sam and Fred.

They crashed into the Midi group, Honey's sword swinging. She slew and spared not. The Red Hand leader was skewered by a thrust from Sam, the android ignoring a return sword chop. Two more heads flew. The rally group broke apart and ran for the bridge which could be seen in the light of the burning siege engines. Honey sprinted after them making her support group run to keep up. Two more Midis were too slow and fell victim to Honey's swinging sword. Then they were at the bridge, and Honey was out of energy. She stopped, panting, leaning against one of the bridge supports. She started sobbing, sliding down the support, dropping her sword and falling on her side onto the deck of the bridge.

"Colin!" she said, between sobs.

Gideon was suddenly aware that he was also weary to the point of collapse, and he sat down on the grass beside the bridge gasping. So did Monster. The soldier looked around. Apart from corpses scattered on the ground and two Midis silhouetted by the light of the burning siege engines, running for their lives from the head-chopping monster, there was no sign of the detachment that had been besieging the structure. No enemy. The battle was over, and it was a Honey-fuelled victory.

Monster also looked around, awe evident in his face.

"Honey," he told the sobbing figure on the bridge deck, "I'm never, ever gonna piss you off."

Chapter Six – He Fights

After the hard-fought battle of Shiloh President Lincoln was lobbied to replace union commander General Ulysses S Grant. Disgusted by the timidity of his other generals, the president would not listen. “I can’t spare this man,” he said. “He fights.”

The little group moved to the information centre, the two androids carrying Honey who was utterly spent and crying uncontrollably. If the Midis wanted to use the bridge to leave that was fine by Gideon. In any case, he did not want to draw attention to the fact that there were only five of them, and their weapon of mass destruction was now a sobbing mess.

“We’ll kick out any Midis still there,” Gideon told Monster, “and come dawn we’ll check the camp for stragglers.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The information centre was dark, but the door was open. Inside were several rooms adorned with placards and screens emphasising various part of Haven’s environment, as far as they could tell in the darkness. Midi sleeping mats were scattered over the floors but the Midis were all gone. They left Honey weeping on one of these mats, guarded by Fred and Sam, and checked the rooms in the upper storey, swords at the ready. These included three tiny bedrooms for anyone who had to stay over and store rooms, from one of which they heard muffled noises and cries. In it they found two young men trussed up on the floor. They were brothers, both dark haired and, Gideon supposed, good looking. The eldest, William, might have been in his senior year of an undergraduate degree. Thomas should have been in his final years at school. Both boys looked half-starved and their colony clothes – T-Shirts and jeans with a blazer – were dirty and torn. William had a beard, which had become matted. They rubbed circulation back into their hands and feet as they spoke.

“We heard yelling,” said William. He spoke with a slight English accent.

“That was us,” said Gideon. “We managed to drive off the Midis.”

“You – you fought them?” exclaimed Thomas.

“Well, yeah.” Gideon and Monster exchanged looks. “The heavy lifting was down by Honey, who’s downstairs.”

“Chick went nuclear,” said Monster.

“We and two androids were along for the ride,” said Gideon.

“I’d like to meet this Honey,” said William.

“Androids?” said Thomas.

“Honey’s downstairs, upset,” said Gideon. “It’s all caught up with her. The androids are down there too. Later. How come you guys wound up as guests of the Midis?”

“We were at the space port not the summer camp when everything happened and walked down here – our elders, the parents, did nothing about these guys. I mean look at this stuff.” William gestured at the swords his rescuers were carrying. “That’s all they’ve got and they were killing our people, and we were told not to resist; that non-violence would win in the end.”

“Non-violence, didn’t win,” said Thomas, bitterly. “When the Midis got sick of killing, they started using our people as slaves.”

“We wanted to see what we could do, but we didn’t have any weapons and a Midi patrol caught us,” said William.

Gideon later found out that, having not eaten for two days, the two brothers had been walking in the open without any precautions and had been taken easily.

“Where did you get the swords?” asked Thomas.

“Same place as the Androids, from The Witches – the creatures inside the structure.”

“You’ve been inside?” the brothers chorused.

“They brought us inside.” Gideon explained, as briefly as he could, his little group’s adventures.

“If I’ve got this right,” said William, “The Witches wanted us here as military protection from these enemies of theirs who are behind the Midis?”

“’bout the size of it,” said Gideon.

“I went through two years of mind numbing lectures on active passivism,” said William, “and all along these Witches wanted the violent part of the human experience.”

“Yep.”

“And you and Mr Monster, here...”

“I ain’t no mister,” said Monster.

“You two and the others were basically drugged, kidnapped and loaded onto a flight to Haven by Dr Benson, who grabbed whoever he could find who had been a soldier or just been violent.”

“Yep. In Benson’s mind there was no difference between a soldier and a criminal.”

“What is the difference?” asked Thomas.

“A soldier is about teamwork, discipline and training,” said Gideon. “They have to be trained, equipped, supplied and delivered to the right place in the battlefield and organised in units to fight as teams. Their actions are governed by rules of engagement and international treaties. It’s not about sticking a knife into the back of a comrade, stealing his stuff and then lying about it. See the difference?”

“Guess,” said Thomas.

“And you know about that stuff?” asked William.

“About being a soldier? Enough to get by. Aside from being a reserve quartermaster sergeant – meaning I look after stores - I’m also a military history nut.”

“Then you’re the one we’ve been looking for?” said William.

“Say what?”

“We don’t care if you’re a reserve quartermaster-whatever. We need help with soldiering.”

“We want to fight,” said Thomas. “We want to make the Midis pay for what’s happened.”

“Look, Will and Tom..”

“William,” said William.

“Thomas,” said Thomas.

“I dunno if you’ve been keeping count but there are five us, including you two if you want to join this happy band, plus two androids. That’s a raiding party, not an army of liberation, and we have to depend on The Witches for everything we need.”

William shrugged. “We have to start somewhere. and you say the gate is closed for now, right? It’s just us and them.”

“After what’s happened,” said Thomas, “that’s the way we want it.”

Gideon went back into the structure to talk to The Witches, to find them lined up in much the same order and sufficiently pleased with him for chasing away their enemies to give him human names they had chosen for themselves for his reference. These were Agnes (the non-environmentalist on Gideon’s right), Tabitha in the centre, the leader, and Sabrina who had been puzzled over the issue of gender equality, on the left.

Requests for food for five were referred to the interface. Agnes now knew something about the care and feeding of humans, or so she said (it later emerged that she knew more than a top medical school full of professors). The interface could produce a thick wafer which was nutritionally balanced for humans in any amount required, although increasing production would take time. Clothing and boots? Gideon pointed to his own clothes and shoes to illustrate what he meant. That

question was waved towards the interface. Just tell the system what material consistency or flexibility was required and what shape. The resulting production would be brought up from the factory area by an android. The factory drew its feed stock from deep underground and, no, Gideon could not visit that area. A request for both Androids to be assigned to the band permanently, and that Fred be able to talk, resulted in a heated discussion between the three witches. It was the first time Gideon had heard them talk in their own language and to him it sounded like birds twittering.

“Twitter, twitter, twitter,” said Agnes.

“Twitter, twitter,” was the forceful response from Tabitha.

“Twitter, twitter, twitter, twitter, twitter,” said Sabrina in concerned tones. This went on for some time. At one point, all three stopped twittering to eye him appraisingly, then went back to their discussion.

“Alright,” said leader Tabitha, eventually. “But we will take back control if there is a problem.”

“Understood.”

Then they came to the much more difficult question of weapons. William and Thomas had already assured Gideon that the only weapons owned by humans on the planet were tranquiliser guns stored somewhere in Haven City and never used as far as they knew. Could The Witches’ machines make gun barrels and explosives? What were gun barrels and what were explosives? they asked. Sigh! After some discussion got across the idea of barrels and was told just try the interface. Manufacturing tolerances and tensile strength? The Witches had no idea. Test the material and then go back to the interface. There was a way to specify hardness. As for explosives, the interface had lots of sub-menus. Try those.

Gideon emerged from the structure, this time from the front door which opened for him, just before dawn, dog-tired, to find that the Midis had not reappeared but two newcomers from the Haven summer camp of about Thomas’s age had arrived from somewhere, ready to “join up”.

“Join up to what?” asked Gideon, taken aback.

“You’re the one who fights, aren’t you?” said one.

“In fact, you’re the only one who fights,” said the other. “We’ve seen those burning machines and Midi bodies. There’s been nothing like this, at all. No Midis have even been hurt before this.”

Gideon was tempted to point out that it had been a Honey-fuelled victory. He looked at the newcomers. They might have been Australian bushmen, Canadian lumberjacks or New Zealand shearers walking into an Empire recruiting station in 1914 fired up for an adventure only to wind up in the mud and slaughter of the

Somme. They even had swags – rolled up bedding - on their backs. The heroic fools. In Gideon's mind, something clicked.

“Well, if you want to join up, drop the packs!”

“Huh!”

“I said drop the packs, soldiers, and stand up straight! Shoulders back, stomach out, fists clenched, thumbs on top of the fists and in line with the seam of your trousers. Heels together. Feet at an angle of 30 degrees. Do it!”

Startled, they both complied. Much later the two boys said that they felt as if they were suddenly in one of those rite of passage films when the hero is put through an ordeal, such as army training which involved yelling. They were being yelled at. The fightback had started. Gideon told them he thought he understood.

“William! Thomas! I see you two there.” The two young men had come out to see what the yelling was about. “Come over here and line up. You're about to be inducted.” Gideon went through how they should stand. “Do not look at me, damn it,” he snapped at the newcomers. “Eyes front, look at the structure.”

Gideon had never been trained as a drill or recruit sergeant, he was stores, but he had seen recruit sergeants up close and could give a passable imitation of one. Monster turned up to watch. Gideon was not about to make him stand in line and Honey was still blubbing over Colin's body which had been wrapped in Midi bedding and placed on the visitor centre's back veranda. (She stopped long enough to have a hearty meal and went back to blubbing.) Having lined up all four of his new recruits, Gideon did not know what to do with them, so he made them swear an oath – to themselves.

“I swear,” so the oath on that first day ran, “that I've got myself into a real mess by agreeing to join up. The only person to blame for this is me. The only person who is going to get me out of this is myself by hard fighting, by taking orders from those placed above me, keeping discipline and standing by my comrades, or the devil take me.”

“That's the oath for me,” said Monster. “Sign me up too. These Midi things have been killing humans and I've got nothing better to do than kill back.” He stood in a line with the rest of the recruits, lifted his right hand and put his left on his heart, and repeated the oath.

“Excuse me, Gideon,” said William.

“You now call me sergeant, Toms.” That was William's last name.

“Sergeant, will we be getting weapons?”

“I'm trying to organise muskets.”

“Say, what?” said one of the newcomers.

“A gunpower musket. You load the powder and ball in the top and..”

“We know what they are, sergeant” said William, “we looked up some weapons before we went walking. It’s just, aren’t they primitive?”

“Oh sure. I would like to give you an assault rifle firing 7.62 mm ammunition with over and under grenade launcher and laser sights, but I have to get it out of these guys,” Gideon jerked his thumb to indicate the structure, “and they don’t know anything at all about weapons. What I will do is arrange for caps to ignite the charge rather than use flints like they use to, so you’ll get something familiar to a soldier from the 1820s – but I’m not sure even about that. I don’t know about the strength of the barrels and about making the barrels and stocks – that’s the wooden part in the pictures you would have seen - fit together. I don’t know anything yet.”

“Still seems kinda primitive,” said Thomas.

“I’ve seen science fiction stories where humans have been marooned on a more primitive planet and started building stuff like time monitors out of spare parts they happened to have. Guess what, no spare parts. We’re starting from scratch. Muskets it is.”

“So, we’ll be musketeers,” said one of the newcomers.

“Don’t you mean Mouseketeers?” said the other.

“No, musketeers – Mouseketeers was an entertainment thing. We’re going to be musketeers.”

There, in the shadow of the structure, while The Witches meditated on the nature of space-time, and with Honey’s headless victims still scattered near-by, the Musketeer Corps of Haven was born.

“Do we get to like duel with swords?” asked Thomas.

Chapter Seven – Total War

The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothes and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn linen into lint; the old men shall betake themselves to the public squares in order to arouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the republic.

Proclamation of the French republic, 1793.

The first task of the newly enrolled musketeers was to go through the remains of the encampment left by the Midis, much as Viet Cong use to pick over the remains of American military dumps, looking for anything usable. The Midi dead were dumped in a hole dug by the androids, using spades discovered at the back of the visitor's centre, and poor Colin put in a separate grave in an open field by the visitor's centre. A rock was found as a head stone and Monster scratched the man's name on it with a Midi knife. Honey remembered Colin's last name as Jennings which they much later found to be wrong. It was Jenner. She waved that away, saying that their relationship hadn't been about words.

Gideon had The Witches interface make some more of the concrete blocks and got the androids, who were proving handy to have do the heavy work, to stack them across the bridge as a makeshift barrier against Midi interruption. Two more young men arrived to undergo the musketeers newly invented swearing in ceremony.

"We left in the middle of a lecture on the non-violent obligations of citizenship," said one.

Two girls turned up, keen for revenge for murdered family members, and were promptly taken by Honey to see the grave of her dead lover. They listened to her tale of passion and violence, expressed sympathy and then took the oath. Gideon gave his growing band a brief lesson in patrol craft – don't wander around in the open discussing your personal lives in loud voices, stick to cover, keep your eyes open and keep track of the direction in which you are going. He sent out two groups of three armed with captured knives, one up river and one down river, to see if they could see any Midis and report on possible ways to cross the gorge. If they kept the river in sight then they would not get lost, Gideon hoped.

Others were sent to patrol around the camp and see if any Midis had wandered back but were told not to lose sight of the structure. Instruction in basic navigation would start tomorrow. Did anyone have a compass? Their phones had one. Sorry, what? Gideon was shown the standard issue settlement phone, the network for which, despite everything, still worked. No one had told the Midis about it. In any case the invading creatures had yet to grasp the concept of electricity, let alone that of mobile phones. William and Thomas had been making calls to friends, which explained the trickle of musketeer volunteers. There were more on the way.

"Hold on, don't the network and the phones need power."

"Power's still up," said William. "System is automated. The Midis also haven't messed with the wind generators or PV farms and the nuclear reactor is sealed. All cables are underground. We're told when a human turns on a light, the Midis think its magic and want it turned off."

“And those guys over-ran us with ease,” said Thomas.

“But there’s no power in the visitor’s centre,” protested Gideon.

“Probably the power’s just in stand-by mode,” said William. “Easy enough to switch it back.”

Gideon who had been fumbling around the centre in the dark was not impressed, but there were other matters to think about. His tiny but growing band needed supplies, equipment, a training schedule and designated sleeping areas. There should be a guard on the bridge and maybe an observation post on that small hill well beyond the bridge.

“What does the observation post do?” his recruits asked.

“Watch out for the enemy, as the name suggest. They stay out of sight somewhere handy, maybe with one up a tree.”

“Okay, so what do they do when they see an enemy?”

“One comes and tells the main body, including their harassed commander, that there are Midis out there. The rest watch to see how many Midis there are, what armaments they have and, importantly, what direction they are going in – towards the bridge, away from the bridge, and so on. Those details also should be relayed to said harassed commander.”

“Right – but what is the person up the tree meant to be doing?”

Gideon thought to himself then that it was going to be a long day, and so it proved. By the end of it, Gideon fell asleep on a Midi mat in one corner of the visitor’s centre, as a few of the new musketeers took it upon themselves to teach Sam how to play chess, using a set they had found in one of the store rooms. Fred had little to say for himself, even after the Witches changed his programming so that he could speak, and showed little interest in doing anything else aside from slavishly following orders, which was no bad thing. On the other hand, Sam showed some interest in interaction.

“Pawns, these pieces,” Gideon heard one of the musketeers say as he fell asleep, “just move one space, but the first time they are used they can move one or two spaces.”

“First move, two spaces,” said Sam.

When Gideon opened his eyes again it was daylight and everyone else was asleep. Alarmed, he got up immediately to see whether his strict instructions concerning guards had been followed. The visitor centre guard he found asleep and snoring on the veranda and was resentful about being kicked awake.

“Hey, wow, what’s the big deal,” said that gentleman. He was a tall, lanky, long-haired youth with the dopy expression Gideon associated with sheep or active drug use.

“The deal is you fell asleep on sentry duty. The penalty for that use to be a court martial and a firing squad. Now get up and look alert!”

“Okay, sheesh, I just lay down for a moment.”

The guard on the bridge was awake, to Gideon’s relief, but leaning with his back to a tree, pointing the wrong way, and listening to music through headphones. He pulled one headphone away from his right ear when the soldier stepped in front of him and smiled politely.

“You’re not watching the bridge.”

“But I am it’s right there,” said the would-be sentry, pointing at the bridge.

“I know it’s there,” snapped the soldier, thinking of what his sergeant would have said in basic training. “I’m not worried about the bridge being stolen. I’m worried about Midis using it. The idea is that you turn around so that you keep it in view at all times, and take those head phones off. Put them in your pocket!”

“Okay.”

“You say ‘Yes, sergeant!’”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“With the bridge in sight you can see whether ill-intentioned creatures are walking up to it. Without the head phones you might even be able to hear them before they arrive. You may also hear, shots or cries of alarm in the distance – the sort of things that alert sentries will want to tell their commanders about.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

Gideon went back to the visitors centre to find the first sentry lying down again on the veranda, this time with earphones on. Before Gideon had tapped him awake with his foot, now he thumped him hard in the ribs.

“Ow! Hey man what’s your problem?”

“What’s yours? I told you to stay alert and you go straight back to lying on the veranda. The idea behind being alert is that you stay upright and stay awake!”

“Alright, alright, Mr Grumpy!”

“You say, yes sergeant, and stand up straight when speaking to me.”

“Um, yes sergeant.” The musketeer assumed when he imagined to be an at attention pose. “And look straight ahead, not at me.”

“Yes sergeant.”

One of the female musketeers chose that moment to appear on the veranda.

“Hey, can you guys keep it down, we’re trying to sleep.”

“And why is everyone still in bed?” yelled Gideon, ignoring her. “Everyone up, now! Mr Toms, where are you?”

“Here sergeant.”

William Toms appeared on the veranda fully dressed and looking fresh. At least someone was getting the idea.

“Get everyone up, now! Do not shake them politely awake. You yell, and if they do not respond, or ask for breakfast in bed, kick them soundly in the ribs. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“You, get out on the parade ground?” he told the female musketeer.

She looked around, in bewilderment. “Parade ground?” she asked, as William began yelling inside the visitor’s centre.

“The car park as you were told yesterday. Now move!”

“Oh okay, I’ll just go and..”

“I said, move and that means now! Go and line up!”

The girl vanished. Gideon checked again on the sentry by the bridge to find that he was pointing the right way and did not have his headphones on.

“Anything to report?”

“No sergeant.”

“Very well, line up with the others in the carpark.”

He walked back to his new command to find fourteen, dishevelled specimens of humanity in a line and two androids behind them. Fred and Sam had seen everyone line up and had walked over to see if they were required. Monster and Honey had also lined up, for which Gideon was grateful. But how did he already have fourteen? Of more immediate concern was that three were listening to music on headphones. He went up to the nearest, who seemed to be in a trance induced by the music. The music lover took one ear phone out and smiled vaguely as Gideon loomed in front of him.

“Are we disturbing you in your enjoyment of music?” he asked with deceptive sweetness.

“Oh no, sergeant, Brahms, is really morning music..”

“Take those ear phones off and put them away!” yelled Gideon. Startled, the classical music lover did so, as did the other two.

“I do not care what music you might be listening to – I don’t care whether its classical, dance, folk, rock, rap, hip hop, techno pop, swing, death metal, or whatever other label has been dreamed up. You do not listen to music while on guard duties. You do not listen to music while on patrol. You do not, in fact, listen to music at any time while you are undertaking your duties as musketeers. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sergeant,” was the muted response.

“Louder! I said is that clear?”

“Yes sergeant!”

“Excuse me sergeant?” asked one of the girls.

“What?”

“Can we still text?”

It was going to be another long day.

That first morning parade was in fact the start of Gideon’s long battle with discipline and his musketeer’s free use of the settlement phone units for entertainment and communication, when they should be paying attention to their surroundings. But then he had long battles over almost every other issue concerning his small, but fast growing military command. The machinery inside the structure produced a barrel closed at one end and studded with a small tube, a nipple (his musketeers always sniggered when he said that word), over which a percussion cap could be fitted. The percussion cap had been a saga in itself. It was a thin metal cup with a small explosive charge in a pocket at the top. That small charge exploded when stuck.

The idea was to put the percussion cap over the nipple (snigger) then bash it with something, as Gideon explained to his excited musketeers who wanted their muskets. The cap then exploded and that small explosion reached the main barrel, detonating the powder in the tube. This was not gunpowder but something The Witches’ interface had conjured up from local materials, after an exhausting to and fro on what he wanted. The explosion in the barrel would shoot out a bullet, if Gideon had remembered to specify the manufacture of bullets. He had remembered the percussion caps but forgotten about the bullets

On the first try, after tying the barrel to a piece of timber they found in one of the store rooms and thumping the percussion cap with a hammer at arms length, the explosive powder, whatever it was, did well indeed. They knew this because it blew the barrel apart. Gideon went back to the Witch’s interface and worked on the strength of the barrel. They also needed a stock, and a trigger mechanism linked to a proper hammer of a size suited to the musket. That would include a spring – Gideon did not look forward to getting the interface to produce a useable spring. Bullets would be good.

In the meantime, with some help from Monster, Gideon set his band of Musketeers, he now had twenty-five, to practising knife fighting with bits of wood in place of knives when they were facing one another. There were disciplinary issues.

“Who is that lunatic with earphones on while he’s knife fighting?” Gideon would scream. “He’s meant to be fighting to the death not listening to gangsta rap. Give him additional guard duty.”

The second attempt at a musket fired a bullet into a tree but the barrel cracked. Gideon started the musketeers on patrolling and navigating in the wild. At this they did well. There had been nothing in their passivist education to prevent them hiking or finding their way by a map. He added exercises to get individual patrols to coordinate with one another, but individual musketeers were easily distracted.

“I’ve seen musketeers on patrol texting one another and even talking on their phones,” thundered Gideon. “This has to stop. The only people who will communicate with other patrols or anyone else will be the patrol leader, or someone he or she tells to communicate. You’re meant to be out there looking for enemy, while prepared to fight, not to engage in idle chatter with those back at base.”

Gideon devised the punishment of one lap around the structure, at the double, for minor infractions. They really needed a hill for musketeers to labor up and down, to make the point, but there wasn’t one to hand. Lapping the structure would have to do. Musketeers who fell asleep on guard duty got dunked in the river (with a rope attached to make sure they were not swept away) in front of everyone, then made to lap the structure to warm up.

Despite these disciplinary issues, the raw material that walked into the musketeer’s camp asking to take the oath were the sort of stuff about which recruiting sergeant’s dream. They were volunteers, willing, able, intelligent (for the most part), interested in learning military skills and in taking the fight to the enemy. A few asked for “passivist roles”. They could go into kitchen, stores, transport (when they had the means to transport anything) and medical, but they still had to take the oath and train and, above all, they were to keep their hands off their phones while on duty.

One of the new arrivals was an older man, maybe graduate age, who the others called Padre. This man promptly demonstrated why he was called that by quoting the first commandment to Gideon.

“Thou shalt not kill,” he said.

“You want a non-combat role?” Gideon asked.

“The abomination of slavery is in the land,” said Padre, then he sighed. “Show me one of these muskets.” In the tradition of religious Americans who take up war

with a vengeance, such Sergeant Alvin York (on being drafted York initially claimed conscientious objector status) and paratrooper Major Richard Winters (influenced by the Amish and Mennonite faiths), Padre became a highly skilled musketeer.

Another recruit who stuck in Gideon's mind was Dean. He was dressed in much the same clothes that William and Thomas had been wearing, that of jeans, Tee shirt and a blazer, but with a pack on his back and a ready smile, which he used on Sam.

"Sam, huh? You're a big one. Do you play games, Sam?"

"Games?" said Sam. "Chess."

"Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam," said Dean putting down his pack and rummaging through it, "any fool hunk of silicon can play chess." He produced a deck of cards and expertly riffled them from one hand to another. "Real intellects play cards."

"Cards?" said Sam.

"Sure. I've just got to get some formalities out of the way" he was referring to the oath, "and I'll show you what a real intellect does."

Later, Gideon saw Dean showing Sam card combinations. "This is a pair," he said, holding up a two of hearts and a two of clubs.

"A pair," said Sam. Gideon got the impression the android was bewildered.

Another recruit was Diane, the most beautiful girl Gideon had seen. Blond, tanned, lean, with a fine-boned exquisitely symmetrical face, she glowed, Gideon thought, when she took the oath. On the spot he suggested a non-combat role.

"No," said Diane, smiling. Her smile could melt winters. "I came to fight like the others, and that's what I'll do, and I want to be in the same squad as Gustav."

This was her boyfriend whom Gideon had not really noticed up to that point although he had been standing right next to her and was one of the largest recruits to date. This raised the delicate issue of allowing romantically involved couples to serve in the same unit. Couples were not allowed in fighting units or certain units of the police, say, for very good reasons. When the bullets started to fly, romantic involvements and tensions could cause problems. In practice, there were too many existing relationships among the recruits, including one gay couple, for the rule to be fully enforced. Gideon handed the matter over to a committee of mainly girls, including Honey, and told them to arrange matters to minimise the problem. Oh yes and let's not have pregnancies if it can be helped, he told them. Life was hard enough without pregnancies.

And life was hard for Gideon, with plenty problems to distract his thoughts from Diane. When armies expanded, they usually had a reservoir of trained personnel

to draw from. In two world wars the US army had regulars and national guards as a pool of trained personnel who could be promoted to sergeants and junior officers, so that they could then train up the rank and file. Gideon had nobody. Colin had been the only other trained soldier on the whole planet, as far as he knew, and he was in a grave which Honey visited regularly, with female musketeers in tow, to exclaim dramatically.

He selected older recruits, in consultation with William, as squad leaders and platoon leaders. William, who Gideon now referred to as Mr Toms, was given the rank of captain (he asked what that meant), and Gideon promoted himself to colonel – why not? – so he was Colonel Swift. Recruits continued to trickle in. How many more were there? Lots, he was told, but the summer cap supervisors were cracking down. A man called Bishop, the head honcho and a mad passivist had somehow managed to keep the other potential recruits under lock and key.

There was a training schedule for new recruits, which included route marches, knife fighting, unarmed combat, patrolling and navigation. He used the Midi interface to design a short spade able to bear the wear and tear of soldiering and the structure's machines started churning the out. Gideon handed out these out, telling his recruits that it was a very important implement, often more important than any firearm.

“How so, sir,” said one of the female recruits. “I mean what are we meant to do with it?”

“I'm glad you asked that,” said the newly promoted Colonel.

He set them to work building walls of sandbags – the bags also came from The Witches – one on each side of their end of the bridge. Once they were in place he realised he had set them wrong. They should be at a shallow angle to the bridge, rather than a right angle so that they formed a V shape. Then everyone would be able to fire at the bridge. The musketeers reset the walls, grumbling. More sandbags connected the walls with the original concrete blocks set across the bridge. Where the walls met he had the musketeers build a redoubt which would tower above any Midi foolish enough to get across the concrete blocks. Now all they needed was some weapons with which to defend these fortifications.

While working on designs for a musket, Gideon thought to make a hand grenade. This was a small, round ball made of the same material as the barrels but much thinner, filled with the explosive power they had been using and bullets, with a wick stuck in it. This worked well in the first tests but Gideon was reluctant to issue them to his recruits for fear that they might do more damage to themselves by misuse than to any enemy they might meet. Eventually he gave way. The musketeers were determined to take the fight to the enemy and wanted something better than knives.

They worked out a drill with two person teams, one to light the wick the other to throw it. Soon there were almost constant explosions as musketeers (if they threw grenades technically they were grenadiers, but they still called themselves musketeers) experimented with the length of fuse and throwing times. Gustave and Diane made a good grenadier team. Thankfully there were no casualties.

“What about a mortar, man?” said Chief, while they were pouring over designs for the musket.

“You call me sir, or colonel.”

“What about a mortar, Colonel?”

Chief, real name Chifley, was a long haired, narrow faced man somewhat older than the rest of the musketeers, who had been an assistant teacher in the summer camp. He had quickly become a key part of Gideon’s tiny design team as he had an engineering mind and knew something about firearms.

“I’m listening.”

“It’s a grenade thrower. A tube. Stick some powder in it. Have one of the nipples so that we can detonate it from the bottom then throw a grenade in at the top. It’ll still be smooth bore but if we’ve got a battery of the things that can throw grenades maybe 250 metres then it’ll be a nasty surprise for Midis on the other end, especially if they oblige us by grouping up, medieval style. Those grenades are lethal man, er, sir.”

“I dunno. For what we’ll be doing a cannon like Napoleonic-era 12 pounders firing solid shells, or maybe explosive ones, on a shallow trajectory will be an even nastier surprise for groups of Midis. Remember these guys stand up when they’re attacking – mortars were of more use when they fought from trenches.”

“We might have to do both, sir. Use the mortars as a step towards cannons. Getting the musket barrels to stop splitting after three rounds has not been super fun, a cannon barrel is going to be another level of non-fun. Maybe we could make mortars to work real quick by throwing mass at the bottom of the barrel so it doesn’t split and putting it on wheels to move it. Then we’d have something to impress the Midis with while we work out how to scale up.

“Hmmm – well, give us some idea of what it’ll look like. Now we’ve almost done the musket, how quickly can we do a mortar prototype?”

“No problems, just one thing..”

“What?”

“Can I command?”

“Command what?”

“I wanna command artillery, sir. You offered me the officer thing when I turned up.” As Chief was older than the others he had been offered rank. “You gotta have a smart dude for the artillery and I’m a smart dude, and it’s my thing.”

“Okay, it’s your thing. Go on the Officers course and we’ll see.”

The officers course was another of Gideon’s innovations. He had never been an officer and had only a vague notion of what the course content should be, but felt he should do something. He recalled reading somewhere that the Viet Minh, the Vietnamese insurgency force that fought the French, faced with a similar problem of unskilled personnel, had instituted two week courses for officers. Luxury. In the end the course was a few lectures backed by a quiz. It would have to do. His newly commissioned officers had as much trouble as he did with the fine points of discipline.

“I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again,” thundered Gideon at morning parade. “Keep your hands off your phones while at your duties. You may soon be in life or death situations. You cannot text or listen to music if you’re dead.”

That morning he found half of the squad manning the observation post on the other side of the river using their phones. The squad leader pointed out, with a smile, that one half had been keeping a look out while the other half used their phones. That had seemed like a fair arrangement. Gideon sacked him on the spot and sent the squad on endless laps of the structure. Still the message did not get through. The worst and most consistent offender was a musketeer Turnbull, called Turns or Turnie by the others. This was the musketeer Gideon had found lying down twice and had booted in the ribs. The man was keen enough to have been among the first few to take the oath, but just could not keep his earphones away from his ears or keep his attention on the job at hand. Sentry duty was too boring; patrolling was dull. He had to put on his ear phones and sit down for “just a moment” only to wake up with Gideon standing over him. Turns lapped the structure so often that the other musketeers joked he had his own track

Gideon tried taking the man’s phone away from him. Someone he got another. Monster offered to take him somewhere quiet and show him how bikers enforced discipline. Gideon was tempted by this, as he was by a firing squad, but rejected the idea. It was not the way to real discipline. When Turns was found, using headphones yet again and was brought into the colonel’s presence Gideon handed him a backpack.

“What’s this?”

“You’re out of the musketeers. I want you out of the camp. There’s two days of food and a water bottle. Should be enough for you to walk back to the summer camp.”

This was the same treatment he had given Boothroyd. He couldn’t put people in jail, or execute them, but he could send them away.

“But what’s the problem, man?” said Turns.

“You say Colonel or sir,” said William who was present for all disciplinary hearings.

“What’s the problem, sir?”

“You don’t have to call me sir, any more. You’re out. No longer a musketeer. The problem is that you just don’t pay any attention to me and think discipline is a joke, and others are beginning to copy you. You’re taken the attitude of who cares what Swift thinks. Okay, I agree, you don’t care. You can ignore me all you like at the summer camp. But I won’t have you messing things up here. The musketeers want to fight and they have to pay attention when they fight, and you don’t want to do that.”

“Hey sir, I lost family to the Midis. I want to fight. Being a musketeer is what I want.”

“Then why didn’t you act like it? I’m sorry for the family you lost but soldiering and obeying orders is not for you. You have half an hour to pack up your stuff and say goodbye to your friends. Mr Toms, you are to make sure that this happens.”

“Yes sir.”

Turns walked out of the musketeer camp half an hour later a lone figure heading West along the only road, obviously holding back tears. Gideon was astonished by this. If the man had felt that much about the matter why hadn’t he taken training seriously? All the other musketeers, he now had more than 50, turned out to watch Turnbull’s departure in silence.

“By all means look,” yelled Gideon striding into the middle of the road where all the musketeers could see him. “If you don’t want to be here; if you don’t want to follow orders then grab your stuff and follow him. Otherwise get to work!”

The musketeers instantly returned to their duties. Gideon still had problems with discipline but they were considerably less than they had been now that he had an ultimate punishment up his sleeve. Like Australian troops in the first World War on their way to the slaughter of Gallipoli and the Somme the very worst punishment was to be sent home. What fools!

Two days later the musketeers came together again to witness the firing of the new musket. Chief went through the loading sequence which, for anyone used to modern firearms, was complicated. He tore open a paper cartridge with his teeth, poured the powder down the barrel and the ball on top, which had also been in the cartridge, then the paper was put in to act as wadding, to keep the ball and powder in while the weapon was being aimed. The assemblage was then packed down with a ramrod. A cap, which was kept in a separate pouch, was fitted over the nipple at the other end and the hammer pulled back until it clicked into place. Finally the weapon was all ready to go but, as Chief explained, it was then a good idea only to point the weapon at whatever you intended to shoot at. Once the hammer was pulled back – cocked as they say (snigger) - a pull of the trigger would send the ball on its way. He aimed at a target – a wooden board with a bulls eye on it at 100 paces and hit it. That was good for a musket, but the machining of the barrel was vastly superior to anything that a veteran of the Napoleonic wars would have known.

“Excuse me. What about brass cartridges with a bolt action rifle?” asked some know it all from the ranks.

“We don’t have brass, or steel for the bolt,” said Gideon. “All we’ve got is the stuff we can get from the Witches. Its some sort of composite which can act like a metal but we’ve had a enough trouble getting this far. You can wait around while we figure out how to make the cartridges and a barrel with rifling” (grooves inside the barrel to spin the bullet) “so the whole assembly won’t blow apart, or you can take the musket until we do it. Considering the musket ball would drop a bison, if we ever encounter one, then it should make a decent hole in any Midi it hits.

“Musket seems good,” said someone.

Then they wheeled out the new mortar in the unofficial firing range which was south of the structure, not far from where Colin had met his untimely end. Most of the musketeers had not seen the weapon and there were murmurs.

“We’re still working on this one, so you want to stand back,” said Gideon.

Chief, now Captain Chifley, had made the barrel of Mortar Mark I so thick that it had not cracked in its first test firings. That made it too heavy to move around easily on a battlefield, but they could they lose some of the mass in development. Otherwise the weapon worked in the same way as a musket, but with a live grenade thrown on top of the powder. The loader threw in the grenade and then ran, while Chief pulled the trigger from a safe distance by a string. There was a satisfying bang and the grenade shot out of the barrel, its arc marked by its glowing fuse. It fell to ground beyond where the charred remains of the siege engines still lay, then exploded. The musketeers jumped up and down and whooped.

They had the technology.

Chapter Eight – Not one step back

If we do not stop retreating we will be without bread, without fuel, without metal, without raw material, without factories and plants, without railways.

This leads to the conclusion, it is time to finish retreating. Not one step back! Such should now be our main slogan.

Josif Stalin, Soviet Army Order No. 227. July 28, 1942

Gideon and Chief were still finalising the designs of the musket, with the musketeers painfully learning how to load and fire the prototypes, when the observation post reported that perhaps six hundred Midis plus several humans but no heavy weapons they could see, were advancing along the main road.

“Call the OP in,” yelled Gideon. “Everyone to the bridge with weapons. Artillery ready.”

The musketeers hurried excitedly this way and that until they were in previously arranged position, mostly out of sight behind the sandbag walls and in the redoubt. The fifty eight musketeers of the newly created Corps were now organised into an artillery company and two infantry companies, A and B, with A mostly on the left at the sandbags and B on the right but Gideon had no intention of fighting them as companies. Instead he would keep them behind the walls and hope the Midis would be obliging enough to attack straight across the bridge. Getting to the bottom of the gorge was not a problem, although the sides were steep, and crossing the fast flowing Styx creek at the bottom – named after the boundary with the underworld in Greek mythology – was no great challenge. But organisation and effort would be required and it would have to be done under fire. Instead of bothering with all that or hunting for another crossing place, and there were no usable fords for some distance up and down stream, he expected the Midis to simply attack his fortifications.

To encourage such an attack, almost all the musketeers were hidden from view. Those behind the sandbag walls on either flank, angled so that they were facing the bridge, had the force’s few muskets which they were still learning to use. Maybe they would hit something. Gideon, Honey, Monster, the two droids and a few others, including the card playing Dean, who had proved adept at using swords were at the chest high, barrier to the bridge. Behind them were spear people (not spearmen,

Gideon was told) who would thrust their captured Midi spears between the fighters and, hopefully, above the round shields the Midis used. This might work but, more importantly, they had artillery of sorts and grenades, which might prove to be a mixed blessing.

As Gideon had pointed out the idea was to throw the grenades so that there was a comfortable barrier between the subsequent explosion and shrapnel and the humans, preferably a host of Midis. Equally importantly they should be thrown so that they did not hit the bridges' cross beams and bounce into the human ranks.

"In other words, musketeers," said Gideon in training sessions, "the idea is to throw the grenades so that they kill Midis not humans. You look before you throw and throw accurately. Now let's practise." As he was in the front rank, he hoped they understood.

Monster was to Gideon's right. A little further down the line, Dean was occupying what he saw as down time playing cards with Sam.

"It's straight poker so you keep all five cards hidden – don't let me see them."

"Cards, hidden," said Sam. "Take two." The android put two cards on the concrete block in front of him to be changed for two from the deck.

"Alright, the man is learning."

As Gideon had never seen his new enemies properly armed and equipped before he spent some time examining them through a pair of binoculars brought from the rocket base. Some equipment, including sorely needed medical supplies, had been looted from unmanned settlement sites on the human side of the river.

The medieval host which trailed into view consisted of Black Band Midis carrying two spears, one short and one long ("Why two," wondered Gideon), and a round shield. They wore leather pants and coat without arms. A handful of Red Band officers had swords and longer kite-shaped shields plus a knife, as another symbol of their rank in a scabbard on their leather belt. The humans he could see were mainly at the end of the column, some driving supply carts drawn by the horses bred specially for local conditions. Gideon studied these with some interest. He could use a cavalry arm for scouting if nothing else. He was told that the summer camp had a strong horse riding tradition, but Gideon had not seen anyone riding a horse, or any horses for that matter, until that moment.

The Midis did not ride horses but they had no objection to riding in carts drawn by horses, which was the case for the apparent leader of the assaulting force, a Red Band Midi, unusually tall and stout for his species meaning that he was almost as tall as Gideon and a lot fatter. He rode in what might be described as a rough farm cart with a seat at the back and a human driver on the front bench.

This imposing creature seemed to take the extensive sandbag fortifications on the human side of the bridge as a personal affront. He leapt off the cart and was about to storm over the bridge, unaware that he was dangerously close to musket killing range, when another human, a female, said something to him. The Midi waited, obviously fuming, while Gideon had the force's best shot called to his side. This gentleman had a round face set under what previous generations would have described as a Beatle haircut and a wicked grin. His name was Skull. Gideon did not know why he had that name and did not care.

"That Red Hand will make a handy demonstration of our new fire power. Take him out."

"Hundred and thirty metres," said Skull, eyeing his target. "A stretch for accurate work with these things sir, but if he comes a bit closer I'll see what I can do."

The Witches' manufacturing machinery made barrels were considerably more uniform and better machined than those of the old-time muskets, but that only meant the weapons could hit a target that it was aimed at out to perhaps one hundred and twenty metres, as opposed to maybe eighty metres with an old time musket. Hitting anything beyond that was a matter of luck.

Skull loaded in the approved manner, and took aim resting his elbows on sandbags. Then Gideon saw a white flag.

"Wait. White flag. Let's see what happens."

Somewhat disappointed, Skull stepped back.

"Mr Toms!"

"Sir?"

"Up here."

William came over to stand with Gideon behind the bridge barricade. William's phone rang and he answered it, with Gideon thinking that it had better be official business. It was.

"That was Chief with the mortars," said William. "He says the main Midi group is right on one of their ranging markers. His guys can do some damage."

"So they could," said Gideon, eyeing the distance. "We'll see what these guys with the flag have to say first. Tell Chief he'll be able to blood his weapons, but not just yet."

Chief had produced three mortars, which they quickly realised were too heavy for handy use in the field, but could throw grenades a full 200 metres for real damage, rather than the 250 metres he had first estimated, if they could get the length of the fuse right. These had been placed in a sandbagged position off to the left. An

observer with binoculars had been stationed on top of The Witches' structure to correct direction and range.

"Can overwatch see anything more?" asked Gideon. That was the observer.

Checking involved simply ringing her. Gideon could not believe the mobile network still worked, or that the nuclear reactor was still operating, and the power lines were still connected.

"Nothing more coming on the road as far as she can see," said William after a moment.

"Very well."

By then the parlaying party was within hailing distance. The woman had short dark hair and fine features which Gideon admired. The chief Midi had been joined by another Red Hand who also looked big and mean for his species.

"Excuse me!" said the woman. "Excuse me! Oh, hello William."

"Hello BD, what are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," said BD. The two Red Hands glowered at him, William, and at Skull, who stood back from the barrier holding his musket across his body looking casual, as Gideon had told him to do. "These bag and stone walls are annoying the Midis. There was trouble with the first group that was here, and they've come to find those responsible. It's all I can do to stop them all coming in here and killing you all. Say is that a gun?" She pointed at Skull's weapon.

"Why yes," said William, "it's a.."

"Mr Toms!" snapped Gideon. "If BD wants to ask something then she should speak to me."

BD looked at Gideon for the first time and did not seem to like what she saw.

"BD, this is Colonel Gideon Swift. He is commander here."

"Colonel?" said BD. "What's that?"

"It's a military rank. Mr Toms here is a captain."

"I don't know what that means, but I do know the Midis are angry over these dumb walls. They have to come down and everyone has to line up for inspection, or they will come in and kill anyone they find in these walls. There are 600 Midis with weapons. The few here wouldn't stand a chance."

With the defenders hidden behind sandbags and, for once, quiet, BD couldn't see anyone aside from Gideon, William, Honey and Monster who had not bothered to hide. As the humans had been about as ferocious as lambs up to that point, the Midi leader had discounted wild tales of mad women chopping off heads and had not bothered with reconnaissance. Obviously something had happened but he thought he would massacre a few humans first and work it all out later.

“Ms BD..”

“Just BD. My name is Brenda Daniels but I prefer the initials. Everyone calls me that.”

“Okay, BD, you have five minutes to clear off the bridge before the fighting starts.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Gideon raised his voice. “This is our bridge, and we don’t want you or your Midi friends on it. Go and find your own bridge.”

BD looked at William. “Is this how you feel too.”

“What he said.” William, nodded at Gideon.

“Captain Toms is not in charge here,” said Gideon, sharply. “I am. This is still our bridge, and you’re still on it.”

“But you’ll die.”

“Midi’s have already caught me once,” said William.

“If I want military advice from you, I’ll ask for it,” said Gideon.

BD turned to translate to the senior Midi.

“Four minutes,” said Gideon.

“I have to translate the terms of the offer.”

“It wasn’t an offer and this isn’t a parlay. Get off this bridge. That white flag you’re holding...” Gideon looked at the white cloth BD had been holding up on a stick. “Say, is that a pair of your panties?”

“Well, yes, it was all I could find that was white at short notice,” said BD, looking abashed. “That’s right, isn’t it? White means a parlay.”

“Sure,” said Gideon, “and because it’s a pair of your panties I’ll put my deadline back a minute. You have five minutes to get off this bridge.”

BD spoke to the senior Red Hand who growled his displeasure, made a sweeping motion with hand and spoke rapidly. To Gideon the Midi language sounded like a series of grunts strung together.”

“He says that all this will be swept away. You’ll be made to clean the place up before digging your own graves and then being killed beside them.”

“Well if your friend, whatever his name is..”

“General Scragg.”

“..General Scragg has his schedule worked out then we won’t keep him. He sounds like a busy man.”

“Please, I’m trying to stop a massacre?” Gideon thought that BD looked pretty when she pleaded but that wasn’t the point of the meeting.

“If the Midis want to be massacred then we’ll oblige them. Now I’m tired of repeating this point.. get off my bridge!”

BD said something to Scragg who made a fist and jerked it downwards. They were going to die. Gideon waved and smiled, thinking that compared to the people at the HEO Scragg was positively friendly. Both the Red Bands and BD left the bridge, BD looking back apprehensively at what she thought were the bridge’s doomed defenders. The humans with the Midi column had clustered around the carts which were drawn up to the left, out of the way. The Midi forces were on the right.

“Take him out, sir?” said Skull.

“Not now, I want to be seen to be observing the flag of truce, but when the Midi general next comes back in range go for it.”

“Gottit,” said Skull.

“Mr Toms,” said Gideon.

“Sir?”

“You are to personally go and tell those with muskets they are to start firing when the attacking Midis are about halfway over the bridge. Their killing zone is about the middle. They are not to fire on Midis getting close to this position. Too much chance of hitting one of us. Everyone starts firing on your order and then fire at will.

“Yes sir!”

Gideon was well aware that his troops were eager but almost totally raw. Best to keep it simple, let them get some experience, and hope that they caused the other side a few casualties.

“What happens if they get through here, sir?” asked one of the spear people behind Gideon.

“The everyone grabs their knives and hand shovels and we have a good time, but we’ll be using grenades before that,” he said. “Captain Hannigan.”

“Sir,” called that officer from the top of the citadel.

“Plenty of grenades to hand?”

“Yes sir,” she said. “All ready with lighters hot.”

Across the gorge Scragg could be seen forming his soldiers into a single, large column, fronted by a group of big, strong individuals. Gideon then thought to give orders to his artillery. He dialled his artillery commander on a spare phone brought in from the space port and given to him.

“Captain Chifley, start firing at the far end of the bridge when that Midi column reaches it, and keep firing at that point even after they have gone through. I don’t want reinforcements getting to the column.”

“No reinforcements, understood, sir,” said Turns.

The battle started with Midi drums. Scragg’s force included a section of kettle drummers who kept up a slow beat on their instruments. “tum, tum, tum, tum”. The Midi column raised a flag. The background was green with a symbol, difficult to identify at that distance, in yellow.

“Looks like a lightning bolt,” Gideon heard one of the spear-armed musketeers behind him say, after peeping over the parapet.

“Like the Flash,” said another.

“Green is for Green Lantern, man.”

“The Flash has a yellow lightning bolt on something dark,” said another.

“Quiet,” said Gideon. “Argue about flags and super heroes later – we’ve a got a battle to fight.”

“Looks like we’ve gotta stop the game a while, Sam,” Gideon heard Dean say. “We’ll just see to these guys and get back to it. Remember, cards are everything.”

“Cards are everything,” said Sam.

“Tum, tum, tum..” The Red Bands with the Midi column shouted something like “Neno huff.” The Black Band infantry shouted back what sounded like “Beeno haff”. A trumpet sounded and the column started towards the bridge.

“Neno huff,” shouted the Red Bands again.

“Beeno haff,” yelled the Black Bands.

“This is a show,” thought Gideon. “Like Zulus singing or Napoleonic attack columns shouting ‘vive l’Empereur’ as they marched.” Its all a show to frighten the enemy.

“We should yell something back,” said one of the musketeers.

“Fuck you guys?” suggested one of the spear people.

“Decorum, guys, decorum,” said Gideon.

At that point William reappeared at the front barricade.

“I’ve got a chant, if you want, sir” he said.

“Can’t hurt,” said Gideon, “go ahead.”

William climbed up on to the stone barricade to stand and face the still hiding musketeers.

“Guys, the response is ‘kill, kill!’,” and let’s really yell, okay.

“What do we want to do?”

“Kill! Kill!”

It was a creditable effort. The Midis were too occupied with their yelling to notice much, but Gideon could see the humans on the other side of the river look surprised.

“When do we want to do it?” yelled William.

“Now,” screamed the musketeers.

“What are we going to do?”

“Kill! Kill!”

“Louder! We’re supposed to be warming ourselves up to kill, not trying out for the school chorus. What are we going to do?”

“Kill! Kill!”

“When are we going to do it?”

“Now!” they screamed.

This time the sound echoed off the bridge, making the Midi Red Bands look at the human position, in puzzlement. BD, whom Gideon could just see standing well back from the bridge, looked surprised. She could not see who was yelling.

“Havenites, what do when we see a moon?” yelled William. “We howl!” Then he put back his head and howled like wolf. “Howwwl!” The rest of the still hidden musketeers joined in, and put their lungs to it, “howwwwl”.

Although it was broad daylight the sound was distinctly eerie.

“What’s with the howling?” Gideon asked of Monster. He had not heard of the local custom of howling at the moon.

The biker shrugged. “Local shit,” he said.

Through binoculars Gideon could see the mouths of the humans around the carts fall open. They had now realised that the main force was hidden.

The Midi column, maybe three hundred strong or half the force on the other side of the bridge, came on at a steady walk. They did not know about keeping in step, but they knew about keeping in line and beating their spears against the shields in rhythm. “Crash! Crash! Crash!” The drums also kept up their “tum, tum, tum”. Then every few steps, a Midi officer would yell “neno huff”. The rest of the column would yell back, “beeno haff”. They were supremely confident.

“Couldn’t they be quieter when they attack?” Gideon heard one of the female musketeers behind him say.

“They’re attacking us, Lucy,” said another. “Being noisy is part of the deal.”

Gideon wondered, again, about the two spears each Midi carried. The longer one they keep in their hands as they marched, using it to bang their shields while the second one – perhaps used for close up work – was strapped to their backs. Hmmm! Something tugged at the back of Gideon’s mind, but he was about to fight for his life. He shoved the feeling to one side.

The column entered the bridge, and one of the human mortars fired. The bang made the Midis look around and then watch as the projectile arced through the sky to

bounce off one of the bridge's overhead cross beams and explode with a crack. Two of the Midis screamed and fell out.

Good shooting, thought Gideon, and the fuse was about right. Pity it hadn't landed on the bridge roadway. It could have done real damage.

The next round went through the cross beams, hit an unfortunate Midi on the head, who fell, but failed to explode. The third round, however, hit the rear of the column and exploded, spraying musket balls. Midis screamed and fell out grasping red blotches. Those in front looked behind. Then Gideon heard the command "fire", and the muskets on the human flanks roared. He saw a few of his musketeers close their eyes when they fired. Musket balls pinged against the bridge structure. So much for firing low. But a few bullets struck the column. Midis fell. The rest looked around. It was dawning on them the battle would not be a walkover.

The Red Band at the front of the column, a large fellow waving a sword did the only thing possible in the circumstances, pointing his sword at the humans he could see at the stone barricade – this included Gideon – and yelling "tado!".

"Umph!" said the Midi column in unison, then the leading files transferred their shields to their spear hands and grabbed the short spears on their backs.

Gideon suddenly realised what the second spears were for.

"Get down!" he screamed. Most of those on the wall heard him and had the sense to obey, as the leading Midi ranks threw their spears. But not everyone. A large musketeer at one end of the line took a spear in the eye and died instantly. Another was hit around the shoulder joint.

"Grenades!" screamed Gideon and the grenadiers both behind the fighting line and on the citadel, itching to join the action lit fuses and flung their bombs. The grenades went off in a series of distinct 'Whumps!' as the human fighters still sheltered below the parapet. Midis screamed. "Up musketeers! Watch for spears." Beyond the wall was carnage of bodies, wounded Midis grasping at bloodied arms and holes in their torsos. Their blood was just as red as that of any human. Beyond that heap were the survivors gaping in horror at the pile of comrades, then they saw the humans, screamed with outrage and charged.

Gideon deflected the spear thrust of the Midi opposite with his captured shield, with the creature snarling "Haf! Haf", whatever that meant, close enough for the human to feel it's breath. Gideon tried to get past the creature's shield with his sword as they heaved together but the creature shifted his own shield. The musketeer with a spear beside him was trying to wound the midi on Gideon's left with similar lack of success. The creatures were strong. Up and down the line the musketeers, Gideon among them, were yelling "Kill! Kill". The Midis yelled "Haf! Haf!" Well off to the

right was the lone cry “Colin!” and Gideon was dimly aware of a object, perhaps a head, flying across the line to be momentarily lit up by explosions as Turn’s guns pounded the end of the bridge.

Then the Red Band Midi on Gideon’s right, with a sword and larger shield rather than a spear, dropped low and heaved with his shield catching Monster unaware. The biker staggered back. The Midis jumped up onto the parapet, knocking aside a spear trust with ease, then crouched down and raised his sword to strike the momentarily disorganised Monster. That left his right side exposed. Still struggled to get through the defences of his own opponent, Gideon spared a split second to push the point of his sword into the flesh underneath the creature’s rib cage, twist it and withdraw. The creature screamed, staggered and turned to Gideon only for a recovered Monster to push forward and stab the Red Hand in the other side. It screamed again, twisted and fell off the wall.

“Grenades!” yelled Gideon, then “everyone down” as he saw the shells lob over the heads of the Midis. The explosions seemed to rock the wall. The Midi attackers abruptly vanished. A couple, including the one opposing Gideon, who had been trying to climb over the wall, fell on the other side. The Soldier pushed the corpse of his dead opponent to one side. When the humans peeped back over the wall, they were rewarded by the sight of the attacking force, many of the them staggering, retreating across the bodies of their own dead and dying to run the gauntlet of the artillery barrage.

The humans yelled in triumph, several getting up on the sandbags to laugh and jeer at the Midis, adding insults about what they could do with their mothers and variations on the common form of the verb to fornicate. Then one howled and the others stopped the pointless insults to also howl. A few of the more dedicated musketeers kept firing. In the distance. Gideon was aware of the lone figure of BD standing as if in shock.

“All cease fire,” yelled Gideon, “Stop the wolf thing and get off the walls.” The musketeers fell silent. “Mr Toms, tell Captain Chifley to see if he can hit the other Midis out there.

“Sir!”

He looked at his casualties. He had organised medics with scrounged equipment and medicine, but he was well aware those preparations would be inadequate for any major encounter. He had two dead and four wounded, one seriously. The dead would keep Colin company in what would now be designated as the hero’s graveyard, but the musketeer who had taken a spear right in his shoulder joint was a real problem. He had been dosed with morphine taken from the medical

centre at the summer camp by a far sighted musketeer, but he needed surgery and they did not yet have surgeons or operating facilities.

“Let’s take him into the Witches,” said Fred, short for Fredericka, the chief medic who reported the butchers bill to Gideon. She was a tall, attractive girl who had joined up with her boyfriend and asked for a non-combat role. As she had studying for a medical degree before the invasion she was the closest they had to a doctor

“They’re a different species,” Gideon pointed out. “Isn’t it like taking people to a vet?”

“I was in the interface room yesterday trying to work out medical stuff and one of them came and spoke to me. She says you call her Agnes.”

“Oh right – she just came into the interface room?” Gideon had told his musketeers to keep to the rooms humans already used. He thought that having loads of musketeers wandering through the structure trying to talk to The Witches would soon wear out their welcome. Not that the order was really necessary. The visible doors would not open unless the human had an appointment organised through Sam, and only Gideon could ask for an appointment.

“She came in through that door on the other side. First time I’d seen one. She said she’d been looking at the stuff I’d been asking for and wanting to know if anyone was hurt.”

“The Witches must monitor the requests,” said Gideon, half to himself. He hadn’t realised that the Witches would do so, but it was their materials and their machines, so it was their call.

“Guess they must,” said Fredericka. “Anyway, she said they have healing machines and they could adapt one. She’d been looking at the human body.”

“I thought they were too busy meditating on space time.”

“Got the impression that messing with human medicine was a hobby,” said Fred.

“Worth a try but ask Agnes if you or another medic can be there when it happens. We’re talking about alien machines working on human bodies. I don’t want our guy to end up as something else, or whatever.”

“I’ll tell Agnes that,” said Fred.

“You did me a solid at the fight, man,” said Monster, after Fred left.

“No problem. I couldn’t do anything with my guy, but yours exposed his side,” Gideon raised his sword arm to demonstrate, “and I thought of Culloden.”

“Cullwhatta?”

“Culloden – a battle between English Redcoats and Scottish Highlanders, eighteenth century. The Redcoats had lost earlier battles but they changed their bayonet drill so that each soldier targeted the highlander on their right when that guy raised his sword arm, exposing his side.”

“You’re weird, man,” said Monster.

“It’s sort of appropriate,” said Gideon. “That charge had a real Highland feel to it.”

There was movement at the end of the bridge. A Red Band, the deputy to General Scragg who had been on the bridge earlier, was walking towards them holding a human hostage, with a knife at the man’s throat, BD trailing along. The rest of the Midi force was well back, out of range of Chief’s artillery. Gideon called Monster. Honey and Skull to him, grabbed a loaded musket from the nearest musketeer and walked out onto the bridge. The two contingents met halfway.

“This is Dr Richard Poole,” said BD, as if it as perfectly normal to introduce a hostage apparently under threat of death.

The Red Hand screamed something.

“Hey, fellas,” said Dr Poole, a small man with a black beard, filthy clothes and torn Tee-shirt. One lens of his Harry Potter-likier glasses was cracked. He had been the driver of General Scragg’s cart until a few seconds ago.

“Captain Mosta here says that unless you surrender, he will kill Dr Poole.”

“He’s kidding, right?” said Gideon.

“This has happened before. He will kill Dr Poole, if you don’t do as he says.”

“Hey, Vincent,” said Dr Poole to Skull.

Gideon thought that for someone under threat of death, the hostage was remarkable calm.

“Hey, Dr Poole,” said Skull.

“Is my Jimmy part of this nonsense?”

“Still back at summer camp but talking about coming out when I left,” said Skull.

“Have the Midis been allowed to get away with this before?” said Gideon to BD.

“It’s about negotiation,” said BD, her voice finally showing the strain of dealing with a violent confrontation. “I just need to know your objectives and we can work something out. Otherwise Dr Poole dies.”

“I thought I made my objectives clear last time,” said Gideon drawing back the hammer on the musket he had brought. “This is our bridge, and if you look around you can see you can see what happens when ill-disposed creatures try to take it from

us.” To emphasise Gideon’s point, one of the Midi wounded chose that moment to get up and stagger away, bleeding. The humans ignored the creature. “Tell your guy to release Dr Poole or there is one more Midi body on the bridge.”

This startled Dr Poole into wrenching his attention away from Skull. The others said nothing, but when Gideon cocked his musket they had brought their weapons up to the ready. Captain Mosta looked around, snarled and brought the knife in closer to Poole’s neck.

“Negotiation is an art,” said BD, her voice wavering. “You tell me what you want and I’ll tell you what can be achieved.”

“The captain here can unhand Dr Poole and walk away, and we’ll let him walk off the bridge. If he doesn’t do that or slits the good doctor’s throat, then he dies. He needs to focus on the outcome for him. You should also remind him that this is a military situation not a civil or police one. We’re in the middle of a battle. Negotiations aren’t on the agenda.”

BD listened to this open-mouthed, then spoke to Captain Mosta. Her command of the Midi language seemed excellent. The Midi officer certainly seemed to understand as he snarled something back.

“He said surrender or the doctor dies,” said BD.

“I think he means it,” said Poole, seeming for the first time to take his role as hostage seriously.

Keeping an eye of the Midi’s knife arm Gideon raised his musket, brought it to his shoulder and pointed the business end at the creature’s right eye. The Midi screamed something at him but did not move his knife hand.

“Amateur,” said Gideon, and fired. At that range even a musket could not miss. The Midi’s jerked back onto the roadway, right side of his face a sheet of blood. The knife clattered harmlessly to the ground. The Midis soldiers who had been watching the encounter, howled with outrage. The kettle drums started beating again.

“You could have shot me,” spluttered Dr Poole, indignantly. “What did you think you were doing?”

“You’re welcome,” said Gideon and turned to BD, whose mouth had fallen open in horror. “You still think we’re about negotiating?”

“No,” she said, in a small voice.

“You and the good doctor here have a choice - either come with us that way,” Gideon pointed to the human side of the bridge, “or go back to the Midis. The choice is yours, but I’d make it soon. Looks like I’ve managed to rile them.”

“Dudes look real pissed,” said Monster.

They could see another column forming as the drums beat. This time the commander was using all the troops he had, doubling down on his bet, and that suited Gideon.

“I don’t see General Scragg,” he said to BD.

“He’s dead.”

“What can I say,” said Skull. “The dude was just standing there.”

How easily they had all adapted to killing, thought Gideon.

“Come with us,” he said to BD.

“I have a son back in Haven City. I can’t leave him.”

“Well, suit yourself, but I’d get off the bridge fast.” The humans with Dr Poole dashed back to the barricade, Gideon shouting orders. “Mr Toms tell Captain Chifley to fire at the end of the bridge. He’s to fire right from the start and keep firing. Grenadier teams start throwing those grenades the moment the Midi column is in range. Organise it so that you re throwing two at a time continuously. Keep the fuses short so they don’t start throwing them back. Fighters keep down until they are right at the wall. Musketeers fire when in range and keep firing.”

The second assault was one long series of explosions with the Midi column coming on bravely but falling apart the moment the grenade teams got to work. A handful made to the barricade, only to be cut down. The Midi survivors, still a large number retreated off the bridge, many clutching wounds. The musketeers all stood on the walls, put their heads back and howled for minutes, until Gideon told them to stop.

“Let’s go after the rest,” said William. “We can take down the entire force.”

Gideon shook his head. He was not about to send his completely raw troops, who barely knew how to load their muskets, over the bridge to fight an enemy better trained in close quarter combat than they were. The humans would stay behind their fortifications. Instead he stood on the barricade and yelled across the bridge.

“BD!”

“Yes!” BD shouted back.

“Tell whoever over there they can come and collect their wounded. If they come unarmed we won’t fire.”

“Okay.”

“Mr Toms.”

“Sir,” said William.

“Organise a few of our guys to collect any wounded closest to us. If The Witches have taken up human anatomy as a hobby, maybe they can stretch to fixing up Midis.” Gideon gave that order thinking that he could interrogate the Midis later

then realised they had no common language. It was a pity that BD had chosen the other side or chosen not to abandon her son – a pity on several counts, he thought. They would first have to learn the Midi language then interrogate them.

Dr Poole loomed before him.

“You’ve had contact with the creatures inside the structure?” he said, eyes wide in astonishment.

“Yep,” said Gideon. “We call them The Witches because that’s what they look like to us. They’re helping us.”

“Can I speak to them?”

“Hmm! I’ll go in later and report what’s happened out here, you can come along then. They let people in if they’re with me.”

“What, report on the fight?”

“They can view events outside the structure, but they’ll want to know what’s going to happen next.” Gideon was curious about what was to happen next himself, but he supposed the Midis would send a larger force. “You don’t happen to know where these creatures come from do you?”

“As a matter of fact, I have some idea. There’s an underground area far back beyond Haven City. They seem to have been bred up/trained up in secret by someone in black robes.”

“Black robes?” Gideon remembered that The Witches had spoken of a mortal enemy, but he had not asked for further and better particulars at the time.

“I saw this dude once from a distance. BD has spoken to him a few times – curved nose and thin face.”

“The Witches have curved noses, thin faces and wear red robes. They are also hers rather than him. Although that’s just an impression they have also chosen human female names for themselves, now that I think about it. Interesting. There may be a lot more to the Haven story than we’ve been told so far.”

As Gideon and Poole were walking away from the bridge the Colonel heard one of his female musketeers ask another whether “that was it”.

“Seems so,” said the other. “Can’t see them coming back for a third time.”

“Okay,” she sounded relieved, “that was a real party we had with those guys, but I can pass on another dance.”

After that, in musketeer speak, a party was a battle and to dance was to fight. There was hard partying to come.

Chapter Nine – Styles

“I’m not fastidious about troops,” Britain’s premier soldier in the Napoleonic wars, the Duke of Wellington, once wrote about German mercenaries he had been sent. “I’ve had them of all sorts, sizes and nations... If they come to the field with weapons clean and sixty rounds well appointed I do not look to see if their trousers are green, blue or grey.”

The Witches were lined up in the usual order when Gideon went to see them, trailing Dr Poole, and proved to be sufficiently emboldened by the human victory at the bridge to critique Gideon’s military decisions.

“You did not go across the bridge to fight them?” said Tabitha, the middle witch. Poole listened to the exchange open-mouthed. Like all the older generation of Havenites he had taken the dogma that the inhabitants of the structure were all about passivism, gender equality and the environment at face value. He now had to process the fact that almost all of what he had been told was total nonsense.

“My soldiers are completely raw. Our casualties were light, but they would have been a lot higher if we had tried attacking them,” said Gideon, “for no real additional gain.”

“What if they come back? Will you attack them then?”

For a race that had previously known nothing of violence the Witches caught on quick, thought Gideon.

Aloud he said: “We’ll have to see. If they have heavy equipment – big weapons that throw stones, they might be able to hit your home from the other side of the gorge. We’ll have to see if our heavy weapons can hit theirs. I have a lot to do, including talking with my soldiers. I would also like to know more about the situation. I have been hearing about a creature in black robes that looks like your, um, good selves.”

“Not like us,” said Tabitha. “He is of a different clan that wishes to stop our meditation efforts, by force if necessary. He says that it’s dangerous.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“To him, perhaps, as he will be left behind. We intend to transform ourselves into beings of pure energy and thought. He says that is a violation of the space-time of the universe and says we should retain the physical shell.”

“Whatever the dispute between that creature and ... your good selves,” said Gideon (he opted against saying ‘you guys’), “this other creature raised up – created -

these creatures who know how to kill and sent them to get you, and the humans happened to be in the way.”

“That is right,” said Tabitha. “The humans were supposed to stop them. They failed. The rest is not important to you. Our meditations on space-time will never have any effect on humans.”

“Very well, I will now go and see what is to be done about defending your home.”

The Witches twittered briefly amongst themselves and then said, “Report when you know more.”

Gideon resisted the urge to bow his head although he did nod at Agnes on the right – he did not know whether he was supposed to openly acknowledge her help or not – and left, with a subdued Dr Poole.

“We were invited here to protect those creatures,” he said as they walked out.

“Just as I told you.”

“What about that stuff about space time. Did you get any of it? Did you believe it?”

“Dr Poole..”

“Evan.”

“Evan, it ain’t my job to sort out just what The Witches are doing in their own home, especially as the physics is far beyond me. I didn’t ask them for details as I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have understood any answer they cared to give. What I do know is that the black robed guy set loose a force that’s been killing and enslaving humans, and that’s what matters to me and what should matter to you. As Haven City is in Midi hands, and we’re cut off from Earth the Witches are the only ones with the resources to keep us fighting. That means, in the immortal words of one of my former colleagues, we’re the witches bitches until something else happens.”

“Guess,” said Poole, as they came out into the afternoon light. A glance across the river told Gideon that the Midi force had decamped, taking what wounded they could find with them, but leaving the bodies of the dead. The grim task of taking away and burying the creatures they had killed was being done by musketeers. A small patrol was following the Midi force at a distance, with strict orders to keep out of sight and not to engage.

“If your committee had thought to whistle up a couple of companies of paratroopers with some of that light artillery that they air drop along with the troops then all this could have been avoided. They would have taught the Midis real respect for human technology.”

Poole shrugged. "The committee always talked about negotiation and the example of passivism."

Gideon found Captain Toms, Captain Hannigan and artillery commander Captain Chifley waiting for him inside the visitor's centre.

"Can we have a word, sir?" said Toms in a way that made Gideon think there was trouble. It was trouble of a kind. "A lot of the musketeers are complaining we didn't go after the Midis when they retreated," he said, when they were all seated around what had been a display table and was now a communal dining table for the musketeers who slept in the building. All the musketeers were out on various jobs so they were alone. Poole came along as he had no place else to go.

"That's right, we didn't go after the Midis," said Gideon. "They still outnumbered us and you've no idea how raw you guys are. I mean, of the musket shots, how many of those hit home? I saw some of the musketeers closing their eyes when they fired. I saw shots going off the support beams at the far side. The idea, guys, is to keep your eyes open when you fire."

"We only just got the muskets," said Hannigan. Gideon had given her rank as she seemed to dominate any room or meeting she was in. He had no reason to regret his decision but, like the rest of them, she knew nothing of military matters.

"That's right," said Gideon, "you only just got them and, if you'll recall we've had real trouble with the bayonet fitting on those muskets. So not only are most of our musketeers firing blindly and slowly, they can't fit bayonets on our mere thirty or so muskets and expect them to stay on. Added to that most of the newer recruits haven't even got it straight what company they are in, let alone any idea of working as interacting teams, and you guys want to take on Midis in the open? Even with the losses they took they'd still outnumber us five to one and they're pretty good with those spears. The graveyard 'll fill up real quick."

"Maybe not this time then," conceded William, "but what about next time. Those guys 'll be back."

"Sure the Midis will offer a rematch but here's the thing. When we get the muskets right, I'm sort of hoping to move up to a Minié rifle - Mid-nineteenth century," Gideon added hastily when he saw the puzzled look on the faces of all his officers, except Captain Chifley. "Rifles have grooves on the inside of the barrel to make the bullet spin." He made a turning gesture with his hands. "That makes the bullet more accurate. But rifle bullets have to grip the barrel so if you're loading an ordinary musket bullet from the top you have to force the bullet down." He made forcing motions of loading a rifle with his hands. "That takes a while, really slowing down the reloading time. A Captain Minié of the French army devised a conical

bullet which expanded when fired. The user then doesn't have to force the bullet down. The bullet expands slightly to fit the grooves on the way out. We can get the accuracy of a rifle with the loading times of a musket. North and South did a lot of damage to one another with Minié rifles during the American Civil War. If we can put a rifle in the hands of every musketeer and train them in how to use it, the Midis will soon learn what it's like to mess with humans several hundred metres out."

"Sounds great," said Hannigan, "when do get we get them?"

"It's going to take months."

The officers groaned.

"We could always negotiate with the Midis," said Dr Poole.

"Sure, like that's worked real well in the past," said Hannigan. Her mother was a slave somewhere to the East of Haven City.

"What about bolt action?" said Chifley. "That's pretty simple. If we forget about the magazine it would have one moving part plus the trigger mechanism."

"We've been over this. It's more than one part for the bolt and it's all precision machining work," retorted Gideon. "Plus we'd have work out how to make a proper cartridge - one shell holding the bullet, the powder and the percussion cap at the base, and get the bullet to fit the barrel. I mean the stuff we get out of the Witches isn't even metal. It's some composite material stuff. It isn't a bad substitute for steel but it ain't steel. If it was steel maybe we could look up books that would tell us about the tensile strength or if we had a trained metallurgist we could ask him or her. We might also be able to build machines to make all this stuff to military level tolerances. As it is let's aim for a Minié rifle and hope we can make it work without the barrel splitting."

"But you said that'd take months," said Hannigan.

"Well, yeah. Much of that is basically because we have to make the expandable bullet somehow from scratch with the Witch's material. On the other hand we can solve the remaining problems with muskets and get them out in the hands of our guys real quick. Once we've got the design right then The Witches machinery is probably good enough for the components we want, and they can make them in a snap."

"Let's do that," she said.

"If we do that and use muskets, and take the fight to the enemy," said Gideon, "then we have to use the tactics that went with muskets."

"Such as..?" said William.

"Musketeers have to stand in line and volley fire, as they did on an eighteenth, early nineteenth century battlefield. Volley fire means that there is a chance of even muskets hitting something in front of the troops. Volleys can be devastating when

done right – and if the other side is obliging enough to charge our front. But that means loading quickly in the heat of battle and firing on command when all the Midis in this world are charging at us, yelling. That also involves not listening to music devices and – big ask here - not closing your eyes when you fire. That requires training and training, and did I mention training.”

The officers exchanged looks. “Then train us,” said Toms.

“Did I also mention we’d have to reinvent-reimagine all the drills. I’ve never studied the details of the drills and it’s been nearly two centuries since they were used outside re-enactments. Also, we need way more people. We’ve got fifty plus counting non-combatants. We might be able to hold the line here with a party of our size, but there are thousands of Midis I’m told. Our force would just be swallowed up once we move beyond the bridge.”

“There are more of us coming,” said Toms.

“I heard more, too,” said Hannigan. “Lots more, now we have weapons of a sort. They’re just trying to figure out what to do about Bishop.”

“This is this principal of the summer camp I’ve been told about,” said Gideon, “The violent passivist?”

“We prefer to think of him as rabid rather than violent,” said Hannigan.

“Sound about on a par with my good friends at the HEO,” said Gideon. “Is this guy running a jail or what – how come these new recruits can’t get away?”

“It’s not straightforward,” said William. “The new people have decided to all go at once – a mass breakout kinda thing.”

“Okay, whatever,” said Gideon, “but until something happens we are only going to send patrols to the other side of the river – and what about cavalry?”

“Cavalry?” echoed the musketeer officers.

“Sure, you know, guys on horses with swords that yell charge and then charge. Even the Midis had horses - just to pull carts, I guess, but were still using them. If we’re going to do dumb stuff like stand in lines to fire muskets, I’d like cavalry to protect our flanks and screen our force from inquisitive Midi scouts. Napoleon had cavalry, Caesar had cavalry on the flanks of his legions while fighting barbarian hordes. Why can’t I have cavalry, even if it’s just scouts? What about these riding societies I keep hearing about? Will any of those join up?”

“Bishop has kept those guys well out to the West,” said Toms. “They haven’t been heard of since the Midis came, so no-one here knows what’s going on with them?”

“They don’t have phones?”

Toms shrugged. "They keep to themselves. But if it's just a question of scouting, there's always the drones at the Summer Camp."

"Drones?" said Gideon. "As in remote controlled flying devices that carry cameras?"

"The drones at the Summer Camp are just toys," said Chifley.

"Well, yeah," said Toms, "but they're usable out to a few clicks, and the Midis won't have any answer to them."

"Toys or not, the musketeers could use an aerial recon unit," said Gideon. "But at the same time, if anyone has contact with these horse loving groups, tell them we could do with horse persons who are okay with violence."

The next day they began to work out the drills with the muskets they had, and tackle the remaining problems with the weapons. A further complication was the addition of a strap so that the weapon could be carried over a musketeer's shoulder, but the machinery in The Witches' structure was soon producing the components. The musketeers assembled them, then made their own cartridges by wrapping powder in a piece of paper along with a musket ball, using a stapler to seal the ends. Spades were produced. Gideon thought to request ground sheets which could double as tents and a jacket. A full uniform would take too long but a jacket, at least, would make the musketeers look less like a partisan band, or so Gideon reasoned.

The resulting item of clothing had a similar colour to the almost-black metal used in the muskets, with the material having the same smooth feel, although it was as flexible as any cloth from Earth. A jacket made in a conventional way has more parts than a musket, but The Witches machinery could make them in one piece except for the buttons. Production would have started at once but for certain musketeers, mostly female, messing with the cut and design of the jacket, to the point where it became a coat with a belt which had to be made separately, along with a buckle. Finally, Gideon stepped in to put a stop to the changes, insisting that production start and be damned to the fashion consequences.

The first of those coats were coming off the production line somewhere in The Witches' home when two young men wearing long dress coats, slim ties, waistcoats, stovepipe trousers that showed their socks and chunky brogues stained by hiking overnight from the Summer Camp, turned up at musketeer HQ, the tourist centre, and asked to be sworn in.

Gideon was taken aback. They were the first recruits he had seen in a while, and the first he had seen in what amounted to fancy dress.

"What's with the coats and stuff?"

“We’re Teddy Boys.”

“You mean Teddy Boys as in early 1950s Britain?” asked Gideon, astonished.

“Well, yeah,” said one, “although the style’s influence extended through to the 70s.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Gideon, “but I don’t understand how come you’ve turned up at my recruiting station dressed as Teddy...” Two more recruits came into view. One had white pants and a white jacket, as if he was on his way to a 1970s disco, the other had poorly dyed red hair and was wearing a black Tee shirt emblazoned with the words “Goth As Fuck” in giant, silver letters.

“Um, guys, what’s going on?” asked Gideon. “Why am I suddenly in a youth culture fancy dress parade?”

“We convinced the powers that be at the Summer Camp that what we needed was a parade to celebrate youth culture,” said one of the Teddy Boys. “Like, what we needed in response to our homes being overrun, our parents killed or enslaved was to celebrate youth styles through the ages. We thought they’d never go for it but they did. We got dressed up enough to make them think there would be a parade, waited until the main instructors were distracted and then escaped.”

“There’s a big group of hippies just behind us,” said the other Teddy Boy.

So it proved. There were perhaps twenty young people with floral pattern shirts and dresses with flowers in their hair.

“Make war not peace, baby,” said the apparent leader of this group and handed Gideon a peace symbol medallion. “Give it back when this is over.”

“Okay,” said Gideon who thereafter kept the symbol on his desk. “Line up with the others and take the oath.”

In the following days Gideon got rockers, mods, Australian sharpies, punks with elaborate hairdos, e-girls and e-boys, chavs and beatniks, wearing turtleneck sweaters and berets and sporting wispy beards to signify their beatnikness. Then there were skinheads, head bangers, girls as flappers and bobby sockers, bikers (Monster glared at them), soul boys, more goths, metal heads, emos, riot grrrls (Gideon had to ask) and surfers in shirts, shorts and sandals.

“Too cold overnight, man,” complained one of the surfers. “If we’d gone as Teddy Boys we’d have had jackets.”

One youth turned up in in a kaftan with one half his head shaven, but the other half sporting long, flowing locks.

“I reject labelling and categories,” said this apparition.

“Line up and be labelled a musketeer,” said Gideon.

Captain William Toms oversaw the induction process which involved the recruits being given one musket, one bayonet, one groundsheet/tent, eventually one coat (complaints about the style and cut were ignored) and one small spade.

“What’s this for?” the recruits often asked on being give the spade.

“You’ll find out,” they were told.

“When we assign companies, do you want to do it by musical styles?” asked Toms at one point. “It doesn’t seem right to mix disco with punk.”

“Nope,” said Gideon, amused by the turn of events. “We’ll take the Foreign Legion approach. Mix ‘em up.”

The resulting parades were sights to behold.

These diverse recruits learned to reload while standing in line, fire by volleys and then by odds and evens – as the officers debated just how they would handle the volleys - reloading while standing and firing while crouched. They charged with bayonets, dug weapon pits, filled sandbags, learned cover and concealment, and cover and charge tactics – one group covering the other while it moved, then the second group covering the first. They sneaked around in the forest, worked out a form of camouflage paint for their faces, learned not to expose themselves on a ridgeline and why the flanks and rear of their formation was important, but above all they learned to load and fire their muskets. Load and fire; load and fire; load and fire. Somewhere along the line in this peculiar mix of eighteenth century and special forces tactics, the musketeers began to get the idea, discovering earth’s rich and lengthy history of military conflict.

One of the officer’s courses included a discussion, which Gideon sat in on, about the greatest comebacks in military history.

“Soviets against the Germans,” said one officer-candidate. “The Germans destroyed the equivalent of the entire pre-war Soviet army in the first year plus some and still lost.”

“The Soviets were never in any real danger of going under after the first few months,” said another candidate, “and the Germans were already in deep trouble. Even taking Moscow wouldn’t have done much. Napoleon occupied Moscow and look what happened to his army? My money is on the French in the Hundred Years War. The French nearly went under but then Joan of Arc happened; they changed tactics – they listened to du Guesclin – and they organised a siege train with cannon for breaking open fortresses.”

“For straight comebacks,” said a third, “it has to be King Alfred against the Danish Vikings. They chased him into a marsh with a few followers, and he got back

to take Wessex and for his successors to form England. Granted he had the militias and lords in a couple of counties to draw on, but he was still in a marsh.”

“We’ve gotta put a word in for the Reconquista,” said a female officer candidate, “the Spanish retaking Spain from the Muslims. The Spanish were driven into the North West part of the peninsula but managed to retake the entire country – admittedly it took the best part of eight centuries to do it, but it was still a good come back.”

In the midst of all this preparation, Gideon was told that Boothroyd wanted to meet him in a spot well to the West and South of the Witches’ structure. He was aware that, rather than walk onto the human summer camp, Boothroyd had set up a camp somewhere deep in the forests to the South. A number of Black Band Midis, rather than submit to Red Band domination, had fled into the forests and a few of those had found their way to Boothroyd’s camp. Provided Boothroyd stayed away, Gideon cared about none of this. He cared far more that a few of the captured Black Band wounded had escaped – the humans did not have the time, energy or expertise to run a prisoner of war camp, and complete lack of interest in doing so – and far more importantly the escapees had taken a few of the new muskets with them, after seeing how they were loaded and fired. Gideon belatedly put the muskets and ammunition under guard and sent out patrols, but the newly armed Black Bands were not to be found. He had an uneasy feeling that they would gravitate to Boothroyd’s camp.

Before starting out for his meeting with Boothroyd, Gideon handed Monster a badge that had, with difficulty, been produced from the Witches interface.

“What’s this man?” said Monster, looking at the badge in his hand. It consisted of a star emblem with the word Haven set above it and MP in much bolder letters set directly on the star.

“MP means military police.”

“I know what it means, man,” said Monster. “You expect me to go cop? It’s not my side of the law. I’ve done some bad shit.”

“I don’t give a damn about bad shit in the past. You break up fights as it is and do it well, without causing more hurt than necessary or bad blood. None of the guys are going to backchat you.”

“Dunno man – I dunno anything about the law. Cops follow rules. They have procedures.”

“At the moment we don’t have any procedures to follow. Just attach the badge to the top left of your jacket for the moment (Monster had opted to wear one of the new jackets) and see how it feels, and you’re a sergeant.”

Monster did so, glancing at it warily every now and then, as if it might come alive and bite him. “Whadda you want me to do at this meeting with Boothie?”

“Nothing at all. You wearing a badge should be enough to upset Boothroyd. Stand around and look mean – that’s a procedure for you.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Boothroyd had one of the Black Bands guide Gideon, Monster, William Toms and a half dozen of the older musketeers to a small clearing maybe an hour’s walk South of the structure. The musketeers, with loaded firearms and fixed bayonets, confronted the ex-biker plus perhaps ten Black Bands, a few armed with human muskets, standing in front of a bundle – an object over which a tarpaulin, probably stolen from the visitor’s centre, had been thrown.

“It’s the Witches Bitch and shithead, with the mouseketeers,” said Boothroyd.

“Bad to see you too Boothie,” said Gideon. “I see we’ve found the missing muskets. Before the fighting starts tell me why I’m here.”

“I need three months worth of food for my guys plus ammunition for these guns.”

“Why should we give you any of that?”

Boothroyd lent down, threw aside the covering on the bundle behind him and dragged its contents upright. He held a girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, pretty with dark hair. She winced in pain as he held her up, cradling one arm with her other.

“Kat!” said William. The other musketeers growled and started cocking their weapons. Boothroyd dug a small knife had had found somewhere, into the girl’s throat. A Midi moved behind Boothroyd and the girl and pointed its musket directly at Gideon. The other Midis brought their muskets up and cocked them.

“This could get interesting,” said Boothroyd, grinning unpleasantly. Then he caught sight of the badge on Monster’s jacket and his grin vanished. “What’s that?” he said gesturing at the badge with his chin. “They’ve made you a cop?”

“Do I gotta arrest people before I kill ‘em?” Monster asked of Gideon, “or can I kill ‘em then arrest them?”

“Don’t think you can arrest anyone who’s dead,” said Gideon. “But if you’re going to kill them there’s not much point in arresting them first. Just adds to the paperwork.”

“Paperwork?” said Monster.

“We’ll find you a form to fill in.”

“Uh guys?” said Kat.

“I just gotta move the knife a little and the girl is history,” said Boothroyd. “You give us the food and ammo and we back outta here, leaving the girl behind.”

Gideon thought for a moment. He had blown away the Red Band Midi on the bridge, but that creature had not known the rules for threatening hostages. Boothroyd did.

“We fetch you the food but no ammo. Your guys have already stolen enough cartridges for defence.”

Boothroyd shook his head and dug the point of his knife a little deeper in Kat’s skin. “Food and two thousand cartridges with those firing caps, man, or your sweet little friend here becomes a casualty.”

“Sir,” said William. “Is it that important about the ammunition?”

“I don’t care about the food,” said Gideon, ignoring his second in command, “but I don’t want you roaming around in my rear with live ammo.”

“Food and two thousand rounds,” said Boothroyd.

“Food, bayonets for the muskets you’ve got and, oh, one hundred cartridges won’t matter much I guess.” Gideon noted that Kat was not pleading or begging for her life, just standing there, one foot forward and her weight on the other as if, as a last ditch attempt to save her life, she would kick Boothroyd in the shins.

“Food and two thousand,” said Boothroyd shaking his head again.

“Looks like we’re going to have an interesting time Boothie,” said Gideon bringing up his own musket. He planned to go down on one knee, when and if the shooting started.

“Start shooting,” said Kat defiantly. “I’ll be alright.”

“Food, bayonets and three hundred cartridges,” said Boothroyd.

Gideon thought for a moment. “Three hundred then, but if I or any of my musketeers get you in their sights again Boothie, we’re going to pull the trigger.”

Boothroyd grinned – a grin like that of a shark. “You wanna make the first shot a good one.”

Musketeers had to be sent back to the visitor’s centre for the goods while Boothroyd faded into the forest. Eventually the material was left in sacks in the clearing where it was picked up by Black Bands and Kat left behind in a heap, cradling her left arm with her right.

“Hurt your arm?” Gideon asked Kat.

“Think the bone is fractured,” she said. “Boothroyd wanted to be my boyfriend and that was the price of saying no.”

“Okay, we might be able to do something about that. Mr Toms, take Kat into The Witches, when we get back.”

“Yes sir.”

“And Mr Toms.”

“Sir?”

“Do not interrupt me in the middle of negotiation again.”

“Yes sir.”

“Witches?” asked Kat.

“In the structure – you’re going to be a medical guinea pig for aliens.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, they don’t seem to use probes. Captain Toms will explain. What is your name incidentally?”

“Katrina Shevchenko is my full name.”

“Russian?”

“Ukrainian please.”

Gideon turned to Monster who had been smiling broadly, a most uncharacteristic expression, and chuckling to himself since Boothroyd had left.

“What’s got you so amused?”

“The badge, man. I’ve found a way to really piss Boothie off.”

After that Monster was seldom seen without his badge of office.

Chapter Ten – Room Nine

“And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” – the Gospel according to St John, Chapter 8, verse 32. Inscribed in the foyer of CIA headquarters.

Kat underwent treatment with Agnes and emerged from the structure with her arm in what looked like plaster, wide-eyed from the encounter.

“Those were the dudes in the structure all along,” she said to Gideon when she saw him at the visitor’s centre. “The one that helped me spoke English.”

“Their own language sounds like a bird song but they don’t seem to have trouble with any other language. How’s the arm? How long do you have to keep the plaster on?”

“Much better thanks, maybe two weeks for this fracture, Agnes said.”

“Two weeks isn’t long for a fracture.”

“Got treatment with some machine in there. Agnes said she’s still trying different things, but what she did helped a lot.”

Gideon thought that he should not be happy that Aliens were experimenting on humans, but Agnes and the structure’s machines had proved remarkably effective in

treating the wounded and sick to date. Aloud he said, “How come I had to pay ransom to get you back? What were you doing with Boothroyd?”

“Me and my boyfriend Vincent were looking for you. We wanted to join the fight. But we got lost.”

“Is Vincent around anywhere?”

“He died defending me.”

“Oh – did Boothroyd kill him?”

“Yes, it was him.”

“Wish I’d known that. I wouldn’t have let him go. He’s a no-good piece of shit but I didn’t think he’d stoop to murder.”

“It was a fight. Vincent lost.”

“Whatever. Sergeant Monster!”

“Yeah, colonel.”

“If ever we lay eyes on Boothie again we are to bring him back here for a fair trial and then a proper, judicial execution.”

“Paperwork is shit,” grumbled Monster. “Just kill the fuck.”

“Have to go through the motions, even for Boothie.”

Monster said what he thought about going through the motions for Boothroyd.

Ignoring his provost marshal Gideon strolled on, chatting to Kat.

“If you want to join up...”

“I sure do – I want to start shooting at stuff.”

“...Then find the logistics guys,” (a few of the non-combatants had been gathered together in what had been grandly dubbed ‘Logistics Command’), “and they’ll get you set up. You’ll have to wait before shooting stuff.”

“Huh! Why can’t I start shooting now?”

“You’ve still got the plaster on, you have to be trained and, in any case,” Gideon pointed out, “there’s nothing to shoot at. The Midis aren’t coming, not yet anyway.”

“When are they expected to come?”

“When they come, I guess. I’ve got forward posts and scouts out, but there haven’t been any sightings.

“Sounds like you don’t know what’s happening.”

“There’s no ‘sounds like’ about it – I don’t know what’s happening. Are you always this annoying?”

“Annoying is what I do,” said Kat. “I haven’t had a chance to annoy anyone for a while. Now I’m back in civilisation I can get back to what I do best.”

William then took Kat away, leaving Gideon thinking that would be the last he would see of their newest recruit for a time. She was back in half an hour with another female musketeer – older to the extent that she could be an under graduate rather than a school leaver.

“Excuse me Mr Gideon, colonel, sir,” Kat said.

“Until you’re sworn in colonel will do,” said Gideon bemused. “I thought I’d gotten rid of you.”

“This is Olivia.”

“Sir,” said Olivia standing to attention. The musketeers had no salute.

“Do you have a surname, musketeer?” asked Gideon.

“Ballantine, sir.”

“Well Musketeer Ballantine, why has Kat dragged you away from training?”

“She said you wanted to know what was happening with the Midis, sir. They’re assembling a large force in Haven City, but they’re having trouble getting together the carts to bring food for them.”

Gideon’s jaw dropped. “How many Midis?”

Ballantine shrugged. “Several thousand as far as anyone knows. They’re building carts.”

“How do you know all of this?” Gideon’s voice rose as he spoke.

“Well, sir, um my mother is still in Haven City. She’s still got her phone and manages to keep it charged. She calls me whenever the family that owns her is not around. She talks to the other slaves and tells me any gossip.”

“Your mother is being held as a slave and still has the use of her phone?” Gideon thought there were some parts of campaigning against the Midis he could not believe.

“She keeps it hidden in a sort of covered over area out the back of the house she sleeps in. She gets cold at night sir, she is sometimes hungry and they work her hard. That’s why I’m here.”

“I understand, musketeer. It’s why we’re all here. But... I have to ask, you didn’t think to pass on this military information to any of the officers?”

Olivia was taken aback by this. “I thought everyone knew, sir, and I’m just a musketeer. Why would it be up to me to tell anyone?”

Gideon sighed. “Never mind, musketeer. Thank you for the information. You can now return to training.”

“Yes sir.”

Olivia departed, leaving behind Kat grinning triumphantly.

“Being annoying is not all you do it seems,” said Gideon.

“It’s a lot of what I do,” conceded Kat, “but I have other uses.”

The revelation engineered by Kat led to a fraught confrontation between the musketeer officers and Gideon who demanded to know why no-one had thought to pass on freely available information directly relevant to the military situation. Two of them said they had heard rumours but it had not occurred to them to pass those rumours on. Gideon ranted at them for a time while they all hung their heads and then ordered the formation of what amounted to a military intelligence agency.

A few musketeers with an interest in such work would be put into a room in the visitor’s centre and they would set up a network of humans with phones like Olivia’s mum. This network would be strictly about gathering intelligence. It was not to do what intelligence agencies of previous ages might have called “wet work” such as blowing things up or murdering hapless Midi sentries. This agency would also interrogate prisoners – no, there would be no torture – and possibly run deep scouting missions. But above all its operations would be kept a secret. If the Midis realised what was going on, there could be huge problems for the many slave humans in Midi hands. Anybody who broke that secrecy would be sent back to the Summer Camp.

The room in the visitor’s centre chosen for this new secret organisation was one of a series of numbered storage areas on the top floor at the back. There was a nine on the door so it was called Room Nine, and that’s what the organisation came to be called – Room Nine, eventually Rm9. Although it did little more than collate information from various sources to pass on to Gideon, when the Midis eventually became aware of the phrase “Room Nine” the secrecy with which it operated resulted in the organisation taking on a sinister mystique.

Human things they could see and had some chance of understanding killed many of their brethren, their reasoning went, so this thing they could not see or understand must be deadly indeed. Eventually, just as Roman matrons use to scare their children into obedience by declaring “Hannibal ad portas” (Hannibal is at the gates), Midi mothers would say “Room Nine! Room Nine!” and their children would run to bed squealing.

While number nine storage room was still being cleared out, Gideon had to deal with a different sort of terror in the form of his newest recruit.

Kat emerged from the visitor’s centre just as Gideon, standing on the veranda, had finished discussing training schedules with senior officers. “Colonel.”

“You again,” said Gideon, without heat, thinking that he really should set up an office with a proper staff whose job would be to keep casual visitors away. “I thought I’d given you a job in our new organisation, until the plaster came off.”

“You did, and I’m doing it. I’m seeking information. What is your romantic situation? Do you have anyone waiting back on Earth?”

“You mean do I have a girlfriend? You’re being annoying again.”

“It’s what I do. Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Well, I was dumped just before.. what am I doing? What business is this of yours?”

“The Room Nine people thought that while they were setting up, they’d fill in time by working out someone you could date.” Two musketeers had been appointed to the new, secret agency, both women.

“Room Nine is about military intelligence not my personal romantic affairs. Tell them from me that if I hear about the matter again, they’ll be doing continuous laps of the structure. Come to think of it, have you been introduced to our punishment of jogging around the structure?”

“You can’t punish me; I still haven’t taken the oath,” Kat said, completely unabashed. “That’s why they sent me, to see if you wanted to look at the list of possibles.”

“Wait, there’s a list?”

“We’re still thinking about it and, no, you can’t have Angela on it. Your mooning over her has been noticed, you know, but she’s taken and too young for you.”

“I do not ‘moon’,” retorted Gideon. “I take a healthy interest in the doings of my musketeers.”

“Healthy interest? Is that what they call lechery on earth now?”

“I’ve decided I’m going to create a new military offence for civilians called ‘annoying the commanding officer’.”

“We thought one of the younger widows – also, there are a couple of teachers back at summer camp..”

They both heard a noise that Gideon had not heard for weeks, the sound of a vehicle approaching. In the distance, on the road that ran beside the structure and all the way to the Summer Camp, they saw an enclosed, jeep-like vehicle with large tyres driving towards them.

“Oh crap, I think that’s Bishop,” said Kat. “I was never here.”

Before Gideon could retort that he wished she had never been there, Kat had gone and the car had stopped in front of him. A man perhaps in his forties with a new testament beard, scraggly, dark hair and wild eyes, dressed in jeans and a tee shirt unfolded himself from the driver’s side of the vehicle. Gideon then saw that Dr Evan Poole was in the passenger seat. The doctor had set out on the road to the summer

camp with food for the journey several days previously. Gideon had considered his departure a mild irritant disposed of – the good doctor’s specialty was ethics and he had no use for an ethicist. The driver soon proved to be more of a problem.

“I need to speak to the lunatic in charge of this shit shower,” said the newcomer.

“That’s me,” said Gideon. “Colonel Gideon Swift.”

“You’re no colonel,” the newcomer sneered. “You’re a part time storekeeper sergeant.”

“The term is quartermaster sergeant and I have four companies here, plus artillery and support groups. That force can be commanded by a colonel so I’ve given myself the rank. Calling myself a general seemed over the top.” Gideon thought that the newcomer could outdo even his old friends at the HEO on Earth in charm and tact.

“I’ve come to get my senior classes back. This,” he waved his arms to indicate the new extensive encampment of lean-tos, tents and sand bag huts that made up the sleeping accommodation of the musketeers – they had run out of space in the structure and visitors centre long ago – “is dangerous nonsense, upsetting the negotiations. And I want the horses back.”

“Horses?” said Gideon.

“Don’t ‘horses’ me. I want them back.”

“I don’t know anything about horses.”

“Bullshit! Our entire herd and the riding society is missing. We want them back before any of the them get hurt playing your stupid soldier games.”

“If you see them,” said Gideon, “send them this way. I could form cavalry units.”

“Where are they?” the newcomer looked around. “And where are my students? I know they’re here.”

Gideon realised that although the road had been busy with musketeers marching back and forth and various units had been training within his sight just a minute before, now there was not a soul to be seen.

“They were around before, now you’ve turned up they’ve all gone. You might take that hint.”

“Ha!” said the newcomer without humour. “I’m tired of this nonsense. I let it go for a while because the students wanted to play soldier and I couldn’t seem to stop them, but people are being hurt, Evan told me.”

Evan had also gotten out of the car. “Um, Gideon, this is Owen Bishop, he’s sort-of principal of the summer camp.”

“A none too-popular principal it would seem,” said Gideon. “His senior students have run away, and now his horses. If you see these horses and, I assume, their riders let me know. I’d like to have them.”

“Don’t play games with me,” said Bishop. “You’re in a lot of trouble Sergeant Swift.”

“Just trouble? I thought I’d left trouble behind long ago for mortal, terrifying danger. You know your Dr Benson basically shanghaied me and a few others to come here as a soldier unit.”

“Against the express direction of the HSC.”

“HSC?”

“Haven Settlers Committee,” said Poole.

“You guys really like acronyms.”

By that time Monster and Honey had turned up, to see who the newcomer was, and work out why all the musketeers had suddenly vanished. Honey had brought her sword which she held two-handed, blade resting on her shoulder, as if she intended to chop off Bishop’s head, but just grinned at him. Monster was wearing wrap-around sunglasses he had found in the visitor’s centre on the first day and was his usual unsmiling self.

“Nice wheels dude,” said the Provost Marshall. “Electric?”

“As a matter of fact it is,” said Bishop. “Can be refuelled at any power point by clean renewable energy – who the hell are you?”

“Biker brothers called me Monster.”

“Monster is another of Dr Benson’s unwilling recruits who is now my Provost Marshall,” said Gideon. “He’s very effective in settling disputes.”

“Disputes have to be referred to the disputes resolution committee,” said Bishop, stiffly. “I’ll send you the procedure manuals. The emphasis is on a peaceful settlement.”

“Monster isn’t into procedures or paperwork,” said Gideon. “Or peaceful settlement of anything much.”

“Last committee meeting I was at cops had to break up,” said Monster.

“The lady with the sword is Honey...”

“I ain’t no lady,” said Honey.

“.. who was also shanghaied by Benson and so is none too fond of anyone involved with the Haven hierarchy.”

“Haven office dudes can kiss my slim, Asian ass,” said Honey.

“Okayyy,” said Bishop, taking a step back. “Take the matter up with Dr Benson. He sent you here. I didn’t. As I said we told him that negotiations would

work. Now I need to see these creatures you call Witches and ask them what they mean by this protection business.”

Poole caught Gideon’s eye, shrugged his shoulders and raised his arms as if saying ‘I tried to tell him’.

“Sure,” said Gideon, a plan forming in his mind. “Just give me a moment to tell them we’re coming.” He stepped inside the Visitor’s Centre to find his senior officer, Captain Toms, waiting out of sight, along with many of the musketeers who had been busy until training until Bishop arrived.

“So this is where you’ve all got to?” said Gideon. “Mr Toms.”

“Sir?” This was said tentatively.

“Can you drive that electric vehicle? I didn’t see Bishop using any keys.”

“Summer Camp got lots of those things. Bishop locked them up in case anyone tried driving here. You push a button to start.”

“Excellent. You’ll use it to drive back.”

“Sir?” This was even more tentative. None of the musketeers had any stomach for a confrontation with Bishop.

“I’m taking your principal to see the Witches. Tell Monster that I said to sit in the back seat with Bishop for the return trip under strict orders to push the man out if he causes you grief.” Toms cheered up noticeably at this. “Take armed musketeers and grab those other vehicles by force if necessary, although it’d be good if you didn’t hurt anyone. Waving the muskets around and showing them Monster should be enough. Also take whatever supplies you can find, particularly medical, but use discretion – can’t leave the others to starve. If there are others of the right age who want to sign on, you can make return trips.”

“Yes sir – um, are we going to use those cars to fight?”

“No, no,” said Gideon, “I doubt they’d be of much use close to the action. Even a Midi spear might go through the hood and mess up the engine. But we need to transport supplies, evacuate wounded, maybe we can even move small commando teams close to target, and we can recharge them. This world will open up.” Gideon considered adding that no one had thought to tell him that there were vehicles of any kind at the Summer Camp but decided to let the matter go. Maybe he should have asked. “Now get busy.”

“Yes sir.”

“Where is Sam?”

“Playing cards out the back with Dean.”

Gideon walked through the centre to find Dean instructing Sam in how to bid in a bridge game.

“Now you say two clubs,” Dean told Sam, after looking at his cards.

“Two clubs.”

“Cards have to wait,” said Gideon. “Sam come with me.” The android dutifully followed the colonel back to the roadway to find Bishop in a stilted conversation with Honey and Monster.

“The committee meeting that got broken up, what was it about?” Bishop asked Monster.

“Dollars, man, or drugs,” said the biker, shrugging. “Brothers did four kegs. Shit kinda got confused.”

Bishop then saw Sam.

“What is that?”

“An Android on loan from the Witches,” said Gideon. “The facial features are the same. Thought it might prepare you for meeting with them.”

“You think I’d be put off by mere differences in appearance,” sneered Bishop. “The Haven settlement is all about inclusiveness and acceptance of diversity.”

“That’s a shame because the Witches don’t give a damn about diversity one way or another. They’re also all one gender, take them or leave them, in case you’re wondering.”

“Which gender?”

“Never asked, but I think of them as female for convenience. There’s a male one somewhere in Haven City, we think.”

The Witches were lined up in the usual order when Gideon led Bishop to the meeting chamber and proved to be in fine form.

“Why would we go to the trouble of creating the Star Gate, unless it was so that humans could keep this planet safe?” said Tabitha, when Bishop questioned her about the need for security. “We didn’t consider humans to be violent, but we didn’t think they’d be so .. peaceful.”

“Why didn’t your people fight these creatures or call for soldiers before this?” said Agnes. “If it was not for Gideon and the other humans we found, the Midis would have come in here.”

“You didn’t say what you wanted,” Bishop pointed out, “or warn us that these creatures were on their way.”

“We didn’t know these creatures were coming,” said Sabrina, “until they were almost here. We thought we’d escaped from our rival, but we also thought that if something did happen humans would take care of it – and they didn’t.”

When they finally emerged from the structure Gideon thought that Bishop seemed subdued, but he forgot about the principal when he saw the horses. A herd of

them, maybe forty or so with their riders. These were the usual run of students dressed any old how, except for the leader, an older broad-shouldered man with a full beard wearing a broad-brimmed bush hat and what appeared to be an Australian dtriza-bone. His appearance was reminiscent of a Confederate cavalry commander. Perhaps not a JEB Stuart who had been a young man, but maybe a Nathan Bedford Forrest with a touch of the eccentricity and intensity of Stonewall Jackson.

“Been looking ‘fur a Colonel Swift,” said this apparition. “Fixing to join up.”

“Geoff is this where you got to with the horses and your students,” said Bishop. “I thought we’d agreed on negotiations. Talking is still the way.”

Geoff leant forward on his saddle.

“Time for talking is over,” he said.

“Just stand over in the car park, you’ll see the line, and we’ll give the oath,” said Gideon.

“Been practising charging in line on the way down but need weapons.”

“We’ll sure see what we can do,” said Gideon.

“Geoff you cannot do this,” said Bishop, raising his voice. “This is against the express direction of the committee..” Geoff swung off his horse, “We agreed that there is no place for military action..” continued the teacher. Geoff advanced on Bishop, “..this settlement will not be about violence and fighting..” Geoff hit Bishop hard on the jaw and the principal went down. The mounted students cheered.

“Been meaning to do that for a time,” said Geoff. “Where do we line up?”

Gideon had his cavalry.

Chapter Eleven – Deception

All warfare is based on deception.

— *Sun tzu, The Art of War, 6th Century, BCE.*

The Midis finally found or built enough carts for their supply needs and an army of some thousands with siege equipment marched towards the structure, singing as they went. It was now mid-Autumn but the days were still fine, even in the uplands of the plateau, albeit with a chill in the night air that made the Midi warriors appreciate their camp fires. For them it was a pleasant hike with a promise of victory at the end. For such a large army would surely sweep away the few humans that dared to defy them, even if they had sticks that thundered and rocks that banged. At night, as they passed the hard liquor around the camp fires, the Midis amused

themselves by devising inventive ways putting the humans they expected to capture to death.

Human slaves brought along as servants and porters now understood enough of the Midi language to catch the drift of what was being said and quailed for their fellows by the structure. They had heard of other fights around the bridge but had dismissed them as the work of enthusiasts. BD was with them again as an interpreter, having been bought for that purpose by the Midi general, leaving her son behind in Haven City in the care of others as assurance of her good behaviour. She gave her fellow slaves a reasonably accurate account of the fight, including a correct estimate of about fifty or so on the human side. When the slaves heard that number they shook their heads. With any luck the young humans would vanish into the forests close to the structure rather than stand up to the Midi host.

But there were disquieting signs, for those who cared to read them, that the humans at the bridge would not fold easily. The marching warriors would see humans, always at a distance on ridge lines or at tree lines, sitting on top of one of the four legged creatures that they bred. The Midi warriors distained to ride the creatures as not in keeping with the traditions and military virtues of the 'right people' as they thought of themselves, but they had to admit the human-horse combination made a daunting sight.

However, the horse-humans refused to stand and fight, simply watching the marching columns for a time before vanishing into the trees and behind hills before any Midi scouts could get near them. That must mean, the Midis told each other. That the horse-humans were cowards who would never pose any threat to their column. It did not occur to them that the cavalry scouts were simply following orders to occasionally show themselves to the Midis but not to engage, as part of a plan by the human leader, Colonel Swift. They did not guess that the colonel wanted to draw the column in to camp by the gorge within spitting distance of the structure still confident but beginning to wonder what these strange humans were up to.

One night, Midi sentries saw another camp fire in the distance that could only be human. A group of skilled trackers were dispatched to capture the humans around it and, they hoped, drag them back for questioning and perhaps some sport. The trackers never returned. Midi sentries thought they heard cries in the distance, but in the morning patrols discovered only splashes of what might be blood spilled by their brothers and a single dropped spear, in a disturbed patch of forest. Tracks of the four-legged creatures that the humans used led off East, towards the structure. They were not to know that the human cavalry commander, Captain Geoffrey Parker, earned

himself a rebuke from Colonel Swift for the night ambush, which went against orders.

“Still too risky for your guys,” Gideon snapped at Parker. “How many used their phones for directions at night?”

“Not the guys I picked, man,” said Parker.

“You do not man me, you sir me,” said Gideon, sharply. “None of them had been in a fight before and suddenly they’re killing Midis at night? You could have lost them all.”

“My guys needed bleeding, sir, and we were real careful. If they hadn’t come by the route we expected then we would have pulled out. At the ambush site there were three humans for every Midi.”

“Still I expect my officers to obey orders, not organise ambushes that don’t make any difference one way or another. I want them at the bridge confident that all they have in front of them is a bunch of cowardly humans. Gottit?”

“Yes, sir.”

Privately Gideon thought that Captain Parker showed promise, if ever he could be persuaded to obey orders.

Training picked up. This included another session with officers about the greatest battle plans.

“Stonewall Jackson’s Shenandoah Valley campaign of 1862,” said one candidate. “It wasn’t a battle plan as such, but Jackson kept three Union armies outnumbering his command more than two to one on the go and won several victories by unpredictable forced marches on interior lines. The campaign is still studied worldwide.”

“Cannae,” suggested someone. “Hannibal enticed a whole Roman army into attacking his centre, then closed in his wings and killed them all. Or maybe Teutoburg Forest in the first century. Arminius set the whole thing up, even altering the terrain so the Romans would go where he wanted them and building a wall where the ambush was going to be. He snuffed three legions plus auxiliaries, guys. That was a proper disaster. The Romans never tried to conquer East of the Rhine after that.”

“What about von Manstein in Russia after Stalingrad,” said another, “when the Soviets thought they had the Germans on the ropes. He lured the Soviet forces into a trap, even evacuating some places to make them come on, then encircled them. A masterpiece.”

“No, no, no, guys,” said another, “the all-time classic masterpiece has got to be the Austerlitz campaign. Napoleon set everything up so that the Allied powers would do what he wanted them to do when he wanted it and they obliged him by performing

on schedule. They hit what they thought was the weak French right wing, only for Napoleon to use forces they didn't think he had to smash their weakened centre on the Pratzen Heights then come down and trap a big part of their extended army. He knocked the shit out of the combined armies, and got to redraw the European map. No wonder the French built the Arc de Triomphe."

Over at the Midi camp, the commander, General Kang, had identified a simple explanation for the first two minor human victories at the structure and for the disappearance of his scouts, one that did not rely on battle plans and technology.

"Humans must be using sorcerers," he informed BD, after the woman was required to kneel before him. "Sorcerers could make thunder sticks and rocks that bang?"

"There are no sorcerers with the humans, Lord," she replied. "They are flesh like you. The thunder sticks are things from earth they have made, Lord." Like all other Havenites, BD's military experience was very limited, but she suspected that the camp fire had been a lure and the missing group had been ambushed. However, as a slave, human and female – BD was not sure which category counted the most against her - she had also learned to only answer the questions asked of her and stick to the facts. She also wondered if she would see Gideon again as anything other than a corpse and decided to put the matter from her mind. Her new owner had made it clear that she had been purchased to translate pleas for mercy, not to negotiate. The initial negotiations of the preceding Midi force had been a mistake which had contributed to the defeat, the general declared. BD knew that wasn't right but held her tongue. As the Midi army was many times the size of the previous force and had brought big siege engines to bombard the humans into submission, she thought that perhaps the general had some reason for his confidence.

Then, as they neared the bridge, BD heard what had once been a familiar buzzing noise and looked up. She could just make out what she characterised as a toy helicopter, but with four rotors rather than one, hovering well above the column. She wondered over the sight for a few moments before she realised it must be one of the drones from the Summer Camp, and that it was watching them. No one asked her about it, and the Midi warriors dismissed it as a new type of bird. But BD remembered Gideon at the bridge blowing out the captain's brains, the musketeers howling and the disappearance of the scouts and thought that maybe the Midis would have a battle on their hands.

When they arrived at the bridge after days of travel, BD thought that the sandbag fortifications and stone barriers across the bridge itself looked the same as

when she had last been there in the summer but with even fewer visible humans. There were two on top of the sand-bag citadel who looked bored and another on top of the structure, who was little more than a dot in the distance.

A small patrol sent to the bridge reached one end without challenge, but when the first Midi set foot on the bridge's decking a thunder stick spoke from across the gorge and a bullet pinged off the bridge support just above the intruder's head. A deliberate miss by Skull on Gideon's orders. The patrol withdrew and the Midis set up camp at what they imagined to be a safe distance from the bridge, and those strange human weapons. This meant there was a large clear area in front of the bridge, then a hastily erected mess of tents, lean-tos and ramshackle huts, mostly housing the quality. The bulk of the common Black Band warriors slept in the open, further back, covering themselves with whatever they could find. When night fell the area blazed with campfires. Tomorrow they would start construction of the big siege engines. That night the soldiers would rest. On the other side of the gorge another fire blazed and, to BD's astonishment, she heard music.

Three six nine
The goose drank wine
The monkey chewed tobacco
On the street car line

The line broke
The monkey got choked
And they all went to heaven
In a little row boat

Clap clap..

In the light of the bonfire she could see people moving.

"What are the humans doing?" asked Kang, puzzled.

"They're dancing, lord," said BD bewildered.

"Dancing? Is that human dancing?" Kang was used to orderly court dancing. This dancing seemed chaotic to him. "What does the music mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything, Lord. It's a silly song."

"Humph!" said Kang. "It is right the human dance on their last night of life." He moved away.

For her part, BD had a sneaking suspicion that the dance party had been put on for the benefit of the Midis and that a deeper game was being played. She also thought that she would have liked to go dancing.

Across the gorge, Gideon was being pestered by Kat.

“We’re still trying to finalise the list of suitable partners for you,” she said, as they both sat with their back against the structure, watching the dancing. Earlier Gideon had condescended to dance with Honey and then with Kat, more to show that the commander was one of the guys, than with any real interest in the party which, as BD had guessed, was about distracting the Midis. Then the sound system played a song bound to get everyone on their feet, even youths born decades after the song was written on another planet, the Hollies *Long Cool Women in a Black Dress*.

Even if the Midi sentries had not been distracted by the dancing in front of them, they would have had trouble seeing the party of humans deep in shadow at the bottom of the gorge and downstream of the bridge, faces blackened. They moved across rocks that turned the river into rapids at that point, hanging onto ropes that had been put in place as the Midi force marched.

“Hollies – we’re on schedule,” whispered the leader to his female second in command, looking at his watch. “What’s the next checkpoint.”

“Twenty minutes,” she whispered back. “We should be half-way up when they play *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*.”

“Wham!” said the leader in disgust, who had joined as a punk. “I can’t believe I agreed to Wham!” The choice of songs to keep the assault party on schedule had caused far more trouble than the plan for the assault.

“Let’s just get to the top and stay alive,” said the second in command.

Back at the party Gideon was questioning Kat about the list of romantic partners that had been drawn up for him. He had long given up trying to stop the junior musketeer, as she now was, from pestering him, but thought the pestering should stop short of his romantic life.

“Don’t I get a say in this matter?” he asked.

Kat pretended to think about this for a moment then shook her head. “Nah, you’re a guy; you’d mess it up. You do get a right of veto though. Not much we can do about that.”

“Do the girls also get a veto?”

“Oh yes. It’s a shame, but there it is,” said Kat, cheerfully. “People will make their own choices in life.”

Both were then dragged away to dance by others – Gideon by the senior medic Fredericka who had already worn out her boyfriend dancing – and were still on their feet when *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go* was played, the assault team leader, Evan Grey, still grumbling under his breath about the choice of song. By that time the Midi sentries were too busy laughing at the antics of the humans on the other side of the gorge to notice, if they had been able to see anything, as the human assault party climbed over the lip of the gorge on the Midi side and hid themselves in a dense patch of forest well away from the camp site. They remained there, watching the sentries change and checking in on their phones, as the party wound down to a few slow dancing couples. Then Elton John's *Your Song* told them it was time to move.

They snuck out from their hiding places to creep up on the bored, half-asleep Midi sentries. The Midi Red Band in charge of the sentries had checked on them for that shift then gone back to his tent, while the rest of the army snored comfortably in whatever billets they had been able to arrange, dreaming of what they would do to humans. Wind stirred the grass. The Midi sentry fire had long been allowed to burn out. One Midi, thinking of women, beer and home, and unaware that a human was creeping up on him, gazed across the river at the few couples still dancing.

"Is that human sex?" he said to a fellow sentry, a tent brother, although they did not actually have a tent.

"Maybe we could grab a human female tomorrow and see how they fuck?" said the tent brother.

The first Midi chortled then went on a few paces and lent on his spear, one cheek resting on the wood. A slight sound made him turn back to his tent brother who, it seemed, had vanished. The sentry blinked, shook his head and then a human hand slapped over his mouth and a knife was thrust into his back, under his ribcage angling up to reach the heart. It missed. The sentry gurgled and tried to scream, clawing at the hand across his mouth. His human assailant thrust again, then again and the Red Band's body flopped to the earth. Lucas, who had lost a sister to the Midis while being told that negotiations would work, knifed the body again and again, trembling, until Jennifer, his second, pulled him off.

"He's dead Lucas," she said. "Trust me, he's dead."

Even stood up, still trembling from his first kill, shook himself, then wiped the bloodied knife on the creature's clothing.

"All others down?"

"Yep – no sound."

Lucas was aware of a faint light in the Eastern sky. When the sun rose, it would almost be shining in the eyes of the human musketeers who were about to pour across the bridge. That could not be helped.

A ready reaction force of perhaps twenty Midis had been left, fully clothed and equipped but sleeping close to the bridge, to be woken by the sentries in what the commander considered the unlikely event of the humans forestalling their doom. These Midis found themselves rudely awoken by humans, tape applied to their mouths, hands bound and led across the bridge. Just as they reached the barriers on the human side they could see those barriers were being dismantled and humans with fire sticks were pouring across. Just beyond that they saw more humans seated on the four legged animals which they favoured, apparently waiting for their chance to get across the bridge. The leader of this group looked at the Midi Red Band in charge of the captured detachment in a way that Midi thought was disrespectful.

The creature consoled himself with the thought that the humans seemed pitifully few compared with the vast host – a full legion – that had been sent against them. Two large tubes on wheels rolled passed him without the Red Band realising what they were or shaking his conviction that his side would win in the battle that would soon be fought. Then the many slights against the honour of the Right People would be repaid.

Chapter Twelve – Would you live forever?

At the battle of Koln in 1757 Prussian soldier-king Frederick the Great saw his guards hesitate to attack the Austrians. “Rascals,” he called to them, “would you live for ever?”

When dawn broke Midis stirring out of their tents and huts were startled to find two lines of humans drawn up between their camp and the bridge, carrying the fire sticks they had heard about. At either end of these lines, the flanks, were the horse-humans they had seen in the distance marching up to the bridge, but this time they were close and not running away, their muskets were slung on their back and they carried swords at the hips.

The humans who seemed to have appeared from no where, started yelling.

“Haven, what do you want to do?” yelled Captain Toms.

“Kill! Kill!” the humans roared, the sound echoing off the structure.

“When are we going to do.”

“Now!”

“What do we do when we see a moon, Haven, we howl.” Toms put back his head and howled. The three hundred and ninety two musketeers in two lines, as well as the cavalry and artillery crews all howled. That got the Midi’s attention. The space in front of them filled up as Midis, still unaware of danger of being in a musket killing zone, gathered to see the fighting humans and the horse persons up close. Two Red Band officers at the front of the crowd were looking around, plainly wondering where the sentries and the small force by the bridge had got to, but the other Midis were simply curious. Plenty of time to kill the humans later.

Gideon, for his part, waited until he thought there were enough Midis in the kill zone.

“Mr Toms,” he said. “Time to Pump up the volume.”

“Musketeers, silence!” said Toms. The musketeers stopped howling. “Volley fire present.” Muskets were presented. The command had not been given seriously on Earth for the best part of two centuries. The hammers on nearly four hundred muskets were pulled back.

“Weapons hot, people,” said Toms.

“Weapons, hot,” whispered one of the musketeers. “We’ve just got muskets and he’s saying weapons hot.”

“Aim low, guys,” shouted Captain Hannigan from the other end of the line.

Silence.

The Midis had heard of fire sticks, although they were still not sure what they did. They had not been a major feature in the first battle at the bridge. However, most of them were now uncomfortably aware that they were looking at the wrong end of one and started backing away, realising that they had left their shields by their beds. One of the Midis, possibly slow witted, started laughing, thinking the humans looked funny.

“At my command musketeers will volley and charge,” called Toms. “Remember, only as far as the camp line.”

Then Gideon saw BD, her head showing just above the Midi crowd, obviously bewildered over this turn of events.

“BD,” yelled Gideon. “For heaven sake get down.”

BD saw and heard Gideon, but she was still sufficiently unaware of military matters to not want to get out of the way of nearly four hundred muskets. Captain Toms turned to Gideon. “Wait,” he mouthed. Gideon shook his head. They had to strike now.

“BD get down!”

At the very last moment the interpreter, finally realising the danger she was in, grabbed someone beside her and dropped to the ground.

“Musketees.. fire!” yelled Toms. Nearly four hundred muskets spoke at once in a deafening crash. Smoke filled the air. The explosive provided by the Witches was not gunpowder but, unlike modern explosives, it was smoky. Midis started screaming. “Musketees, charge!”

The humans charged.

Until that moment, despite all that had happened, Gideon could never bring himself to take his young soldiers seriously. They listened to music on parade and texted while on patrol. But they had been told to wait, blood boiling, while relatives and friends had been dragged away and killed. They had been told that negotiations and the passivist approach would work when their parents were enslaved. They were told that they did not understand, and that violence was not the answer when Midis wrecked their homes. Armed, disciplined and trained they were now a coiled spring of pent up fury and frustration aching to unleash themselves against an enemy that had caused them so much torment. They were ordered to charge; they charged – hard.

“Kill! Kill!”

The swept on to the Midi line, a tsunami of stabbing and thrusting bayonets wielding by musketees who forgot lectures on passivism, negotiation, and the need to understand different viewpoints in favour of a red rage that might have been familiar to a Greek city state citizen of more than two thousand years ago. The God of War folded them in his black wings, the musketees later told Gideon, and they felt that savage joy of killing their enemies.

Midis further back in the crowd who had survived the volley and tried to stand vanished in a spray of blood with bayonets in their chest and throat. Gideon saw Midis tossed into the air others simple flattened into a bloody mess.

Monster’s jaw dropped open.

“Fuck me,” he breathed.

“Recall. Recall,” said Gideon in alarm. He could see some of what was happening through the smoke and realised the humans had already reached the Midi camp line. He had a bugler. This was a musketee with a trumpet which he could barely play but he had worked out how to make a “Ta da!” noise reliably, lingering for a while on the “Da” sound that the musketees now knew as the recall. At the same time, another musketee with everyone’s phone on speed dial sent a message to that activated alerts. This peculiar mix of ancient and twenty first century technologies stopped most of the charging musketees who in any case had run out of victims. The Midis were running. A few musketees continued to charge heedless of

shouts, trumpet calls and phones buzzing, until they stopped, out of breath in the middle of the Midi camp, fortunately with the Midis running even harder in front of them. All but one was able to make it back. The one exception was found later, face down with a Midi spear in his back, his musket and pouch of cartridges missing – more company for Colin in the hero's graveyard.

As the Musketeer line reformed Gideon walked over to where he had seen BD fall to find her pushing away the body of a Midi that had died on top of her.

“We meet again,” he said.

“I got mixed up in a battle – again,” she said, standing up. Her hair was a mess, she had Midi blood on her, but she still looked good, Gideon thought. The companion she had pulled down with her proved to be another, younger girl completely bewildered by the turn of events.

“I thought it was a demonstration of some kind,” she said, “but you killed them.”

“That's the idea,” said Gideon, “We're musketeers, it's what we do. Shoot enough Midis and they might see our point of view.”

The girl thought about this heresy for a moment, pushing a strand of dark hair out of her face.

“Can I join up?”

“Sure, but you'll have to wait behind our lines for the moment. We're sorta busy right now.”

“What about you?” said Gideon to BD after the girl had left. “I guess your son is still back in Haven City.”

BD nodded.

“Well you won't have any choice for the moment. Look behind you.” In the distance, on the other side of what was now a ruined mess of tents, shacks and lean-tos, where the bulk of the Black Band soldiers had been sleeping, the Red Band offices were yelling and pushing Midis, now armed with spears and shields, into a large column, much wider than the one they had faced on the bridge. They may have been surprised and taken casualties but there were still plenty of Midis and now they were angry. “Those guys might not understand that you're on their side...”

On the other side of the river, the Musketeer's two large mortars opened fire with a “Whump!” Gideon and BD watched as the shell arced over, falling beyond the Midi columns where it failed to detonate.

“Not to mention the danger from our artillery – when they get the range and timing of the fuses right,” Gideon said.

They walked back slowly towards the bridge just as the musketeer lines opened up to let through an electric car towing two cannons, their crews trotting along behind.

“Really big guns,” said BD.

“Cannons,” said Gideon. “Quite a struggle to make.”

Napoleon would have considered the weapons to be the equivalent of standard twelve pounders in his era, although he would have puzzled over their construction. This included an outer sheath of composite material to prevent the inner sheath, the barrel, from splitting. However, he would have appreciated the comparative lightness of the composite material, which meant the weapon could be moved around the battlefield with ease on wagon wheels, particularly when they were pulled by an electric car.

The car was unhitched from the cannons and moved back over the bridge well out of harm’s way, as the mortars spoke again. Those mortars, the first produced, had proved too heavy to move around the battlefield easily, even with electric cars, so they decided to shift them up close to the bridge, in its own sandbagged position, and hope that the Midis came with range. They had. This time the shot fell short and the shell, packed with musket balls, exploded well above ground. The resulting shower of musket balls hurt no-one but gave Midis and inkling of what earth technology could do to soldiers in close packed formation.

Gideon watched as the cannons were trained around to face the Midi column and loaded. In the distance he saw a black speck. Through binoculars he carried he could see that the speck was a slightly taller and broader version of the Witches, wearing a black rather than a red robe.

“Who’s the dude in the black robes?” he asked BD.

“I’ve spoken to him a few times. I think he’s creepy. But he mainly deals with the generals, the chiefs. All the other Midis avoid him.”

“Can you speak his language? Does it sound like birds twittering?”

“He gave me a computer program to learn it. I can speak some with difficulty - and, yes, it does sound like birds. Very difficult to make the sounds.”

“Well, then the Witches in the structure on the other side of the gorge must be his enemies. They speak a language like that, and they look a lot like him but have red robes, rather than black.”

“I heard you had contact with the creatures in the structure,” she said. “So they’re like that guy.”

This conversation was cut off by one cannon firing with a “Whump!” recoiling nearly a body length. The ball, which every musketeer watched with interest fell

short, but bounced on the dry ground, contemptuously tossing aside a piece of the Midi camp. It managed to miss the main column but smashed a Red Band who did not have the sense to dodge, into pulp. Musketeers yelled with glee. Midis howled with outrage.

The second cannon fired sending a ball straight into the Midi column tossing aside the smashed bodies of warriors. The Midis howled. The mortar spoke again, this time getting the range and length of fuse right to reduce the head of the column to red ruin. But it was a huge column. The front was about half the length of the musketeer line and as deep as the line was wide. The Midi command had brought the equivalent of a small division to smash aside the pitiful line of humans.

Midi officers worked out that the longer their troops stayed in the cleared area they longer they were targets for these new human horror weapons. Orders were yelled. Trumpets sounded. The kettle drums started the “tum, tum, tum” of an attack.

“Now we’re for it,” Toms muttered.

“Neno huff,” shouted one of the Red Bands.

“Beeno haff,” the column roared back. Spears were clashed on shields. The attack began.

“Mr Chifley,” yelled Gideon.

“Sir!” Chief was up the front with his beloved artillery.

“When they get close enough fire grape and then get your crews back. Mr Toms, when the artillery crews are back its volley by ranks and then odds and evens.”

“Sir.”

The musketeers had basically made up their own drill for firing muskets. Instead of the idea of the time of muskets of rolling fire – Gideon wasn’t quite sure what that meant – the humans fired by alternate ranks and then by half ranks. Each musketeer in each line had counted off as an one (odd) or two (even). He was aware of the cavalry commander, Captain Geoffrey Parker, staring at him. Gideon shook his head. The cavalry’s time would come but it had not yet arrived. For the moment they were on the flanks ensuring that the Midis attacked the human line head on, rather than try to outflank it. Caesar would have understood the arrangement.

The cannon’s spoke again, firing balls that smashed files of Midi warriors but were otherwise like firing shots into water. Five cannons and more would teach the Midis a sharp lesson about artillery but they had only two.

“Neno haff!”

“Beeno haff,” roared the column.

All the time the drums continued beating. “Tum, tum, tum..”

“Remember your training,” Gideon heard the officers say, as they walked up and down the line. “Fire on command. Aim low.”

“What are the Midis saying, with the call and response?” Gideon asked BD.

“Its old, I think,” she said, “but it’s something like ‘who are we?’ ‘we are death bringers’.”

“Okay, thanks. Mr Toms, if the Midis yell we should yell back.”

“Musketeers,” roared Toms, “What do we want to do?”

“Kill! Kill!”

“When do we want to do it?”

“Now.”

“What do we do when we see a moon, musketeers? We howl.”

They all howled.

“There’s still time for you to get back on the other side of the bridge,” Gideon said, turning back to BD. “You’re a civilian.”

“If you guys lose, it won’t matter where I am,” she said. “I just hope to see my son again.”

The cannons had time for one more solid shot, then, with the column looming large in their sights, the artillery crews shoved a heap of musket balls into the barrels, stood back and pulled the trigger lanyards. This time much of the first few rows of the column disappeared in a bloody mess and the massive column checked for a heartbeat. The artillery crews took one wheel off each gun, and retreated to the main musketeer line, rolling the wheels in front of them - just as the artillery crews at Waterloo had done, taking refuge inside the Anglo-British squares.

The column loomed within spitting distance of the other side of the abandoned, lopsided cannons.

“Musketeers, volley fire present!” yelled Toms.

Again, nearly four hundred muskets came up to the shoulders of Gideon’s youthful volunteers. Monster and Honey, who were behind the line to deal with breakthroughs, drew their swords. Fred and Sam, also in the rear party, brought their spears up to the ready.

A Red Band shouted a command and the Midi column started to spread out while still moving forward. That was a worry but for the moment it presented a bigger target.

“Remember, only the front rank – front rank fire!”

Crash! The Midi column was obscured by smoke, but they could hear screaming.

“Change.”

The front rank stood up and started frantically reloading. The second rank knelt.

“Fire!”

Crash!

“Change. Odds and evens! Remember odds and evens! Odds, fire!” Toms paused. The idea was to ensure that the volleys were evenly spaced. There should be no respite, or time when no muskets were loaded. “Evens fire!”

The half line volleys were less impressive but still amounted to a distinct crash that made BD jump and caused more screams from the column now obscured by smoke. Another shell from the mortar roared overhead to hit the other end of the column.

“Odds fire!” Crash! “Evens fire.” Crash!

A wave of Midis appeared from the smoke to throw their spears.

“Incoming,” yelled Toms.

The musketeers ducked, the preferred way of avoiding the spears, and went on with their business, or used their weapons to knock the missiles to one side. Two struck home.

“Medics!”

“Don’t stop to help wounded,” roared Toms. “Look to your front. Keep firing.”

Having thrown their spears the surviving Midis flung themselves at the musketeer line screaming “Beeno haff!” – they were brave, that no one doubted - to be impaled by bayonet thrusts from several directions at once. One was shot by an officer with a musket. Monster and Honey stepped through the lines to deal with one each. Gideon saw Fred thrust his spear into a Midi only for the creature to become stuck there, like a fish on a hook. The android flipped the body over his head for it to narrowly miss a medic helping one of the wounded. The business of volley fire went on.

“Odds fire!” Crash. “Evens fire!” Crash. “Change!”

The wave of Midis petered out.

“Cease fire, Mr Toms.”

“Cease. Reload!”

For a few more moments the only sound was that of the musketeers ripping off the top of new cartridges with their teeth, and ramrods pushing the power, ball and paper down barrels. Then a puff of wind blew away the smoke to reveal a long carpet of dead, with a distinct mound where the first volleys had struck home. The shattered remains of the column was retreating. The humans howled. The Midis stared back in bewilderment. Beside him, Gideon heard BD let out her breath.

“You did it,” she said softly.

“Artillery!” yelled Gideon.

The two artillery crews pushed through the ranks of the musketeers, rolling the wheels of their pieces in front of them. They reassembled the cannons – the Midis had done nothing to them – and loaded them. By that time the Midis had spread out into a still very large mass of warriors that stared in bewilderment at the humans, as the cannons opened fire again. A few Midis at least had the sense to get out of the way of cannon balls only for the balls to smash warriors further back. The mortars roared again, and the humans watched as the shells arched overhead to explode among the mass of their opponents. Some Midis tried to judge the flight of the shell and get out of the way but there were still screams. It did not occur to them to lie down. Warriors did not lie down in a battle.

Red Bands were trying to push and prod the surviving Black Band Midis into a column for another advance – a move did not seem to appeal to any of them, as far as Gideon could tell through his binoculars. Most of them milled about, uncertain what to do. Time to unveil his next super weapon.

“Cavalry! Captain Parker. Time to go to work! Form up on the open ground to the right and hit ‘em hard.”

“Sir! You heard the man troopers! In line with me, march out!”

The cavalry from both wings trotted out, moving slowly at first. There were barely forty in total, not much more than a troop, but the relatives of many of them were Midi slaves. A few had seen relatives or friends die at Midi hands, while the authorities had preached peace from a safe distance. Like the infantry they were going to take the fight seriously. They trotted behind the still firing cannons and out to the right. The Midis stared at this new development with dread.

They watched, barely noticing even when the cannons sent balls skipping into their ranks, as the cavalry moved around to their flank and out to perhaps two hundred metres where they sorted themselves out into two lines. Gideon noted with interest, that the spacing was regular, with the second line close enough to support the first. His newest arm had been drilling hard. Parker drew his sword his troopers following suit, metal scraping in scabbards. Unlike the infantry the cavalry musketeers all had swords, as well as muskets which they had slung over their shoulders for the charge.

Gideon ordered the artillery to stop firing. The musketeer infantry stopped yelling.

Silence.

“Cavalry,” Parker yelled, holding his sword up and putting his horse into a trot.

“Hooah!” screamed the troopers, also thrusting swords skywards. Then they howled. The Midis visibly quailed.

“Pick up the pace. Keep in line on me.”

Mounted on greys with the occasional white stallion, all the riders would have appeared as enormous demons to Midi eyes – demons bearing down relentlessly on them. As with the Midi’s own form of attack much of the charge ritual was show, to terrify their opponents. It was working.

“Line with me, line with me,” Gideon heard Parker waving his sword to indicate a line.

The Midi warriors seemingly rooted to the spot, stared in horror. As the human swords were razor sharp and the troopers had been practising wielding their weapons from horseback, the Midis had good reason to be afraid.

“Cavalry, charge!”

They charged, at just the right distance to get up to full speed but not for the lines to become disorganised. Someone in the second row had a trumpet and used it. “Ta tarr, ta tarr,” as if they were blue-coated US cavalry troopers.

In the days of cavalry and spear troops on earth, charging warriors carrying spears would have been asking for trouble. If the Midis had stood and presented their spears against this new devilry, life would have been a lot harder for the troopers and for the bigger targets, their horses. They didn’t. They threw down their weapons and tried to run. Too late. The first line hit the Midi column with a distinct “whump”, a sound like that of gridiron or rugby forwards meeting mid-field.

It was the turn of the Musketeer infantry to gasp.

Bodies were tossed into the air. Others vanished in a bloody spray. Arms and legs severed by swords slashing down went in all directions. As Gideon watched, one female trooper leaned out of her saddle, cut down hard on a Midi where the neck met the shoulder, chopping nearly to the heart, then let the momentum of her charge pull the embedded blade out of its body. Very neat.

The column completely disintegrated, Red Bands joining Black Bands in running as fast as they could away from danger. The humans had won.

“Oh Lord,” said BD on seeing the cavalry charge. Then Gideon heard her mutter “serve the bastards right”.

Chapter Thirteen – Girl Stuff

American comic and film maker Woody Allen was once asked in an interview if his success had made a difference in his relations with women. “It’s made a huge, a fantastic difference,” he said. “Now I strike out completely; strike out totally, with a much higher class of women.”

The musketeer infantry trotted after the cavalry and found work destroying a couple of knots of Midis who had stood and thought to form circles with their spears pointing outwards. As previously agreed, the cavalry looked for easier targets while the infantry moved up and dealt with the hold-outs. A single volley almost wiped out one knot. Another surrendered. After that the cavalry, fury spent, rounded up Midis who had dropped their weapons and pushed them into the path of the advancing musketeers. BD trailed along, occasionally helping with translations. That meant Gideon’s command soon had more than 2,000 prisoners, many of them wounded.

“Mr Toms march our prisoners back to their camp so they can clean up all the bodies and help with their own wounded. They can use whatever food and medicine they’ve brought with them. Good work everyone! Captain Parker.”

“Sir.”

“Keep your guys going along the main road, scouting on either side. Deal with any Midis with weapons, ignore the rest. Any prisoners you take, strip them of weapons and shields, cut off the colored bands they have,” this meant they lost their status as warriors, “and point them back towards their homes.”

“Yes sir – if we’re going to stay out, sir, we haven’t got anything with us.”

“We’ll send cars to resupply you, so you can set up a camp tonight – I’ll get the drivers to call you.”

“What about the horses?” asked BD when the officers had gone. “What will they eat.”

“The horses can eat grass,” said Gideon pointing to the planet’s brownish grass on one side of the road. “Even more nutritious, for horses, than the stuff on earth or so I’m told. There’s plenty of food for them still – winter hasn’t come.”

“They can eat wherever they are?”

“Pretty much. In the days when horses were a factor in military campaigns on Earth, going where there was enough for them to eat was a factor, but for the moment I don’t have to worry. This part of the plateau has plenty of grass. Have to store up fodder for them soon though, and there’s some back at the summer camp. Winters can be severe, I’m told.”

“Snow on the ground most times,” said BD, “and always up here for a while. We’ve even got a ski resort up in the mountains there.” She pointed North West to where Gideon could just make out snow-covered peaks above the forest. He had been aware that there were other human camps, but he had not given them much mind previously, as he had no means of reaching them. Now he thought that the cars may be able to get there. They started walking back towards the structure, past the large group of Midi prisoners sitting on the ground, waiting for others to be rounded up. Many of the Red Bands stared daggers at Gideon. They knew he was the human general. Gideon ignored them.

“I would like to get back to my son, soon,” said BD.

“You’ll have to stay with us a couple of days until all this lot returns, and then I guess we can drive as far as the nearest Midi outpost in one of the cars, along with any other human who wants to go back. What happened to your husband incidentally? Is he still around?”

She shook her head. “Killed by the Midis in the first couple of days. He was one of the few to resist, if only by yelling that it was all an outrage and the Midis would answer in court and so on. He was trying to organise a passive resistance protest when they killed him.”

“Passive resistance...” Gideon exclaimed, then stopped himself. “I’m sorry to hear that. He sounds like a man of convictions.”

“The right convictions, maybe, at the wrong time,” said BD, then she changed the subject. “You’re going to send the Midis back?”

“Can’t really keep them,” said Gideon. “Just take their weapons, cut off those tags of theirs and send them on their way.”

“That’s mean enough, actually. They put great value on those tags. Marks their cast.”

“It’s either that or kill them. I don’t have the guys to run prison camps for so many of these creatures and no means of building them and feeding so many would be a real pain. We’re obliged to do something about the wounded and that’ll be bad enough.”

“Guess.”

“Where is the nearest outpost, anyway?”

“A few Midis were left at Terminus. It took us about four days to get here from there – slow going with all our carts ‘n stuff and mostly uphill, but just an hour or so in one of the cars at the most. There’s nothing between there and here apart from a car charging station.”

“Saw Terminus marked on the maps – end of the network?”

BD nodded. “The Eastern-most point in the monorail line. No one lives there but there are some sheds for the railway, a camping ground beside the stream for those who like that stuff, and a bridge across the stream. That’s it.”

Gideon filed away the information that a bridge across a stream might be a natural choke point, without realising that it would later become vital.

“Not into camping huh...”

They walked on chatting amiably, Gideon forgetting his command cares for the moment, until they reached the now much battered Midi camp site. In the days of battles fought with muskets on earth, the other side’s camp site was a prime target for looting, but the Midi’s personal possessions were of no interest to humans, except perhaps as souvenirs. A few human slaves had been liberated in the battle and Captain Janice Morrison, head of Room Nine although this was never acknowledged, had organised them to search the Midi camp for anything that might have intelligence value. This meant anything in writing. Room Nine also planned to speak to some of the prisoners.

“Find anything much?” asked Gideon. The slaves, of all ages and sexes clothes mostly in rags, stared in awe at the human commander. A few waited to introduce themselves. “A lot of tents and huts chief,” said Morrison. “Haven’t found the command tent yet.”

“It’s over there,” said BD pointing further back in the area that had been spared destruction in the fighting. “Only place you’ll find anything in writing if that’s what you’re looking for. We passed the body of General Kang back that way.” She gestured at where the column had been. “I saw him try to stand in the way of the cavalry. I’ll take his ceremonial dagger if you don’t mind and give it to his senior wife. He treated me like dirt, but she was nice enough and they set great store by those things.”

“Sure,” said Gideon. “Show us the tent and then get the dagger before the prisoners come back.”

The command tent proved to be a largish structure of canvas with carpet on the floor and even a couch with an occasional table on which a cup had been left, and a dining table with chairs - all items that had been looted from Haven City.

“General Kang lived large,” said Gideon to Morrison who had come with him.

They pushed aside a flap of canvas to find themselves in the general’s sleeping quarters, with his ample bed and writing table complete with dispatch case and medieval-style pen and ink. To both officers surprise the dispatches - the writing itself looked like a series of blocks and lines - were written on lined foolscap paper looted from Haven.

“Can you read Midi writing?” asked Gideon of Morrison.

“Couple of the older guys we freed say they’ve been studying it. BD’d be helpful with this.”

“She’ll be going back in a couple of days. Her son is still in Haven City.”

“Of course, I heard she had a son.”

Gideon was always surprised at the way that Havenites, especially the women, often knew, or at least knew of, almost everyone else in the settlement. In his previous life of just a few months ago on Earth he had known his immediate neighbours but not very well.

The officers checked out the surrounding tents to see who might be permitted to sleep so close to the general. One of these, directly opposite a back entrance to Kang’s tent, contained a single, low bed with a robe of black material that felt like velvet to touch left lying on it. The mattress, the same general thickness as human mattresses, had a pad with a button on one side. Gideon touched the button and the bed shrank down into a single sheet. He touched the button again and it reflat. In its single sheet form it could be folded up and placed in a backpack in one corner of the tent. A pouch on the front of this pack contained odds and ends of electronics, including one which might be described as a thumb drive but with a connection that would not fit any human device.

“Looks like the enemy of The Witches hung out here,” said Gideon. “I’ll take this device into them when I report and see if they’ll show us what’s on it.”

BD, when she returned, could not add much to this.

“His name sounds something like Du’Buce in English except you sorta got to sing it. He gave me a device which taught me the basics, with pictures. I guess he didn’t want to bother learning English. He spoke pretty good Midi.”

“We’ll just keep calling him Black Robes - you have that teaching device now?” asked Gideon hopefully.

“Had to leave it back in Haven City.”

By the time they got to the gorge bridge the musketeer infantry had returned with the prisoners and two officers waited for Gideon with reports. One of these was last night’s dancing partner and senior medic Frederica who handed him the casualty list – five dead and twenty wounded. One horse had to be destroyed and two were wounded. That was an extraordinary light toll, given the extent of the victory, but they were still casualties his force of musketeers could ill-afford. Fortunately, the wounded were mostly expected to recover. Then there was Major Powling, one of the older Haven administrators who had managed to walk away from Midi captivity into

the Musketeer camp and was now the force's quartermaster. He reported that ammunition stocks were low.

"But we only fired a few rounds."

"The musketeers still have their cartridges but after we issue replacements we won't have much left. We've been training a lot, remember. We have to make more. Then there is the question of food reserves."

Gideon sighed. "I'll catch up later," he told BD. "Major can you arrange a place for BD here to sleep for a couple of nights?"

"I knew your father, BD," said Powling. "Sorry to hear about your husband. You have a son?"

"I remember you – Jim, isn't it?"

Major Powling nodded.

"I need to get back – Gideon says when the roads are clear."

"Yes that would be wise."

"For meals put her at the command table," said Gideon. Powling looked up at that but said nothing. "BD gotta go. I'll come and get you later. I want you to come with me to the Witches. You can tell me how they compare with the Black Robes guy you've been dealing with."

Gideon took a few minutes to deal with Powling, then was about to recross the gorge bridge to see what was happening with the prisoners when he was confronted by Kat, her musket slung on her back. She had been in the musket line that morning.

"You asked BD to dinner?" she said.

"I did no such thing. I asked that she be put on the command table, so that I can learn more about our enemies."

"You want to talk about army stuff on a date?"

"You're being annoying again. It isn't a date, I told you. We'll be sitting at a table filled with musketeer officers who will no doubt be watching our every move. What are you doing away from your unit, musketeer?"

"We were just watching the Midi prisoners clean up and I got special permission to deal with this urgent matter," said Kat, again completely unabashed.

"Urgent matter," spluttered Gideon. "Since when are my interactions with a civilian interpreter urgent in any way, and I thought I told Room Nine to stay away from my romantic affairs, or lack of them in this case."

"This isn't Room Nine, I'm with two platoon C Company now, as you know, and a few of us have decided to keep an eye on this stuff, in case you do something dumb.... Sir."

“Finally, you remembered to say sir. Dumb, huh, I thought we were fighting so that people could make their own dumb choices, rather than be slaves?”

“You’re taking her to see the Witches later, I was told, sir,” said Kat, emphasising the last word.

“Have you been speaking to Major Powling?”

“The quartermaster? No, I head this from someone in A Company. You’re taking her to see The Witches.”

“You’re forgetting the sir again. Yes, to find out more about the other side. There’s someone or something that looks a lot like the Witches directing this on the other side. BD can even speak a few words of their language.”

“Oh yes, I heard she’s pretty good at languages..”

“Musketeer, I’m busy,” said Gideon, cutting her short. “This discussion is now over. Return to your unit before I insist that you stand double guard duty tonight.”

That finally got rid of Kat but whenever Gideon spoke to BD afterwards, even when he thought they were alone, he was aware of being under the scrutiny of an intelligence service of greater efficiency than anything he could devise. This was irritating particularly, as he knew, BD would soon return to her very young son and that he was unlikely to see her again for some time. One consolation in taking her to see the Witches was that, for a few minutes at least, he would be away from prying eyes, or so he hoped.

Agnes, Tabatha and Sabrina were lined up in their usual order.

“Greetings great ones,” said Gideon. They had finally agreed on how he would address them collectively. “This is BD who was freed in the recent battle which we won.”

Then BD spoke to them in their own language – “*twitter, twitter*”.

The Witches stiffened and, Gideon thought, collectively gasped.

Tabitha twittered back and BD responded hesitantly, waving her arms as she had a tendency to do when speaking. Gideon had warned her about hand gestures and she was careful to keep them muted. Then Agnes spoke, BD replied, then Sabrina, and it went on from there for many minutes, while the mere male, Gideon, who was to report of a full battle on The Witches doorstep, was kept waiting. Eventually Gideon cleared his throat.

“Do the Great Ones want to hear my report?”

BD then said something, laughter in her voice, waving a hand in his direction. The three witches put their heads back and uttered a joyous, high pitched warble. They were laughing, Gideon realised with astonishment. After that The Witches listened to his report, accepting his requests for more food and ammunition as routine

details. Machinery somewhere deep inside the structure would handle that. More as a matter of form, as Gideon suspected that the Witches wanted to get back to talking to BD, Tabatha asked what the musketeers intended to do next. Gideon had already decided on the next move but was reluctant to say anything in front of BD – she was going back to the enemy after all. Instead he said he would have a strategy meeting with his officers and report back. Barring some sort of disaster, however, the Midis were unlikely to be upsetting them by knocking on the front door any time soon.

The business of the meeting concluded the Witches turned their attention back to BD. As Gideon understood nothing of what was being said, he spent his time looking at the portraits on the wall, without learning much. At one point BD said the word “creepy”. Gideon glared at her.

“Not you,” she said to him, then she said something to the Witches, indicating Gideon and the Witches laughed again. The conversation was renewed. After what seemed to Gideon to be a very long time, BD finally said, “Okay, let’s go”, put her hand on Gideon’s arm and steered him towards the exit. To Gideon’s astonishment the Witches stood up and filed off their dais to walk with them to the door, hands or perhaps claws, folded across their stomachs. It was the first time he had seen them standing and they proved to be slight, coming up to Gideon’s chin.

“You were a real hit,” he said, when they got outside. BD laughed. “I was a guy at a girl’s meeting in a different language.”

“I didn’t mean to hijack your meeting, but you got what you wanted, didn’t you?”

“As far as the Musketeer’s needs are concerned, true – but what about the connection between The Witches and your black robed friend. What can you tell me about that?”

“They all know him and agreed with me when I described him as ‘creepy’, although I had real trouble translating the word.”

“That’s who you were talking about.”

“Of course – don’t worry The Witches had different words for you.”

“I’m sure they do but what is the connection between The Witches and Black Robes? You didn’t show them that device we’d picked up at the Midi camp.” Gideon had given the item to BD for that purpose.

“Oh – yes, I forgot, but I’m going back tomorrow. I got invited to what amounts to afternoon tea with them.”

“What? And does this invitation extend to me?”

“Us girls only, I’m afraid, or rather those who can speak the language. I get to meet some of the others.”

“Humph! I’ve been here months and never got beyond that throne room. You’ve been here five minutes and you’re their darling.”

BD smiled. “You know what interested them the most was the fact that I have a small son. No children have been born to The Witches for a very long time. I’ll get to the connection with Black Robes and the device I promise.”

They parted. He had work to do, she had to make her own arrangements for staying, and call the woman who was minding her son. They had a set time she could call. They would meet again at dinner. Although they parted with smiles, Gideon still felt that as he’d been sidelined in his own meeting, BD would think of him as irrelevant. Then Kat turned up yet again, fronting him in the nook with a desk that passed as his office.

“I’m going to have to talk to your company commander about keeping his Musketeers busy,” said Gideon. “You’re here again instead of outside bullying Midis.”

“I’m on stand down. I’ve got to do sentry go-round tonight. Then I’ll impress our prisoners with how ferocious I am so that they won’t try stupid stuff.”

“Well let’s see how that goes,” said Gideon, amused.

“That means I have a few moments to tell you that BD came away from her meeting impressed.”

“Really,” said Gideon. “It seemed to me I was intruding in her meeting. She got invited to afternoon tea somewhere else in the structure none of us have been, while I get left to be attacked by Midis.” Gideon did not much care about the invitation and did not want to go if The Witches were just going to twitter with BD all the time, but it was something to complain about.

“That’s just it,” said Kat. “The invitation was a special thing that no one else has been given. Girls like that exclusivity and if you’ve had a hand in getting it for them then that impresses, and impressed is good. Plus, The Witches really boosted you to her.”

“They did?” Gideon had given up trying to get Kat to call him sir in these encounters. “I didn’t understand anything of what she and the Witches said to one another but the only times the conversation turned to me, The Witches laughed. I’ve never seen them laugh before.”

“The reference was brief but heartfelt,” said Kat. As he had parted with BD maybe twenty minutes previously, Gideon wondered how all this detailed information had filtered down to an ordinary musketeer so quickly. “Coming from them it matters.”

“What you’re saying,” Gideon said, “is that women will listen to what other women say, over men, even when the women are of an alien species.”

“Correct,” said Kat cheerfully. “Who cares what guys think. The Witches told BD they now won’t deal with any other person officially.”

“They won’t? They haven’t told me this.”

Kat shrugged. “That’s what I heard. You brought another human to them who claimed authority – they thought he was crazy.”

“That was Bishop.”

“Aaaah! Now I understand,” said Kat. “I bet he raved at them about passivism and gender equality and they switched off – just like we do in his classes. Now for dinner tonight play it cool..”

“Musketeer,” said Gideon.

“You want to be friendly but don’t moon over her or be ridiculously attentive – guys are so obvious like that..”

“Musketeer!”

“Let the conversation take its course. If you guys watch a film afterwards – I know you do this on one of the devices - don’t try and sit beside her...”

“MUSKETEER!”

“Yes?” said Kat, innocently.

“Thank you for your insights into my meeting with The Witches, but I draw the line at advice on romantic interactions. If you don’t go away, I will require Captain Hannigan” (that was Kat’s company commander) “to find you a great deal more to do than just guard duty tonight.”

“Snippy, snippy,” muttered Kat as she left.

Despite having sent Kat away, Gideon more or less followed her advice in that he was friendly to BD in the following days but made no serious claims on the interpreter’s time or company. As she was attractive and lively, there was no shortage of musketeers competing for her attention, and Gideon had plenty to keep him occupied, including a strategy meeting.

“There’s a force of Midis at Terminus,” he told his senior officers later on the same day as the battle. “We’re taking the place and installing our own garrison.”

“Then what do we do?”

“We start raiding. There are plenty of Midi farms and even villages between here and Haven they’ve established since taking over. There are human slaves in those houses and villages. We take the slaves back to Terminus.”

“Ahhhhhh!” said his officers collectively.

“We don’t kill anyone unless they want to resist. We don’t touch Midi families or homes or mess with those shrines that they build. We make it clear we are only here to free the slaves, and that should save some fighting.”

“Won’t we want our territory back?” asked Captain Toms.

“Maybe,” said Gideon. “But we can worry about that stuff later. It’s a big planet, for the moment we just don’t have the capacity to take and hold territory. The legion we beat up yesterday was just one of several they can call up and we don’t want to be in a place where the Midis can come at us from several directions at once. Beyond Terminus as I hardly need to tell you, its plains. Our cavalry has proved to be pretty good, but there’s not many of them. We’d be steamrollered. So, we set up base at Terminus and raid and we’ve gotta be quick. When the Midis figure out what we’re doing, they’ll move the slaves. I want A company on the road in an hour marching hard, carrying the rations they need. We’ll use the e-cars for supply.”

“Winter is coming and we don’t have tents,” said Captain Hannigan. “They’ll have to camp out two nights at least, maybe three.”

“Musketeers can light fires and wrap themselves in groundsheets. The Midis at Terminus will know real soon about the defeat, but I don’t want to give them time to call for reinforcements. We take the place fast and start raiding with a combination of cavalry and maybe the e-cars if they can be spared from supply tasks and, oh yes, the aerial recon guys are also going down to terminus. Let’s work out how to make the recon stuff fit with cavalry and raiding parties. I’ll come down myself in a day or so. We’ll send B company as well when things are sorted here and maybe the artillery. Let’s get busy.”

Gideon later warned BD not to talk about what she had seen and heard, not that it really mattered. By the time she got back to Haven City, the Midi commanders would know what the humans were doing, and Gideon had not told anyone what he really hoped - that the Midis would be provoked into attacking the humans, at a place of his choosing - a fortified spot - and hopefully one legion at a time. If the odds were too great he would scurry back to the structure with its bridge choke point and heavy mortars.

“Don’t worry,” said BD, “I’m human, female and captive and that all equals worthless slave as far as the upper crust Midis are concerned.”

“Worthless?”

“Worthless as a person but useful in some respects like humans find hunting dogs useful. Put them to work while out hunting but otherwise keep them in kennels.”

“Sounds grim – pity you can’t take your son and dash for Terminus.”

“We’d never make it. The Midis may seem primitive in some ways, but they do understand the need to patrol and humans are not supposed to move around without their Midi owners. If I can get close enough to Haven City when you drop me off, getting back to Richard, my son, shouldn’t be a problem – coming out with him would be a big one. In any case I expect to be sold.”

“Say, what? Sold?”

“Sure, there’s already an active slave market in Haven City and Kang’s wives will have no use for me. Very likely I’ll be bought by yet another general who dreams of me translating human pleas for mercy.”

“Despite what’s happened here?” said Gideon.

BD shrugged. “These guys don’t learn so easy – and, oh yes, here’s the stuff you wanted from device you found.” She indicated a mound of papers in a corner.”

“Is this all?”

“The bulk of the stuff were entertainment programs which, trust me, you won’t understand or want to watch. Sending text files to human devices seemed way too complicated so I got them to print out the one file that would be remotely interesting to us humans. It was in German. They can translate if you want.”

“German?”

Gideon crouched down and looked at the top page of stack, the title page of a book in old-fashioned type. The title was “Vom Kriege”. Below that was the author Karl von Clausewitz, a city and a date – Berlin, 1832.

“Will you want a translation?” asked BD again. The name of the author had meant nothing to her.

“Don’t bother – the title usually translates to ‘On War’. It’s one of the classic works of military theory. The author was a Prussian general.”

“You mean it’s a book from earth?” said BD. “Why is Du’Buce – Black Robes - reading that stuff?”

“I have no idea,” said Gideon.

Chapter Fourteen – Attack

“No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country,” General George S Patton told the US 3rd Army before the invasion of France in 1944. “He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.”

As he was unwilling to reveal his full strategy Gideon found that he had to “sell” the raiding concept to his musketeers, who were all for advancing to Haven City, capturing the Midi generals – a clique of military commanders who ran the show – and declaring victory.

“One battle doesn’t make a war,” he found himself saying repeatedly. “We go out on the Haven City plain and the Midis can come at us from several different directions. They have discipline and they are warriors. I’m not going to have another Isandlwana.”

It said a lot about how far the Havenites had come in their study of military history that at least someone in each group Gideon addressed knew about the massive defeat the British had been handed by the Zulus, whom they had despised and underestimated, and countered with examples of other battles.

“We could make it like Blood River,” suggested one musketeer. “Four hundred or so musket firing Boers take on umpteen thousand Zulus by laagering, circling, their wagons and having cannons in the gaps.”

“Didn’t the American settlers circle wagons?” asked another musketeer.

“Lot of people did it centuries before those guys,” said a third. “Goths, Chinese, Czechs, Russians, Bohemians, you name it. Movable forts were a thing in Eastern Europe for a while.”

“Guys! Guys!” said Gideon. “I’m not going to start circling the wagons we liberated from the Midis. One attack would wreck them.” (The carts had been found to be flimsy.) “And no way am I using the electric cars. They are too valuable to our supply lines to get them messed up by Midi spears. Let’s take Terminus and go from there.”

As Gideon spoke this the Red Band commander of the garrison at Terminus, Captain Katharge, was wondering how long he could hold out. A full legion had marched onto the plateau from Terminus confident that they would annihilate the humans around the big concrete fort without windows, as the Midis described The Witches’ structure, and add the survivors to the slave population.

The next news he heard, brought by a trickle of terrified, exhausted, hungry Right People, was of total disaster. The humans had appeared in front of the Midi camp in the morning and fired their sticks together, at intervals, many times. Long tubes had torn great holes in a fighting column. Worst of all half human-half beast creatures, the human half wielding a sword, cut down The Right People without mercy.

Captain Katharge did not scare easily and was much more intelligent than the run of Midi officers, which was why he had been left in command of what amounted to a supply depot. After cross-questioning the survivors, he realised that the new monsters were people on horses. He knew humans rode horses and had himself tentatively suggested that The Right People could learn to ride them for use in battle. This idea had been dismissed scornfully by the Midi commanders as undignified, and inconsistent with the warrior honour of The Right People. Enemies should be faced on foot where a warrior can look them in the eye while slaughtering them.

The fact that his self-satisfied generals might have to take another look at the use of horses was one of the few gleams of comfort for Captain Katharge. For the first stragglers were followed by a whole column of survivors with their bands cut off who marched straight through, heads down, disgraced. Katharge knew many of the Red Bands in that column. They did not look at him.

The captain sent a message to his chiefs in Haven City and took a hard look at the position. Retreating in order to live to fight another day was not consistent with Red Band honour, but he had not previously given any thought to a desperate defence. Terminus itself was a collection of sheds and a camping ground which had been the main attraction of the site for humans, as Katharge understood it. The main road from Haven City – the humans built good roads he had to admit - ran past the North edge of the huts and across a bridge over a stream, called Terminus river, and then through forests before emerging in the uplands of the plateau. Anyone who followed it would eventually end up at the Gorge bridge and the fort without windows which the mysterious creature in black robes – Katharge shuddered when he thought of him – had been so keen to take.

Katharge quickly dismissed the idea of defending the bridge on the Haven City side. The ground was open and flat, his troops would be exposed to the fire of the long tubes of which he had heard fearful tales, and the stream was shallow enough for attackers to simply wade across for some distance on either side of the bridge. Instead the gap in the forest was the natural choke point and, as he appraised it with a general's eye for terrain, he realised that the ground folded at that point making a small crest. The crest was a minor obstacle to anyone walking along the road, but it meant that troops on one side could be concealed from troops on the other.

Just below the crest on the river side, on what would now be Katharge's right flank, were three small equipment sheds. The forests on either side were thick, that was a blessing, but the gap was wide – humans would have estimated it at more than a kilometre. That was an impossible width for his tiny force, but a redoubt on the

crest in front of the bridge would create an obstacle an attacking force would have to take if they wanted to use the bridge.

Three hundred Right People from the defeated column who still had their tags and were anxious to regain honour, joined his supply depot guard of just one hundred. Another two hundred were sent by the nearest general. Spades and axes were found in the sheds. The humans Katharge had encountered to date had not known how to fight, but they knew how to make good spades and axes. He set his force to work digging, cutting trees and shifting stones to build breast-high walls. These would offer some protection against the smooth stones spat out by the long tubes, or at least so the Captain hoped. If the humans chose to stand off and pound his new fort to pieces, then he would pull his warriors below the crest, out of sight of these new horror weapons, and wait for the assault. It was a reasonable plan – if the humans did what he expected them to do.

The one problem with the position Katharge had chosen, which the captain soon realised, was that his line of retreat was across the bridge and stream they were defending. Given what happened to the column it was possible that his force would have to cross the bridge or wade the stream, in a hurry. Then they would be the open plain with the horse-humans close behind, and no concealing forests for some distance. Not good, and he had no means of destroying the bridge which was made of a material he did not understand (a form of reinforced concrete). It had occurred to the Red Band that the site was much better suited to defending against forces coming the other way, when one of his officers tapped him on the arm and gestured up the valley. He looked up and his blood froze.

At the end of the valley was one of the horse humans the column survivors had spoken of in terrified whispers. The creature had red hair – a ridiculous thing to have – and had a contraption or device up to his eyes. Katharge wasn't sure what the device did but he got the impression the newcomer was studying the Right People's new redoubt. His warriors saw this creature at the same time and shouted inventive insults. That may have helped morale but sounded faint and hollow in the clear air and made no impression on the scout who sat there for a while before ambling away. Just as the scout turned to go two Black Band stragglers from the column emerged from the forest only a few metres from the horse-human, before realising it was there and diving straight back into the trees. The horse-human ignored them – an act which chilled Katharge far more than if the creature had drawn its sword and charged after them yelling. The two warriors were not worth the effort of killing.

The Red Band pushed the memory of the horse-human out of his mind but that evening, just before the light started fading, he heard a buzzing which he initially

mistook for a horde of the world's insects and looked around in alarm before one of his officers motioned to look up. Far above them was a human device kept aloft, as far as the Red Band officer could see, by four disks, one at each corner of device. No, they were not discs Katharge decided, but blades whirling so fast that they appeared solid. One warrior tried firing an arrow at the device, only to nearly cause the force's first casualty when the arrow, after failing to reach its target, fell back into the fort. Ignoring the arrow and the equally ineffectual insults hurled at it the device unhurriedly drifted across the redoubt, apparently examining the position, then buzzed away towards the plateau.

The appearance of the Horse-Human and the device gave the Red Band captain an uneasy feeling that the The Right People had unleashed forces using technology they could not fight – a feeling that persisted through the day and into the night when he finally told his warriors to rest, posting guards. He had barely settled himself into his nook, wrapping himself in his travelling cloak, when one of the guards fetched him.

“You had best not disturb my sleep lightly,” he growled, as he walked out the back of his new redoubt then stopped. The creature in Black Robes was waiting for him.

“You are the commander of this fort?” asked Black Robes, head bowed. Most of the time this creature looked down and even shuffled his feet. But when Katharge said yes, Black Robes looked up and a pair of reptilian black eyes bored into the Captain, piercing his very soul, or so Katharge thought. “I have something for you.”

Another creature very like the two androids which Gideon was allowed to command at the Gorge, moved up besides Black Robes carrying six devices in its arms – long contraptions of wood and metal with knives at one end. Katharge stared at these for a time before he realised what they must be.

“Human fire sticks,” he said, taking one.

“Very good captain,” said Black Robes. “You can see the knife” (he meant the bayonet) “comes off when you twist it, then can be fixed back on.”

“Urgh!” said the captain, which meant approval. He had forgotten, for the moment, that he found Black Robes ‘creepy’. “How does it work?”

“Put this piece of metal” (he pointed to a firing cap in the android's hands) “onto that bit there.” He pointed to the cone at the rear of the weapon. “Now pull that thing there the humans call a hammer back until it locks.” The captain did as he was asked and then, on command, pulled the trigger. The cap cracked audibly but nothing else happened. “That was just one stage I showed you,” said Robes. “Now you'll load and fire it.”

The captain fumbled through the loading sequence and this time when he fired, just holding the weapon across his body the weapon cracked and jerked in his hands. The noise brought most of the warriors in his command to the rear of the redoubt, only to stop when they saw Black Robes.

“Now you know how to fire it I suggest you show your warriors how to do so and load the ones I brought.” The android lay twenty muskets at Katharge’s feet and a sack of cartridges.

“Is this a fit weapon for a warrior?” mused Katharge.

“The humans defeated a whole column of yours with this weapon and the long tubes. I am working on the long tubes but I can give you these now. Load them before the humans come and be sure to wait until your opponents are close. A few dead and they will run.

Katharge gazed at the musket in his arms. Now he understood, more or less, how they worked, but surely they took too long to make ready. A Warrior could make many blows with his sword or spear during the time it took to put in the powder and ball and the little cone of metal at the back. Then he reminded himself that the humans would have hundreds of these firing into his new fort.

“It shall be,” he said. When he looked up, Black Robes had gone.

Gideon and his musketeer officers not far away but out of sight of the redoubt looked up sharply when they heard the musket crack. They had been discussing how best to take the newly created redoubt with the fewest casualties.

“That’s one of our muskets,” said Gideon. “Are any of the cavalry out that way?” he asked of Parker.

“All the guys we’ve got here are camped just over there, sir.” He pointed at the forest.

“We’ve got a few scouts forward,” said Captain Toms, “but that sounded right up near the fort. No-one’s that far.”

“Hey guys you want to see this,” said the musketeer in charge of the drone unit. He was sitting at a folding card table on which a screen and keyboard had been set. On Gideon’s orders the drone had returned to the fort but at a high enough altitude at night for the defenders not to realise that it was there. That also meant that not much could be seen with ordinary optical sights but, to Gideon’s amazement, the drone had infrared senses which could be focused, and there were musketeers who could work the computer commands with ease. His force had to fight with muskets but could use infrared optics to spy on its enemies.

Musketeer Peterson, at the controls, replayed the moment for them. “There a flash at the rear of the fort-thing, they’ve got. Let’s go back to that bang and focus on the area.” He brought up images of two person’s facing one another, outlined in infrared. One was holding something. “The guy on the left is a Red Band commander and he’s holding a musket. You can see the heat from the barrel. Dunno about the other guy.”

Gideon lent forward to peer at the screen. “Black Robes,” he said. “The rival of our employers.”

“Dressed like The Witches?” said Peterson.

“Dressed like The Witches, sir,” Gideon corrected.

“Dressed like The Witches, sir?”

“Yes, but in black not red. The figure behind him is an android like Sam.”

“This Black Robes guy has given the Midi commander a musket, sir?” said Toms.

“Seems that way.”

They watched as the android brought forward a stack of what looked like muskets, from the infrared outline, then a bag.

“We haven’t lost that many muskets, sir” said Toms.

“No,” agreed Gideon. “All the more reason to capture the fort. We want to take a closer look at those weapons to work out what’s happening, and before they can get comfortable firing them.”

“Yes sir,” his officers chorused.

“We’ve only got A company and the cavalry. We’re out numbered. So we’ll have to hit ‘em just before dawn as we agreed. Cavalry start firing at them from in front to get their attention, A company to hit from their right flank. We use the fold in the grounds and those sheds as cover until we’ve got as many musketeers up close as possible. Then throw grenades and charge with loaded muskets, bayonets fixed. When A company goes in the cavalry gets on their horses and charges. When you attack you do it hard and fast with lots of yelling. Remember you’re ferocious humans who eat Midis for breakfast, drink their blood and howl for more. What do we yell?”

“Kill! Kill!” they shouted, then put back their heads and howled.

Katharge thought that he heard something. One of his warriors struggling to load the new-fangled musket froze. He was one of the survivors of the fight at the gorge who had joined the redoubt’s garrison to regain his honour.

“I thought I heard humans, captain,” said this warrior.

“Human yelling,” one of the sentries reported, “off to the East, my captain.”

Katharge had a sinking feeling that when daylight came his warrior honour would be tested. He would make sure the sentries were vigilant tonight.

The musketeers did not light fires that night as Gideon did not want the Midis to know how close they were, which meant they were stiff and cold when they assembled to move out, munching on some of The Witches’ bread by way of breakfast. A Company was listening to its orders for the last time when Gideon, who had opted to go in with main assault, thought he saw a familiar figure in the back ranks. He dashed through the crowd of musketeers to stand behind this figure.

“You,” he said.

The musketeer turned around. It was Turnbull whom Gideon had thrown out of the force for being unable to stop listening to his device on duty. His hair had since been cut short, and he had a scarf wrapped around his face.

“Hey colonel,” said Turns, grinning.

“I thought I’d gotten rid of you.”

“Well yeah, man, I still reckoned I could help out.”

Captain Toms arrived, looking apprehensive.

“You knew of this?” Gideon asked of Toms.

“He snuck back and swore he wouldn’t listen to stuff, and I, um, let him back in.”

“In defiance of me?”

“Well, he just swore he wouldn’t listen to stuff.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“I was at the bridge, man,” said Turns.

“You call me colonel or sir.”

“Colonel.”

“Where were you at the bridge?”

“At the end, sir. Whole line between me and you. My hair was cut and I had a scarf wrapped my face.”

“Umph!” Gideon was silent for a moment, wondering what he should do.

“Listen sir..” said Toms.

“Shut up!” snapped Gideon. He was silent for a few more moments, while Musketeer Turnbull did his best to stand at attention and stare straight ahead. “Has he kept to his word so far?” The colonel said eventually.

“Yes sir. No listening devices.”

“If I find earphones anywhere near your ears while on duty,” he said to Turns, “I’ll.. I’ll.. well you won’t want to hear what I’ll do but you’ll need a proctologist to undo it.”

“Yes sir,” said Turns, trying to keep a straight face.

“Now get out of my sight.” Turns vanished.

“You and I will speak of this later,” Gideon said to Toms.

“Yes sir,” said Toms, subdued.

A Company loaded their muskets, fixed bayonets, wrapping their ground sheets around the blade to mask the tell-tale gleam, put dirt on their faces and crept through the forest to the Midi right, or the human left, of the redoubt, until they were as close as they dared while still being under cover of the forest. Fortunately, the planet’s main moon was waning and hidden by clouds.

The humans waited in the deep shadow of the forest until they heard the cavalry make a noisy approach. The first gleam of dawn could be seen in the East away over the Haven City plain. The redoubt suddenly came alive. Midis yelled. Muskets cracked. Muskets on both sides, Gideon noted. He was just behind the lead platoon as it crept up to the equipment sheds. None of the humans knew why the sheds had been placed where they were, or what they were supposed to contain (they didn’t have anything in them at the time of the attack). All they did know was that they handily shielded their advance from the eyes of sentries on the redoubt until they were half way across the gap between the forest and the redoubt.

The redoubt itself was simply a rough and ready fort built of whatever the Midis had been able to find including stones and logs, square on the fold of ground so that the side facing the plateau was breast high for Midis but the back end was about human height. However, the entrance at the back, facing the bridge, had no gates. The Midi garrison had not had the time or the means to devise gate posts and gates on the battlefield. Instead the garrison had piled some rubble at the gap as night fell but otherwise left it as their way out if the humans insisted on coming in the front. Two platoons of A company, plus Gideon who had equipped himself with a musket for this action, would aim for that gap while the third platoon threw grenades for all they were worth at one side, then climb the redoubt wall.

They paused briefly in the shadow of the sheds. Gideon was aware of the wind over the grass of the Haven City plain – a cold wind which promised winter. He shivered. Around him he saw the other musketeers shift uneasily; because they were nervous or cold or both. They were going over the top; ‘hopping the bags’ as they said in the first world war, and that was never good for the nerves.

A Midi screamed. More muskets fired. Gideon could see heads above the redoubt rampart – Midis with spears, looking towards the cavalry. Others loaded and fired muskets, without taking the time to aim. The cavalry troopers were not as skilled with the muskets as infantry, but soon they had an almost continuous crackle of musket shots, a few of which struck home. Captain Toms waited for a few minutes, for the Midis to become absorbed by the drama to their front.

“Now,” whispered Toms. “All up, musketeers. Let’s go. Keep silent until we’re noticed. No one in front of me.” The orders were repeated by sergeants and officers down the line.

They moved out from behind the sheds bent over but moving quickly, shuffling. Ten metres, then twenty, then thirty. They could see the detail of the walls of the Redoubt in the suddenly faint light. One Midi caught a moment out of the corner of his eye, turned his head and started yelling. “Carn! Carn! Hudem! Hudem!” All the heads of the midis they could see turned towards them.

“Now!” screamed Toms. “Humans up! Howl!” screamed Toms. He threw aside the ground sheet that had masked his bayonet. As one A company followed suit, wolf howling. Three platoon had fire starters previously used to light the occasional sustainable bonfire permitted at the summer camp, and now being used to light grenades thrown in a continuous stream.

“Whump! Whump! Whump!”

The other two platoons raced for the back entrance. Gideon saw one grenade, trailing a line of sparks from its fuse, soar clear over the fort to land opposite the entrance. “Whump!” A handful of Midis had appeared at the top of the mound blocking the entrance. Two staggered and fell as the grenade exploded. The rest vanished when the lead humans fired muskets and climbed the mound.

“Lieutenant Stevenson!” yelled Gideon. This was the officer commanding three platoon.

“Sir,” she screamed back.

“We’re in. No more grenades.”

Two more, thrown before the order was given landed to Gideon’s right as he climbed the mound, felling more Midis. Gideon felt something flick by his ear - one of the grenade bullets. Then the humans got down to the grim business of killing at close quarter, with bayonets. One Midi desperately trying to reload an unfamiliar musket, took a bayonet in the chest – here and there a human musket cracked. Gideon saw a Red Band near the front wall yell something to the warriors. He pointed at the humans and yelled again. Very likely he was the fort commander saying how few they were. Then the cavalry appeared on their horses above the parapet howling. A

few who had loaded muskets fired at the defenders on the front wall at point blank range. The others clambered onto the parapets direct from their horses slashing at Midis with their swords. Three platoon appeared at the top of the wall on their side yelling “Kill! Kill!”

Gideon’s musket was still loaded, he realised. He turned, aimed at the Midi commander and fired, his bullet catching Captain Katharge in the upper chest, just below the throat. The commander stood for a moment, sword in hand, eyes widened in surprise, then toppled forward. The remaining heart went out of the defenders. Those who could jumped over the far wall, honour be damned, and ran for the bridge. The rest dropped their weapons, which included their newly acquired muskets, and went to their knees.

Later, the musketeers collected all the muskets they could find in the fort and piled them in front of Gideon. The Musketeer Corps had only thought to have serial numbers stamped on The Witches’ composite metal in the more recent production batches of their weapons. They had then assigned numbers to each of the earlier muskets, scratching the number on the stock for want of any better way to ensure it remained on the weapon. The captured muskets all had a number scratched into the stock – the same number in exactly the same place. The muskets were identical copies of the weapon carried by the musketeer who had gone too far forward in the initial charge at the battle of the bridge.

“Weird planet, sir,” was all Captain Toms said at the time.

Chapter Fifteen – Teching Up

We prohibit under anathema that murderous art of crossbowmen and archers which is hateful to God to be employed against Christians and Catholics from now on - Second Council of Lateran, April 1139.

Gideon mulled over what the copied weapons meant for his grand strategy while the musketeers busied themselves sending the captured Midis on their way minus their tags, tending to the enemy wounded who were unwilling or unable to walk out of the redoubt with the others, and burying the dead. The Musketeers had lost two dead and six wounded, with only one of the wounded being bad enough to justify immediate evacuation to Agnes. Like the battle at the bridge the victory had

been remarkably bloodless as far as the musketeers were concerned. But they could not afford many casualties and one of the deaths had been due to a musket fired by a Midi at point blank range. That worried Gideon. Eventually he called his officers together.

“We gotta tech up,” he told them. “We’ve got to finish off the Minie rifle we’ve been working on and issue it to musketeers real quick. The loading drill is the same, but we won’t be standing in line any more.”

His officers muttered.

“But we only just learnt to do that,” said one.

“Like I said we’re improving our technology – we’re teching up and that means we change tactics as well. If the other side’s got muskets, then standing in line makes great targets for them. Even if they’re not as well trained as us there’s a lot more of them. Only a few of them have to hit to shred our line. We can’t absorb casualties like they can. If we have rifles, however, and we’re in a prepared position we can make them start paying for attacking us at up to six hundred metres and more. The range in battles will be opening out, ladies and gentlemen, and we have to change tactics to suit.”

“Are you planning on defending this place, sir?” said Toms looking around.

“Well the redoubt has to be re-sited so that its on the other side of the crest and the walls spread out so that we can cover the whole gap with our rifles.”

“Knock it down and rebuild it, you mean sir,” said Lieutenant Stevenson.

“Yep, unless you have an APC or two in your back pocket.”

“APC - armoured personnel carrier – no sir,” she said. “I don’t have one of those, but its not going to be popular to rebuild the whole thing.”

“Look closely. Do I care? They can do unpopular stuff or leave their parents and families in slavery.”

Stevenson cast an appraising eye over the earth and wood fort. “I always like to rearrange,” she said.

“Excellent. We’ll also have to have people in the forests on either side so that we don’t get flanked, like we just flanked the redoubt. Half of A company will remain here and rebuild the fort to our needs. The rest will start raiding. I want human slaves to be freed and brought back here. If you see any sign of large bodies of Midis, everyone is to return here to defend this place. And keep me informed!”

“Yes sir!”

“And the drones are to be kept flying. Spot villages, spot hostiles, keep in contact with everyone. Captain Toms is in charge and, Captain Toms..”

“Sir?”

“I expect action right away. Get the drones to find villages to send our guys to. Support them with a car and a cart to bring in freed slaves, and screen with cavalry. Get busy.”

“Yes sir. You’ll be returning to The Witches?”

“Someone will be back today with supplies. Artillery and B company will be along soon, I hope. Now get to work everyone.” The officers melted away except for Stevenson who stood there smiling.

“You’ll see BD when you go back?” Gideon stared at her and her smile faltered. “You’ll see BD when you go back, sir?”

“BD is coming here in order to return to Haven City and her son,” Gideon snapped, “and that is the last time I will discuss such matters with you, Lieutenant Stevenson. If you again feel the urge to discuss matters other than military with me then you’ll find yourself back in the ranks.”

“Yes, sir,” she said subdued.

“I have enough of that from Kat,” he said in a softer tone. “I would punish her for disrespect and insolence and any other words I could think of, but I suspect it wouldn’t do any good. Now get back to your unit and get busy.”

Gideon got a ride back with the medivac train – a combination of car and two Midi trailers lashed onto the back bumper which worked if the driver did not try to break speed records and took bends slowly. A few of the younger male drivers had trouble remembering this. Gideon had to threaten one driver with being sent back to summer camp if he didn’t slow right down. They were still teenagers.

He had barely returned and started to deal with the matters on his desk when Kat turned up.

“Heard Lizzie Stevenson..”

“Lieutenant Stevenson.”

“Lieutenant Stevenson got cut off at the knees for daring to mentioning BD.”

“Remind me, how much did I pay for you?”

“Not enough, clearly,” said Kat cheerfully. “Most of the officers will have gone in a while, and me too.”

“That’s something to be thankful for.”

“What I’m saying is that with some manoeuvring you’ll be able to have a dinner alone with BD.. sir.” The last word was added when Gideon glared at her. “She won’t object – won’t say no.”

“How do you know this musketeer?”

“I asked her.”

“You what?”

“I was checking things out, smoothing the path. You can do this for a guy with a girl. Heaps more difficult the other way around. She was thinking of dating again and there’s not a lot on offer back in Haven City she told me.”

“In other words, she is sufficiently desperate to consider dinner with me. Asking a girl out when half the force you’re commanding is watching your every move is wearing, especially when individuals in it insist on meddling in the matter.”

Kat shrugged. “You say meddling, I say facilitating. Potato, potarto. Two companies will be gone and BD isn’t a musketeer so it heaps less of a problem than if she was. Everyone agrees it’s a good move.”

“Everyone agrees!” spluttered Gideon. “I hope that just means everyone on the Get Colonel Swift A Date committee, all members of which are about to face disciplinary action from their commander if musketeer Katrina Shevchenko does not get out of my face.”

A trumpet sounded from the parade ground. Then they heard “B Company formation – com’n line up people, marching order. Full packs. We’ve got serious road to burn before night fall.”

“Permission to join my unit, sir,” said Kat standing up straight and giving what she imagined was a salute.

Gideon laughed. “Go and do your duty musketeer Shevchenko.” Kat turned to go. “And musketeer..”

“Sir?”

“Be careful.”

“I’m always careful, sir,” she said, and ran off.

Kat could be annoying, but she was an annoyance he was used to. Gideon had no wish for her to stop a Midi spear or bullet.

Kat had barely gone when BD appeared, leaning against the wall next to his desk and folding her arms.

“For someone who commands the whole force you don’t have much of an office, do you?” she said, amusement in her voice.

“This is more of a Maoist-style guerrilla insurgency than a military unit with all the trimmings,” said Gideon. “If I had a proper office I could keep people like Kat out.”

“She has her uses,” said BD. “Had a few chats with Kat. Would you want to keep me out?”

“I guess not, but you won’t be around much longer. I should be able to get you close enough to Haven City to walk tomorrow if you want.”

“Well, yes, have to get back to my son.”

“Tonight then do you want to have dinner, just the two of us?”

BD smiled. “You’re going to drop your studied indifference towards me, Colonel?”

“I was never indifferent, studied or otherwise, just busy. In case you haven’t noticed there’s a war going on.”

“I’d noticed and I guess if you can spare the time I can too.”

They fixed a time and BD drifted away just as the head of his artillery and his chief designer, Captain Chifley, came in.

“Heard we’re moving up the tech tree,” he said. “You weren’t going to tell me?”

“I literally haven’t had a chance since I made the decision this morning but, yes, as you might have heard the Midis are getting muskets so we want to go to rifles. We don’t have the person power to trade volleys with the Midis, even if we do five for their one. How is the rifle going?”

“Got it working, as it happens. Bullet expands in the barrel and hits reliably at three hundred for anyone with some training – and a distance more for someone like Skull. Otherwise it’s the same weapon we’ve been using, same way of loading, just much more accurate. The musketeers have just got to remember to load the bullet the right way around - concave end down and pointy end up – and the bullet’s gotta be greased.”

“All sounds good, now we’ve just got to make and test what, a thousand or so? That’s going to be super fun.”

Chifley shook his head. “No need – we can do conversion kits.”

“Convert the existing muskets? Would that work?”

“They had conversion kits for muskets in the American Civil War, man, er sir. It’s just a tube with the grooves on the inside which we slide down the barrel and clip over the muzzle. Doesn’t even need to go right down ‘cause we got powder at the end. The new bullet is a bit smaller so we can’t use the existing bullets but we can recycle those in grenades. We just get the Witches machinery to produce the right bullets and conversion sleeves, and our people to assemble the cartridges and we’re in a whole different era of firearms technology. The Midis won’t be doing those chants of theirs when they attack, they’ll be too busy dying.”

“I thought it’d take months to switch to rifles but we’re talking about weeks.”

Chifley shrugged. “A couple of weeks, maybe – longer to train everyone up to shoot straight. We haven’t bothered much before – just got ‘em to keep the muskets

level. We can even do a side-arm version for the cavalry, basically a sawn-off musket but it'll have to do."

"What about artillery?"

"Doing anything there is going to take a lot longer, sir. Scaling up to do the same thing with full cannons is a different game. Gotta stick with smoothbore for now."

"What about mortars?" said Gideon thinking of their new fort at Terminus.

"You mean like Thor? Yeah, sir, I want to make maybe half a dozen but not nearly as hard to move around. They can lob exploding shells right into those Midi formation. Real useful."

"Okay, sounds good, but I also want a much smaller version along the lines of those small modern mortars where they'd throw a rocket in the top," said Gideon.

"Rockets, sir..?"

"We're not going to start making rockets, but we have grenades. Basically I'm thinking of a small, trench grenade thrower – maybe two grenade throwers per company.

"Give me a week to make and another week for tests, but maybe we want to group them together. Make a real barrage," said Chifley.

"Hmmm! I'll think about that. A Barrage sounds good."

Chifley grinned.

The question of dated but still effective technology arose again that evening with BD. Dinner went well, with the officers of the remaining companies leaving them alone and, after dinner, instead of sitting to watch a movie with the rest the couple went for a walk. It was cold but clear and the stars shone. Gideon kissed BD in the shadow of The Witches' structure and she kissed back for a time before gently pushing him back.

"We can't get too carried away," she said. "I'm not fixed up in any way at the moment."

"I have an answer," said Gideon, still holding her in his arms. He took a thin plastic package out of pocket and held it up. In the dim light it took BD a moment to realise what it was.

"One of these, really?" she said, taking it. "These things are soooo twentieth century."

"My musketeers have been using them. There's quite a few in the stores here. And let's face it, my life recently has been about making old technology work."

BD put her other arm around Gideon's neck and smiled.

Chapter Sixteen – Incentivising

Men are moved by two levers only: fear and self-interest – Napoleon Bonaparte

The next day Gideon went down with BD to Fort Terminus as the defences there had become known, sitting in the electric car drawing the supply carts. At the fort he found that the raids had liberated a handful of enslaved humans, including the parents of one of the soldiers still back at the tourist centre converting rifles and making new cartridges. Instead of being grateful for the end to an extremely unpleasant life as a slave, and while still wearing the stinking, torn clothes they had been originally been captured in, shivering a little from a chill wind that blew across the Haven plain, the former slaves complained to Gideon about their son's life choices.

“Michael is a soldier?” exclaimed the mother, a Mrs Dowding, accosting the colonel, her eyes wide with horror. “But he could be hurt or killed.”

“Well, yes, that's part of the deal,” said Gideon. “Now if you don't mind..”

“He must come back with us to the summer camp,” said Mr Dowding. “I'm told you can order this. We're members of the governing committee so we're telling you to order him to go back to summer camp.”

“Michael, Musketeer Dowding, volunteered to be a musketeer,” said Gideon. “I didn't force him, and I'm not preventing anyone from leaving. I sent someone back once, because discipline wasn't sticking with him, but that guy snuck back anyway.”

After being discovered by Gideon, Musketeer Turnbull had kept out of the colonel's way. At that moment he had found reasons to be busy at one end of the fortification. Kat, in contrast, had escaped her fortification duties for the moment to chat with BD, while Gideon was being harassed by the Dowdings.

“I didn't raise my son to go around shooting people,” said Mr Dowding.

“That's a matter to take up with him, not me,” said Gideon. “Forcing any musketeer to leave against their will is out of question. I can't recall your son to mind directly, but quite a few of them see their service with this unit as a way of clearing up your mess.”

“How is it our mess?” demanded Mr Dowding, indignantly.

“You just told me you were both on the committee. You didn't call for help when these creatures started invading.”

“We were trying to make contact – to negotiate and understand their needs,” said Mr Dowding. “Calling in soldiers would have just confused the matter, and some of the Midis might have been hurt.”

“As opposed to humans being hurt,” said Gideon. “How many were killed and put to work as slaves before the musketeers even formed? But this is all a matter for an inquiry. You need to work on justifying your decision to them.”

“Inquiry?” said Mrs Dowding. “What inquiry?”

“There’s bound to be one,” said Gideon. In truth the colonel had not thought about such an inquiry until just that moment, but he was anxious to get rid of the Dowdings. “Do you think earth’s only settlement can be overrun and humans killed while the government committee debated what to do, without someone investigating. What’s the human death toll been to date, hundreds? Thousands? All because you guys refused to authorise military action.”

“This settlement is about peace,” said Mr Dowding, drawing himself up. “The beings in the structure are hardly going to be impressed by violent behaviour.”

“In fact, that’s all The Witches, the creatures in the structure, wanted from humans. They invited us here for military protection. We’ve been talking to them.”

The mouths of both Dowdings fell open.

“If you don’t believe me ask BD.” At the mention of her name, BD looked over and smiled. “She’s even been speaking to them in their language. As I said, look to your excuses.”

With that Gideon left, unaware that he had created trouble for himself with the threat of an inquiry. Like all activists the Dowdings were not about to admit any fault or any error in their arguments, judgements or knowledge of a particular subject at any time, in any circumstances and no matter what evidence was put in front of their noses. They were also skilled at the political game. The two committee members fled back to the structure where they begged their son to come with them, before he met a messy end. Michael Dowding refused. He was later wounded but survived. The Dowdings were then ferried to The Summer Camp, where they told Bishop, still sore from being hit by the cavalry commander, Captain Parker, that they were about to be on the wrong end of an inquiry. They quickly agreed to start their own inquiry into musketeer war crimes when they were able. Good people back on earth, meaning activists of all types, would soon be told about Gideon Swift’s atrocities, whatever they might be.

Gideon heard various reports from his commanders – about a dozen freed slaves had been brought to Fort Terminus to date and more were coming; work on the

fort was progressing well – and put together a two car expedition to take BD further out on the Haven plain.

“We’ll take you as close to Haven city as we can,” he told BD as they drove, both in the back seat of the lead car, “but you’ll still be in for a stiff walk before nightfall to get back to your son.”

“His name is Christopher, and you have to meet him,” said BD, “but it seems more like you’re now anxious to get rid of me.”

“When there aren’t a lot of Midis in the way I’ll meet whoever you want, including Christopher. As for getting rid of you, you were the one who wanted to get back to him, and away from an unfortunate, temporary liaison.”

“Unfortunate liaison – huh! You know, Kat was boosting you to me.”

“Was she? I’ve threatened her with disciplinary action so often, to no effect, I sorta hoped she’d think of me as a fearsome ogre type.”

“She doesn’t seem to think that. Even The Witches thing well of you.”

“They’re comparing me with Bishop – it seems they didn’t like Bishop at all.”

The two Musketeers in the front seat chuckled over that.

“Bishop is way too intense,” agreed BD. “What’s this?”

They had come to one of the Midi villages that had been built throughout the Haven plain since the conquest. Like the others this village was a collection of huts built besides one of the settlement’s roads of whatever building material that could be found, and lived in by the poorer Black Bands lorded over by a Red Band chieftain. The Midis generally settled besides the sealed human roads which they considered marvels of engineering more important than the machines they did not understand left rusting in open fields. Now the road had brought them a bunch of humans brandishing the now feared fire sticks demanding their slaves.

Gideon saw one human, an older female, appear at the door of one of the huts with a double arm load of clothes.

“Do your own fucking washing,” Gideon heard her say to a near-by Midi, casting aside the clothes, and walking towards the cars. “Am I glad to see you guys.”

“You might have to take a seat in the carts said one of the musketeers.” Each car was hauling a couple of carts.

“I’ll take it,” she said. “Just let me get my stuff.”

“There’s another village just down the side road,” said another slave, a man in his thirties. “You may wanna get there quick before they send their slaves away and, say, can I get one of those guns?”

“We’ll get you back to the fort first. Lieutenant Masters!” (This was the other officer in the detachment.)

“Sir!”

“Get the second car and carts to that village,” said Gideon, “and bring the humans back here. If its not that far, a few can walk back. I’ll untie the cars from this one and take BD a few more minutes down the road. Smartly now.”

Gideon took a musket and some cartridges for himself and drove on with BD, keeping an eye open for Midi soldiers. It would not do for the human commander in chief to be caught by a Midi patrol. BD was also aware that they were getting too close to Haven City for comfort.

“Just let me out before this bridge,” she said eventually. “I know my way from here. I’ll get there before nightfall.”

Gideon got out too and they kissed lightly.

“Calling is not a good idea,” she said, holding up her phone. “I have to keep it off and hidden most of the time. You can text me, and I’ll call you when I can and, Gideon, be careful.”

“You can count on that,” he said. “You too.” He watched her go. After she crossed the bridge she turned and waved, then went out of sight behind a clump of trees. As Gideon drove back it occurred to him that it might now be difficult for him to leave Haven, if and when the gate was opened again.

The humans barely had time to raid the villages within reach of their base before it turned cold. Gideon had been warned that the winter on the Haven plain could be fierce and, on the uplands, truly icy, but that winter was particularly severe, or so his musketeers told him. Snow had never come that early or piled so high. They set to work chopping wood, cheerfully ignoring forestry conservation orders, both to build substantial shelters for both themselves and the horses and for fires, which they huddled besides. Their sufferings were slight compared with those of French soldiers retreating from Moscow, or German soldiers fighting bitterly to defend sinking dugouts in arctic conditions deep in Russia, or even of American revolutionary soldiers at Valley Forge. They did not starve. Witches bread, as their rations were known, did not vary much but it kept them on their feet. They dreamed of hamburgers using the meat from the vats at Haven – animals were not kept for slaughter on the planet – of eggs and strawberries, and of warm beaches and sun-bathing while shivering on guard duties or on endless patrols through a white landscape, occasionally seeing Midi scouts in the distance, then having to thaw out in front of a fire and inspect their toes for frostbite. Maybe it was not that hard, but it was hard enough for them. Later at reunions, just as veterans of Napoleons Old

Guard reminisced about the retreat from Moscow, the musketeers often fell to talking about the hard times of that winter.

In the meantime the musketeers converted their weapons to the new-fangled rifle technology and continued their studies of military history.

“Who can blame Hitler for thinking he could beat the Soviets,” said one officer in a discussion group. “The Wehrmacht had knocked over France in six weeks – just six weeks – Stalin had slaughtered his own high command and almost anyone else in the Soviet hierarchy. What independent commentary there was, was either clueless and hostile or obviously mad like the Webbs, a husband and wife team of English academics who wrote books saying what a wonderful and wise leader Stalin was. How was Hitler to know that the Soviets were capable of moving most of their industry behind the Urals, that the Soviet system could raise divisions just as quickly as they could be destroyed or that American industry, which he declared war on, would send so much material to them.”

“Yeah, sure,” said another, “but there was ideological blindness as well. He didn’t realise the Slavs would fight bitterly to defend their homes, or how tough the Soviet soldier could be. Then he unleashed the SS in the Ukraine and Belarus, alienating natural allies. Those guys hated the Soviets as much as he did.

The first officer shrugged. “It’s true that the Soviet soldiers pretty soon realised that the Nazi regime was arguably even worse than their own – which is saying a lot – and even the ordinary German soldiers had to steal their food from the local population. But Hitler was a gambler who had good reasons for thinking the Soviet regime would collapse after a few weeks.”

With more Havenites coming of age and going through the new standard training program, Gideon now had about double the force he had commanded at The Bridge, all armed with rifles or muskets converted to rifles, with which they practised marksmanship as the female musketeers insisted that the skill of shooting straight be called. However, The Midis still had many thousands of warriors and were clearly up to something. Room Nine told Gideon that Black Robes had been seen around Haven City, meeting with the Midi generals, who then sat up late into the night, talking earnestly. But his intelligence service could tell him little about what was said at these meetings. Human slaves who knew the Midi language were kept well away. Carts and horses were being collected however, so the Midis planned to attack, and Fort Terminus was the obvious place to strike.

Of more comfort were the reports on the adoption of muskets. Despite the lesson human musket lines firing in volleys had taught them, Midi warriors had mostly decided the new muskets were not worthy of their time. They did not like the need to practice loading and firing and found the kick in the shoulder when the weapon was fired painful. Nor did they seem to understand that firing at specific targets beyond one hundred paces was pointless. Musket armed units were formed, but were composed of Black Bands who were not thought to be of use for much else, or who were being punished. Attempts to form cavalry units failed miserably.

Gideon was encouraged by this but ordered that target practice for the new rifles was to be done at the structure, rather than at Fort Terminus where Midi scouts might see the new weapons being used. The newly formed mortar company also practised at the structure, or rather well away from it on the Western side in order not to bother The Witches. He wanted the new weapons to be a surprise. The Colonel wondered how much of his activities were being reported back the Midis or Black Robes. The answer, as he was to find out much later, was they were getting reports from unexpected sources – but those sources did not understand or appreciate quite what they were looking at.

An electric snow plough was brought out from one of the skiing resorts and used to clear the road between the structure and the fort, so that musketeer companies could march up and down, breath smoking, as they were rotated through garrison duty at the fort. Those on garrison duties patrolled aggressively, although they did not see much. A Midi scout was occasionally sighted at long rifle range, but on Gideon's express orders the humans did not fire. He did not want the Midis to find out about the power of rifles until it really mattered.

The patrols occasionally picked up human slaves who had escaped nearby villages, their tracks camouflaged by falling snow. These told Gideon and Room Nine about large groups of Midi warriors moving around, and senior Red Bands meeting with each other. There were rumours that the humans were to be dealt with once and for all, but how this was to happen they could not say.

Gideon, for his part, went to the fort as often as he could to share the hardships of its garrison and to gaze out over the white landscape and think of BD. They exchanged texts often. She had trouble keeping her son fed and reasonably warm, probably at the cost of going hungry herself although she did not say this.

While he was at the fort Kat told him that the Get Colonel Swift A Date committee had been disbanded.

“That’s something to be grateful for,” said Gideon. “Room Nine might get back to military matters and tell me what’s going on over there.” He nodded in the direction of Haven City.

“They’re working on it,” said Kat. Her converted musket was slung. She wore a beanie and gloves and so many layers of clothing that she looked almost round and was still shivering. “But I thought I should tell you that BD told us to disband. We were only going to suspend operations and we told her this, but she said she wanted the committee disbanded.”

“Really?” Gideon was interested in this and had long given up telling Kat to butt out of his personal business. “Did she give any reason for the directive?”

Kat smiled. “No, no reason and we didn’t ask, but in this matter what she says goes.”

“What I say doesn’t matter at all, but what she says is vital.”

“Of course,” said Kat smiling again. “But if a horde of Midis come this way, what you say will become important again.”

“I’m glad to hear that at least,” exclaimed Gideon. “But this all seems a legalistic way to interfere in other people’s private lives. Why don’t I form a Get Kat A Date committee? Would any of the male musketeers have any interest, do you think?”

Kat shook her head. “With girls its more of a committee to keep guys away, or maybe keep them all away except one that meets the girl’s exacting standards.”

“Do any guys measure up to your exacting standards?”

Kat pretended to consider this for a moment. “Maybe one or two,” she said.

After that, Kat reluctantly conceded that she had military duties to attend to and moved off leaving Gideon to stare out over the whitened landscape. The problem he faced was an old one, although long obsolete on earth. Finding food for the horses. Despite a late start they had found and stored a heap of forage for the horses before the snow had piled up. This was supplemented by a horde of food pellets found at the Summer Camp, but stocks would run out by spring. He needed fresh grass to keep the horses fed while they roamed the Haven plain. There were now about sixty or so cavalry troopers, which was hardly enough for all the jobs Gideon wanted them to do, but he knew through Room Nine, that the Midis were terrified of them and they had yet to work out an effective way to fight cavalry. He would feel a lot better about moving around on the plain if he knew the cavalry were out there scouting his flanks, with the help of the musketeer’s aerial recon unit.

Once the grass did grow, however, he would face a choice about whether to go out and provoke the Midis by raiding deep into their territory or wait until they came

to him. On that day looking out over the white expanse, Gideon decided that unless the Midis started moving soon after spring came, he would go to them. Those musketeers itching for a showdown would get their wish.

Chapter Seventeen – Campaign

The German attack on the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa, was the largest military campaign in history. “When Barbarossa commences,” Hitler told his generals at one planning meeting, “the world will hold its breath.”

Spring came, the snow melted and the brownish green grass of Haven showed everywhere. The musketeers looked expectantly to Gideon to lead them out onto the plain for a showdown. Even the horses munching on the spring grass, seemed anxious to be away from their makeshift winter barns. But Gideon was not so sure he should take his youthful force away from its now extensive fortifications. He felt that he was missing something. Why was the enemy so inert? They should be marshalling forces for a strike at Terminus – or maybe to try to outflank him by getting between his force at its base at The Witches’ structure. Instead it seemed to be business as usual. He gathered his own forces at Terminus and sent a company with a handful of cavalry out onto the plains, keeping the drones on overwatch. There were sightings but the Midis refused to engage.

The humans, for their part, had evolved their own methods of co-ordinating ground and air assets, over their phones.

“Ground hog one, this is air dude,” one conversation would go.

“This is ground one, go air dude.”

“Ground, you’ve got company coming on your four o’clock behind trees. Small party, about twenty, spears and one red with sword. No bows we can see.”

“Air dude, thanks man, will engage. Any cav nearby?”

“That’s a negative ground one. Nearest party is infantry checking village on your nine about one klick.”

“Okay, air dude.”

If there was no cavalry, the Midis generally slipped away before the humans could get to them, sometimes after throwing a spear or shooting an arrow or two and maybe firing a single shot from a musket. The bows were a new development. The Midis had used light bows for hunting, and a few had bows at the first day at the

structure when Sam had dropped a concrete block on the battering ram, but they were generally not used for fighting. Now bows had been incorporated into their new missile units simply because they were better understood, as weapons, by the rank and file. This sniping from a distance and general refusal to engage, invited comparisons with the insurgency wars of earth including the biggest of them all.

“We could get ourselves involved in another Vietnam,” Gideon overheard one of his musketeers say. “The Midis could take humans into the forests.”

“We’re not gunna do big sweeps in jungle by units so obsessed with body counts that they kill civilians,” said another. “Maybe something more like the Malaysian Emergency where the communists were Chinese, but the bulk of the population were still Muslim Malays who didn’t want anything to do with the insurgents. But what it comes down to is this. We’ve got a set goal. We don’t care about the Midis’ hearts and minds and if they want to go into the forests and indulge in mad, shitty politics, we’re not going to stop them. We just want our parents back.”

Gideon gathered all his forces at Terminus, leaving only a few non-combatants at the Visitors Centre, brought the first company back and sent another in a sweep in a different direction. This netted a few humans who had managed to slip away from their owners while being marched out of range of a musketeer sweep. Otherwise the humans found Midi villages with its population, minus any warriors or slaves, staring at the humans for the doorways of their huts. As the Musketeers did not interfere with property or persons without good reason, the villagers did not fear these visits. Children followed the “funny” human troops for some distance from each village, curious to see what they would do. No slaves.

“Guys, what are we missing?” Gideon demanded of his officers and Room Nine. “Why aren’t we getting any reaction. We want death or glory and we’re visiting villages that don’t care what we do. The Midis we speak to don’t know anything, we don’t know anything, Room Nine doesn’t know anything – no-one knows anything. I want answers.”

Still nothing.

Gideon decided he would send out seven companies in all directions, maybe sending one as far as Haven City where he knew the slave market was still operating. Perhaps the Midis would concentrate to defend the city and he could lure them towards the fortifications at Terminus? But he was still nervous that the other side, or Black Robes, might be planning something. What? He tried to cover all bases. He briefed his company commanders to stay in contact by phone at all times. They were not to push against any resistance encountered but to fall back, remembering to co-

ordinate with the companies on their flanks. Hopefully they could lure the Midi warriors into a killing ground.

“If for any reason comms fail, that’s a good sign to fall back,” he told them. “If something changes, fall back. If you’ve got no other means of communicating with the companies on your flanks, fire three shots three times in quick succession if you’re retiring and send a cavalry messenger. We’ll also have a general recall signal. If you hear the mortars firing repeatedly in threes, head back here fast. Above all, remember that old military dictum.”

“Which one, sir?” asked Captain Toms.

“March towards the sound of guns,” said Gideon, “and, I’ll add this, guys, try and bring your commands back in one piece.”

One company, the veteran A company, remained at Terminus while the rest marched out, in step, past Gideon and Toms. The sight was almost impressive.

“It is well that war is so terrible,” said Toms, “otherwise we should grow too fond of it.” Gideon looked at him. “What, sir? You’re not the only one who can quote, and General Lee was right. We could grow fond of this.”

Gideon fanned his companies out across the plain, screening that force with small groups of cavalry and keeping at least one drone constantly in the air. Now perhaps the Midis would come out to play.

By this time Gideon had organised a headquarters unit which could be packed up into one of the electric cars and two carts staffed mostly by those who had requested non-combat jobs. It included the people controlling the drones and others who relayed orders by phone and plotted positions of units on maps. Honey and Monster attached themselves to this unit in lieu of being anywhere else. They drove a little way onto the plain and set up shop in a field by a stand of trees. A pleasant spot in the Spring sunshine. Honey dozed, Monster ambled over to look at a nearby deserted village, just for something to do. A few slaves came in, picked up by the electric cars used for medivac. One company reported that a slave had seen a “black cloud” of Midis away to the South but it could not be confirmed before nightfall, with the musketeer companies still spread wide over the plain. Still nothing. Gideon slept fitfully in a small tent, on the camp bed he had found in Black Robes’ quarters and was up before the dawn. Perhaps today something would happen. He was right.

At the same time pre-dawn, Captain Ivor Gunderson, commanding the company on Gideon’s extreme right, felt uneasy. A cautious, capable man whose third year of electronic engineering studies had been interrupted by the Midi invasion, Gunderson had moved his command slowly South along the line of the Terminus

stream all the previous day, without seeing anything or hearing anything, and finding only one human who had run away from a slave column as it was being evacuated. But the silence was enough to unsettle all of them. Before the Midis they would have met one or two humans supervising tending the fields in a sustainable way. Now there was no one at all and the captive reported seeing “a cloud” of Midis in the distance, off near the stream as he ran.

“What do you mean ‘a cloud’?” asked Gunderson.

“I mean it just seemed to be like a black mass of them.” He was of the hippie type with hair and beard more matted than usual thanks to his time as a slave, quite common among the Haven settlers. He had young children at the Summer Camp but he had no idea where his wife was and was anxious to find her.

“We’re anxious to find all the slaves,” said Gunderson. “Can you give us any more details about this cloud?”

“I just got a glimpse when I looked back. I was too busy running. A moving cloud. Like locusts, maybe.”

Gunderson didn’t like the sound of that, nor did Colonel Swift when he called it in. He was told to just keep scouts in his forward positions, with the main body in the fall back position, without fires, and keep in contact with his flanking company. If and when any contact occurred he was to fall back. Gunderson established his HQ – two logs on which to sit - in a small grove of trees and studied his map by the light of his mobile phone. His company, company H, with the H standing for hot as its members often pointed out, wrapped themselves in ground sheets and tried to sleep as he briefed his platoon commanders and sergeants on how they would manage that most difficult military manoeuvre of all – a fighting retreat.

He was up before dawn, rousing his musketeers. Breakfast would be witches’ bread from their packs, maybe varied with a little jam brought from the Summer Camp. Company transport, a cart holding reserve ammunition and food drawn by a single horse, had been left well back. Gunderson walked up to his picket line, munching on bread. All was still quiet. There was a hint of fire on the horizon on his left. Birds were singing. He saw a flock of birds disturbed ahead of his pickets and then one started gesturing at him frantically.

“There, sir, see, through the trees,” she said, pointing. The sentry had better eyes than Gunderson. At first he didn’t see anything. He squinted then saw movement, from left to right as far as he could see – a moving cloud of Midis. A host. His phone was at his ear, having called force HQ on speed dial, without even thinking about it.

“Everyone out, now,” he said, while waiting for the connection. “Go, go. Back to the others.” He heard the HQ staffer. “Company H – we’ve got Midis to our front big time, retiring now.” Then the phone went dead.

“Hello! Hello!” said the musketeer at HQ. “Colonel, phone has gone dead. H Company just reported a big contact, then the call cut out.”

“See if you can get Captain Gunderson back,” said Gideon. “Monster get the others up. I think its show time.”

“Sir, the drone has cut out,” said Musketeer Peterson. “No contact.”

“Crashed?”

Peterson spread his hands. “I’ve got no control so I guess, sir. We just had the one up close to Captain Gunderson’s company. We still have two, but I can’t put ‘em up as I dunno what happened to the first one, sir.”

“Nothing, sir,” said the phone operator. “No dial tone, no nothing. Comms are down.”

They heard a few distant shots in about the direction of H Company. Gideon waited in the ensuing silence. A few more shots and then more shots that built up into a continuous cackle.

“Looks like we’ve found something,” said Gideon. “And Black Robes has proved smart enough to mess with the phones and drones. You.” He pointed at one of the HQ staff still blinking the sleep out of his eyes. “Run to Captain Chifley, kick him awake if you have to, his big cannons are to give the general recall. You.” He pointed at one of the tiny detachment of cavalry he had kept at HQ, who had also just been kicked out of bed by Monster. “The phones are down. Ride in the direction of the shots and find out what’s happening. Then come back. You.” He pointed at another. “Ride in the opposite direction to Company B.” This was the company going North. “Make sure they know they are to retire with all speed. Then work your way clockwise. Tell all cavalry you meet about the general order and that I said they are to retire on Terminus, on the double but keeping contact with flanking units. You.” He pointed to a third. “Ride to company G. That’s the next company along from where all the firing is coming from in that direction.” He pointed. “You keep the firing on your right. Tell Captain Bartuah he is to come in on Company H’s flank in support if he can while everyone falls back. He may already be doing that. Then go to Captain Cherry in the next company along, make sure she’s falling back and that she should support G and H.”

This flurry of orders was met with “yessirs” and fast departures. No doubted that game time had started. To underline the point in the distance was came the unmistakable ‘whump’ of grenades. The action was heating up.

Captain Gunderson and company H were fighting for their lives – or perhaps fleeing for their lives. Gunderson had fallen back for several minutes without contesting the matter, keeping his company at a fast trot while he looked for a position to make a stand. There! A line of trees at right angles to the creek. It would have to do.

“Evens stay here with me,” he said. “Odds, fire and retire. “Hornby.” This was his second in command, inevitably nicknamed Horny. “Find someplace to hold with odds and get there real quick. Go now and scout.”

“Yes sir.”

Then Gunderson turned and almost ran himself. The Midis had abandoned their usual columns for simply advancing in a dense mass with Red Bands ensuring that the “cloud” as the freed slave had described the formation, did not get too spread out. They meant to overwhelm his little command; just swamp it, and never mind casualties. At six hundred metres the Midi front was several times that of H Company’s line and moving towards them in a dense wave.

“Neno huff,” shouted the Red Bands.

“Beeno haff,” roared the cloud.

“Kill! Kill!” yelled the humans and started firing.

Back at musketeer HQ the phone system had been declared dead. “Some sort of virus, best as I can tell,” said one of the musketeers.

“Sir, the email is still working,” said another, looking up from a laptop. “I’ve got an email from Room Nine saying that they got texts from contacts about large troop movements North and South before the phones cut out.”

“Looks like Gunderson’s people have found the one to the South. What about the North? Anyone heard any shots? Any word from Captain Hannigan’s company?”

To the North, a cavalry scout rode up to Captain Hannigan as she stood listening to the very distant noise of shots.

“They sure sound like ours, right at the end of the line,” she said to her second in command.

“Midis in front of you, ma’am,” said the scout. “Thousands.”

“Thousands!” she exclaimed, turning to look. Most of her command, who heard the exchange, also turned to look. They could not see anything.

“Just out of sight, ma’am, but they’re there.”

They heard the boom of cannon, and looked behind them, to see two columns of smoke billowing up from Terminus.

“The recall signal,” said her second in command, a Lieutenant Davis. “Just tried calling HQ. Phones are out. Completely dead.”

“Listen up, everyone,” said Hannigan, after checking her own phone. There were no signal bars. “We go back smartly. Not running but fast. You keep Behind Lieutenant Davis and in front of me. Now move! Recall signal squad! Give the recall. Trooper, the phones are out. Tell the next company along we’re moving back, then race and tell Colonel Gideon.”

The trooper nodded and sped off while the previously designated squad loaded muskets, fired in batches of three and then trotted after the main body. As she reached the rest of the company Hannigan looked over her shoulder and glimpsed a vast, dark mass. B Company would have to keep moving or it would get into a world of hurt. Everywhere the humans started to fall back on Terminus.

For Gunderson’s H Company, it was not so much a matter of falling back, but of trying to keep from being overwhelmed. “Everyone, grenades and run to the next position!” screamed the captain. They had practised this - practised it until they were sick of the manoeuvre and thought they had it down pat. But doing it on a calm day, throwing rocks as pretend grenades against a pretend enemy was a world away from throwing live grenades at an enemy in the next field, bearing down relentlessly on their position. Worse, the enemy were shooting back. As they threw the grenades a musketeer crashed the ground. He did not cry or scream, just collapsed and lay very still. A medic was there in seconds to check the body then shook her head at Gunderson.

“Body has to be left,” said the captain, grabbing the man’s rifle and cartridge pack. The musketeer’s name had been Michaels, but there was not time to think about that now. “Go, go!” He glanced back just as the grenades exploded. Most of the Midis were armed with the traditional spears, but a few had muskets which they fired wildly. Another bullet went by him to his right. Time to go. Further along the line a women musketeer was hobbling along, blood streaming from her leg but leaning on another musketeer and making good time. He looked along the old line. No one left? The musketeers in the fall back position, offset to their left as they had practised, started shooting. Gunderson left.

Company A had doubled out of the fort to line up in front of Gideon. Most stood with both hands around the shooting end of their rifles, butt on the ground, listening to the now continuous cackle of firing to the South. A mortar section of four mortars had loaded their weapons and ammunition onto one of the car-carts supply trains. Another car would medivac the wounded.

“Guys, it’s possible that H Company may need a hand,” said Gideon. A Company murmured. It had been the first company formed and the light of battle came into their eyes. “We’re going to double there and fall in their flank. Other companies are coming to help. I don’t want to stop them. Just slow the Midis long enough so that all the companies can get across the bridge. The last line will be at the town’s big sheds. Everyone understands?” They murmured agreement. “Now move. Double over but keep together. Mortars hold for a minute I’m coming with you.”

A Company moved off as a cavalry trooper rode up. “Colonel Gideon sir, Captain Hannigan is withdrawing. There’s thousands of Midis in front of her.”

“Ye gods! They want to cut us off from the fort. Okay, um, go back. General order. Everyone except those involved in the South are to double to here. Repeat it back to me.” The trooper did so. “If anyone wants to know why say that all the Midis in Haven are coming here. Now move.” The trooper clattered off. “Captain Toms!”

“Sir?”

“We need a defence line there.” He waved to the North of the town.”

“But there’s nothing there, sir.”

“I can see that,” snapped Gideon. “We need to put something there about one hundred metres out. Cut down trees, throw a few stones down. Anything. Use the artillery crews. We won’t be moving the artillery from the fort. Maybe not even the mortars. Once the Midis get this close, they’ll be in range. Get busy!” Toms yessired and moved off.

“Monster!” Gideon realised the biker was standing close by, along with Honey, expecting to go with him to the battle. “How do you feel about being a traffic cop?”

“Last traffic cop I met cost me two hundred bucks.”

“We are about to have the mother of all battles for this bridge,” said Gideon. “I’m going to get the whole corps across it and I’m going to blow it. It’d be real helpful if the bridge didn’t become clogged. Keep traffic moving. Any cavalry comes they get their horses across the bridge first, then come back and help with building the defensive line. Priority to medivac cars. If worse comes to worse companies can wade on either side but its fast flowing. That’s a last resort. Got all that?”

Monster looked at the bridge and then back at Gideon. "I ain't handing out fines."

"If anyone pisses you off or blocks traffic, you can chuck 'em off the bridge."

"Now that's a plan," said Monster.

H Company was about to fall back from its fourth position and Gunderson was loading another casualty onto the supply cart – a musketeer whose arm had been broken by a Midi bullet but was protesting feebly that she could still fire.

"Gotta get the arm seen too," he said, as the medic dosed her.

"Raw work, sir," said Lieutenant Hornby. "We can't even slow them."

By this time H Company's rifles were making a continuous cackle. They could see the faces of their opponents as they yelled "Neno huff" then "Beeno haff". H Company was piling bodies but making no impression on the cloud. The Midis were heedless of casualties

Then they were aware of a breathless Captain Bartuah, the gigantic commander of G Company of West African descent, and that the volume of fire had increased. As soon as he realised what was happening, Burtah and his company had run to join them

"Private fight, mun, or can anyone join," he said.

"The more the merrier," said Gunderson, almost grinning.

Even with G Company, however, all they could do was retreat. But at the next fall back position Gunderson was aware of more firing to his left. Looking over he saw F Company firing at the cloud. A minute later Captain Cherry came over, breathless. Her company had also run to join the fight.

"You were having a party and didn't invite us," she said, on one knee while musket balls whipped by her, "F Company is going to rev it up for you."

Then A Company joined the fight joining on the left of G, linking to Cherry's company and the mortar/grenade thrower section sent by Gideon roared into life behind them. There was no need to worry about range. They could not miss. The grenades arched over the musketeer line, their path marked by lit fuses, to burst with a whump in the middle of the Midi formation. For the first time, the cloud faltered.

In the North, Captain Hannigan heard the distant crackling at the other end of the line become noticeably louder and thought to look over her shoulder. She gasped. A dark mass of Midis had just crested a distant rise, stretching right across her field of view. Thousands.

“We got company people,” she called. All her company looked behind. A few of the more hopeful Midis, seeing the humans for the first time, tried firing their muskets to no effect, but the humans gasped and some quickened their pace. “No one runs!” she snapped. “We keep the same even pace. Can anyone see the company on our left facing towards Terminus, C Company?”

“Thought I saw someone, ma’am, just before,” said one of the musketeers pointing off to the left. “In line with us.”

Hannigan checked her phone again. No signal at all. She thought about racing over and co-ordinating a stand with C Company but then thought that they were all converging on one point. The trouble was, she knew, they would have to turn and fight before they got back across the bridge, and she could not recall any defensible position before that.

As Hannigan was wondering about defensive positions, Toms and the artillery crews were dragging industrial pallets they had found in the sheds across to the chosen defensive line. They dug trenches, dropped one end of the pallets in the ground so that they stood upright, then wedged them in place with rocks. A large tree which had shaded a section of the road for many years met an abrupt end thanks to a chainsaw wielded by Monster, who figured his bridge duties would kick in later. Some sandbags left over from the construction of the fort were added to the line. Another tree was cut down and dragged into position by electric car. A troop of cavalry came in, having been sent back by Gideon.

“Horses across bridge,” said Monster, “then youse come back and work on the line.”

“Should we be doing fortifications?” asked the Lieutenant commanding the troop. He did not try to insist that Monster call him sir.

“Orders from Swiftie. He also told me that anyone who disagrees I get to throw off the bridge.”

“Guess we’re playing forts.”

Gideon arrived at the main engagement to find that his forces were trying to hold ground, with a slow trickle of casualties going to the medivac carts. Honey was with him and her immense popularity meant that just her presence in the front line boosted morale. Disdaining the drill of loading and firing a musket or rifle she always carried the two-handed sword she had used in that first encounter. Now she strolled along the battle line, unconcerned by the occasional bullet whizzing by her, sword

across her shoulders and both arms hanging over it, just as a Viking raider might have carried his sword. A large Asian Viking in pigtails grinning benignly at all.

“I don’t want you holding here,” said Gideon to his officers. “There’s another force of Midis coming from the South, just as big.”

“Just as big, sir?” gasped Cherry. “We thought this must be all.”

“Looks like we got ourselves a whole lot more enemies. My guess is that they meant to attack both ends at once but didn’t get the timing right. Whatever. We’ve got to get everyone back inside the fort. Captain Bartuah, start moving back, by companies. Make sure the mortars and Med guys know.”

“Yessir.”

Time for the commander to show himself on the front line. Before he left Gideon moved right along the ranks, Honey trailing along behind, trying to make himself heard above the noise, telling anyone who had time to listen what was happening. While they was there the Midis edged closer, heedless of losses. Time to get out. Gideon hitched a ride back with the medivac car, as the human battle line retreated, leaving Honey behind in case it got to close quarter fighting. At Terminus he found a defensive line of sorts, both to the North and South, and two companies that had not gone as far as the others yesterday had returned to man the lines.

Then Hannigan’s B Company was in sight and behind them a dark mass which made the musketeers gasp. Gideon organised a line. The grenade launcher crews who had been helping with the fortifications set up their weapons and fired. Then Hannigan’s company reached the fortifications and the musketeers fired, howling. The front edge of the Midi cloud seemed to melt into the soil but, like the cloud coming the other way, the force just seemed to shrug off casualties and come on, as if they were a zombie horde rather than creatures who cared about life or death. The artillery stationed inside the fort opened fire, lobbing explosive shells deep into the mass of the enemy. Captain Chifley had worked out a way to direct artillery fire by observers using emergency radios scavenged from the ski resort. Unlike the phones, these still worked. The size of the target meant that it was hardly necessary to direct the fire, but it showed how far the musketeers had come.

The Midis wavered again, then came with the now familiar call and response.

“Neno huff.” “Beeno haff.”

“Kill! Kill!”

For Gideon the rest of the day was a series of mass assaults stopped with difficulty – including hand to hand fighting along the makeshift barricade. He and Monster became a makeshift close quarter team that pitched in where the fighting

was thickest – Gideon using a rifle with a bayonet, and Monster, like Honey, keeping his sword. Then the southern forces arrived, making a stand at the end of the sheds, helped by being finally in range of the Fort’s artillery, and Gideon had to work out how to get his forces across the bridge without his perimeter caving in. Just as he set to this work, Monster tapped him on the arm and pointed. To the East, stretching as far as they could see was another black cloud of Midis.

“More shit,” said Monster.

It was seriously time to get behind the stream and into the fort. Gunderson’s H Company was sent back first, their ordeal not quite over as they had to race around to the edge of the forests on the other side of the river to fire at the Midis from that side. The cavalry was sent over to fire at the Midis coming from the North, followed by the mortar sections doubling over so that they could continue their work from behind the walls. Then it was company by company racing across the bridge to take up positions on the parapets, and then finally B Company walking across behind a shield of mortar, artillery and rifle fire. One of the last across was Gideon. The musketeer who had supervised the setting of the explosive on the bridge, claiming expertise in the area, looked at him expectantly.

“Blow it,” said Gideon.

The musketeer touched a gas lighter to a fuse by the gate. The fuse hissed and then the line of sparks ran out to the bridge followed by an ear-splitting whump! For a moment the bridge seemed intact, then it swayed and collapsed into the stream, spraying water over the Midis who were about to storm it.

The gates were closed and propped into place while Gideon went up to the ramparts to see all three of the Midi clouds converge in front of the musketeer position into one, gigantic horde. All three clouds had been supposed to attack at once, Gideon guessed, and completely overwhelm the Musketeers away from the fort, but had not got their timing right. Now all the Midis in the universe were crowding into Terminus proper, in front of the fort, and would attack the position the next day.

Gideon had his wish. The invitations had been issued, the music selected and the guests had arrived for the biggest, noisiest, most murderous, mother of all dance parties – Terminus.

Vous ne les laisserez pas passer, mes camarades (You will not let them pass, my comrades). General Robert Nivelle, June 23, 1916, Verdun.

Chapter Eighteen – Terminus

In the pre-dawn light, the musketeer known as Padre who had quoted the first commandment to Gideon, called a prayer meeting which most of the musketeer corps attended. “I had thought of preaching on psalm 46,” he told them “‘He makes wars to cease to the ends of the Earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear and burns the shields with fire’. But that is not right for what is about to happen. Instead I will quote Ezekiel chapter 25 ‘And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them’.”

The first shot of the Battle of Terminus, often just The Battle to the musketeers that fought in it, was fired by a Midi cannon. This was a surprise to the humans as, until they heard a boom from across the river and around shot whizzed over the parapet to bounce twice on the hard ground in the rear, musketeers diving out of its way, they had not known the Midis had cannon. Gideon was at the parapet in seconds, scanning the masses of warriors with his binoculars. Captain Chifley was by his side a split second later.

Another ‘boom’ and a tongue of flame in the dim light helped pinpoint the weapon. The shot ploughed into the remains of the bridge and ricocheted well over their heads. A third shot thumped into the ground in front of the fort’s walls.

“It’s a whole battery, sir,” said Chief. “Six of ‘em, but they’re not very good and they’re using round shot, not explosive shells.”

“Maybe,” said Gideon, “but a few of those balls in our rear can cause casualties, especially if our people don’t get out of the way. Time for some counter-battery work. We should have the range on them.”

“Yessir, but where did our friends get the cannons from?”

“The same place as the muskets I’m guessing,” said Gideon. “Black Robes should be back there somewhere.” He searched behind the battery and then around the cluster of senior Red Bands off to the left beside the road and thought he could detect a spot of black, unfortunately well out of range of even the cannons. Chief vanished and soon an artillery observation musketeer appeared on the parapet besides Gideon, holding binoculars and one of the emergency radios the artillery had started using.

“Whoa!” said this eighteen-year-old with a distinct Asian cast to his features, on seeing the host of Midis spread on the plain in front of the redoubt, as the sun rose

in front of them. “Like the siege of Helms Deep in that Lord of the Rings films, uh, sir.”

“The humans and elves didn’t have artillery, musketeer. Lay it on ‘em,”

“Yessir. Target, nine fifty metres from you,” he said in the radio. “Ready to observe.”

All the while the Midi battery had been banging away to no great purpose as far as Gideon could see except to draw the attention of the small number of musketeers he had spread over the length of the redoubt’s wall. Some of the shots hit the ground in front of the wall, a few hit the wall itself, but the majority went over the barrier to fall where most of Gideon’s force lay waiting for a Midi attack. The musketeers on the wall soon developed a drill where the one closest to the shot would turn and yell “incoming” and the musketeers behind him would shift out of the way. They did not have to keep in formation, as the British had to at Waterloo for fear of French cavalry. Otherwise, as Gideon realised, his position was classic Wellingtonian— the bulk of the defending force hidden from view by a fold in the ground as well as, in this case, a wall.

Trumpets sounded. Gideon looked to his left. A column had formed out of the masses of Midi warriors – one several times larger than anything he had seen to date. Toms and Captain Chifley were by his side again.

“Collect up the closest three companies, Mr Toms,” said Gideon, “we have work for them. And two sections of the mortars – make it three.”

“Want me to switch the artillery as well?” asked Chifley.

“No, no, everything on that battery. Get rid of it and then we can use them to mess up the Midi columns.” The musketeer next to him spoke again into his radio and the artillery fired for the shot to land well beyond the battery.

“Long,” Gideon heard the spotter through the noise. “One hundred down.”

The artillery fired again. Then the thin screen of musketeers on the wall near the column started firing as the Midis came within range.

“The Midi battery should be concentrating on the part of the wall where the column is about to hit,” said Chifley, raising his voice to be heard over the din. “No-one seems to be thinking about it on their side.”

“They’re thinking about it enough to attack where the sheds are,” yelled Gideon. These were the same sheds that he and other musketeers had hidden behind in attacking the fort the first time around. They had proved far too solid to knock down – being made of the same material as the bridge - without a serious expenditure of explosives which could be used elsewhere. In the end Gideon had ordered the

roofs taken off and the explosives set aside for their demolition buried in front of this weak point in the defences.

The Midi column rolled on, a vast tidal wave of warriors.

“Neno huff,” yelled several Red Bands at once.

“Beeno haff,” roared the cloud, the sound echoing off the Terminus buildings.

“Kill! Kill!” yelled the three companies now crowding onto the wall opposite the attack, howling as they reloaded. Their fire flailed the front of the column which dissolved into puddles – heaps of dead and dying. But the rest came on. Further back in the column some of the Midis were carrying what appeared to be very long ramps. Gideon wondered if they were going to throw the ramps against the walls and then realised they must be bridges for the stream. The stream could be waded of course, although that was a tough thing to do under fire. But would they bring any ladders for the walls? He looked over the rest of the field. Another column was forming to attack his extreme right. If Midis got between the end of the fort and the start of the trees where the cavalry were lurking, that would be a problem.

Captain Toms was still with the companies fighting the column on the left. He got off the parapet, calling for Captain Hannigan.

“Sir!”

“Another attack is forming way over on our right. Take your company and the two companies over there and keep ‘em out.” Gideon stopped for a moment at his command post where musketeers were working on the drones and mobile network, while keeping an eye open for stray cannon balls. “What about the phones?”

“No good sir,” said a Sergeant Besser, a lank-haired youth. “Someone’s really messed with the operating systems across the whole network. I’ll have to see if The Witches can help out. If they’re working on unhacking a star gate, maybe they can undo this. The drones are easier. Musketeer Peterson is now working to reset and reload the software and maybe keep their control separate from the network so it can’t be hacked again.”

“Hmm, okay.” The firing off to Gideon’s right increased. The mortars joined in. “Get the drones up as quick as you can. We’ve got no contact with the people back at the centre?”

“Emails, sir,” said Besser, grinning. “Whoever’s hacking the phone system is real smart but doesn’t know about emails. Room Nine has sent you this.” He picked up a tablet and handed it to Gideon.

“Major new forces, all warriors, came overnight avoiding settled areas,” Gideon read. “Existing forces joined them. All on a signal - all pre-planned. Only

highest Midis knew, and they took care not to speak out of turn. No previous reports of cannons.”

“All very well for them to say no previous reports of cannons, sir,” said Besser, as another musketeer yelled “incoming” and a cannon ball shot over the wall a little to the North of them. Neither man flinched. “They’re not being bombarded by them.”

“Get those drones back up, sergeant.”

Gideon climbed the parapet again to see that the Midi battery was distinctly the worse for wear after a direct hit slaughtered two of the gun crews, but the assault on the human left was beginning to look serious.

“Musketeer, sorry what’s your name?”

“Chung, sir,” said the artillery spotter.

“Musketeer Chung, tell Captain Chifley to switch all targeting to the assault on the left for the moment. After this salvo switch targets.”

As it happened, as Chung spoke into his radio, the next round of shots fell more or less on the Midi battery blowing gunners down and knocking two of the pieces of their mounts. That left one lonely, brave, gun crew still firing away. Two of the cannons looked as if they could still fire, Gideon noted through his binoculars, but there did not seem to be anyone organising for those pieces to be remanned by spare gun crews or, for that matter, anyone directing fire. The guns fired in any direction the crews felt like.

Over on the left the cloud of Midis, leaving a trail of bodies, had reached the river, flung down the ramps and those closest to them started running across. Many others threw themselves into the water and started wading across. As the water came up almost to Midi necks and they had little armour they were actually safer in the water than on the ramps. Further back in the column, Gideon could see Midis carrying ladders.

The first few reached the huts and were held there by Red Bands, sheltering behind the concrete walls, while others caught up. The humans started throwing grenades into the sheltering mass, splattering the walls with blood, but still the Midis came on. Black Robes, Gideon realised, must have somehow created new hosts of these creatures to simply fling them at the human fortifications. How had he created them? Probably much the same way he had created the first few thousand that had overrun the human settlement, but those had included females and even children. These were all warriors willing to die for their cause in headlong assaults. There did not seem to be any attempts to manoeuvre, to cross the river to the North or South of the fort, where the stream was deeper but away from human fire – something Gideon

feared, as he might then be forced to fall back. Instead they were just going straight for the humans behind their walls.

The Midis spilled out past and between the sheds, reached the wall and started climbing. It was not smooth and certainly not high. Musketeers did not reach over the wall to fire at the base, but instead dropped grenades, adding to the carnage. Mortar shells ranged down, sometimes exploding before they hit the ground, other times bouncing once or even twice as the Midis ran in all directions, then exploding. More Midis crowded onto the space between the redoubt and the river. Midi musketeers who had somehow survived to cross the river – they were specially targeted by the musketeers – fired above the heads of their fellows. Gideon saw a musketeer crumple and fall off the wall. He saw a musketeer behind the wall hold up two wires, the ends bare strands of copper, and yell something at Toms. That officer looked at the Midis crowded beneath the wall and shook his head. Not yet.

By that time the artillery had found the range on just the other side of the river in a continuous series of shell bursts that threw bodies around and broke the ramps but did not stop Midis throwing themselves into the stream. Finally, as the front rank of warriors threatened to push past the line of humans on the wall Toms nodded to the musketeer with the wires and yelled “everybody down!” - a shout that carried across to Gideon, even above the din. The humans ducked. The musketeer touched the two ends of the wires together, and the explosive buried in front of the stone huts went off with a boom – throwing Midi bodies into the air. Knowing what to expect Gideon had also ducked. When he raised his head a small mushroom cloud had formed, quickly dissipating.

The human defenders picked themselves up, covered in dust and hurled themselves at the Midis who had managed to push their way onto the wall, then jumped down and cleared the concrete sheds the old-school way by and bayonet, yelling “Kill! Kill!” then howling. The few surviving Midis, who had been brave up to that point, jumped back into the river to escape the wrathful humans – demons from the Midi underworld come to life in their imagination – while the artillery and mortars dealt with the few left on the far bank. The humans pulled the ramps the Midis had been using across to their side of the stream, grabbed the ladders and threw them all over the wall. They may come in useful. The attack was over.

Well before that final act, however, Gideon’s attention was absorbed by the drama on his extreme right. There the long sheds on the far side of the river, which Gideon had not thought necessary to knock down, made it difficult for the Midis to marshal the big crowds they now seemed to prefer. Instead, a crowd formed at the

Southern end of the sheds, out of range and then surged forward, around the sheds aiming for the musketeer right.

The cry “Neno huff,” was met with a booming, roaring “Beeno haff,” that echoed off the sheds and, seemingly, from the hills behind them. The crowd surged forward

“Kill! Kill!” screamed the humans. Soon the human line was firing continuously. The artillery, still occupied with the attack on the left, had nothing to spare but mortar shells arched over the wall, their fuses sparking to go off with a whump. The tidal wave rolled on. The warriors reached the Terminus stream throwing down ramps like those carried by their brethren on the other wing and charged across screaming “beeno haff” to be met by a hail of fire from humans exhorted to “aim low”. Midis died on the ramps and on the far bank as a few humans paused firing to toss grenades. Others jumped in the stream to wade across, many perishing in those few metres to drift downstream. Still they came on.

By this time the artillery had finished with the attack on the human left and switched targets, aiming for the far bank of the stream. Like the German artillery on the Somme dropping shells behind the attacking British infantry, the human artillery was trying to prevent reinforcements getting through. The humans, however, did not have enough cannon to achieve those sorts of barrages. The warriors kept on charging through the storm of shell and rifle fire, across the stream and on to the base of the wall where they were met with grenades. The survivors climbed the wall to be confronted by bayonets with angry, desperate musketeers behind them. Smaller parties working way around the human right, despite fire from the cavalry stationed in the trees further to the right. Gideon was forced to send one of the two companies in reserve to clear out those infiltrations. He took back one from the force on the left, but left Toms and the other companies in place.

The battle had just reached the fort wall on the right when a spark from a mortar fuse, or maybe it was a carelessly handled Midi musket started a fire in the long grass and bracken on the far bank. The day was a warm one. It quickly spread. Those Midi wounded unable to move screamed, just as wounded screamed when caught by fires at the Battle of the Wilderness in the American Civil War, thrashing feebly at flames on their clothes. Others got up and staggered away only for the fire to overtake them and they slumped down, clothes burning. The Midis due to reinforce the attack on the human right pulled wounded out of the way of the fire instead, and the attack petered out. Smoke blew across the field, making the humans cough.

Gideon set his musketeers to work defouling their weapons. Like old fashioned muskets it was necessary to pour boiling water down the muzzles of the rifles every

now and then to clean out residue left by the repeated explosions. The artillery finished off the lone Midi artillery piece which had continued to bang away during the action, and then tended to its weapons. Everyone drank water.

While Gideon was talking to the musketeers on the left wing where the action had been hottest, Captain Toms called him over.

“Have you seen this, sir?” he said and used his foot to turn over a body of one of the Midis who had made it to the top of the wall only to meet a human bayonet. “These guys are different. The face is something like that of a Midi but its features blocky and half-formed.”

“So it is,” agreed Gideon couching down for a closer look. Thinking the skin also looked like putty on an impulse he used a pen to press one cheek. Unlike human skin which would bounce back when the pen was removed, the Midi skin remained misshapen, as if it was a form of putty or clay. “Are they all like this?”

“Had musketeers check out the bodies we can get to. They say that there are some that look just like the Midis we’ve been dealing with, but plenty more like these.”

“No wonder they gave up on the columns they’ve been using.”

“Sir?”

“The best working theory on where the Midis came from is that they were basically cooked up somewhere east of here, had their traditions implanted and then sent out like some migrating horde, right? Well someone, my friend in the Black Robes comes to mind, decided to cook up another quick batch to throw at us, but didn’t bother with refinements.”

“Quantity over quality, sir, or maybe like those zombie films with endless bodies throwing themselves at the survivors,” said Toms.

“Must be. No need to bother with warrior traditions or tactical formations. Just get them shouting, holding a spear and moving in the right direction. Not much manoeuvring with these guys either. One of my fears was that they’d build bridges over the stream well away from the redoubt and force us out of it, but no building bridges with these cut down models.”

“Bad enough as it is, sir,” said Toms.

“True. If we hadn’t switched to rifles and mortars we’d have been in real trouble, but the battle ain’t done yet and the casualties we’ve inflicted to date don’t matter a damn.”

“Yessir,” said Toms, which was about all that could be said.

Gideon stepped up onto the ramparts again as the fires on the Midi side burnt themselves out, wondering what was next in store for the humans. As if to underline

his discussion with his second in command he could hear two musketeers talking further down the wall.

“Casualties matter, depending on the regime,” said one musketeer. “I mean look at the wars of insurgency. The Americans caused many times more casualties than they took in Vietnam inflicting them on a much smaller country. The Viet Cong, the insurgency movement in the south, was crippled by the casualties it took in the Tet offensive. The French in Algeria also handed out loads more casualties than they took. Didn’t change anything. The Chinese in the Korean war and the Russians in the war with the Germans just threw bodies at their opponents, sometimes without weapons. The Chinese use to come on bugles and flags, the whole bit and pick up rifles from those already killed as they charged.”

“Brave of the Chinese,” commented the other. “At least the Midis have weapons.”

“Oh sure, you’ve gotta hand it to them, just like you’ve gotta, sort of admire the Midis for wanting to charge this place over piles of their own dead,” said the first. “But my point is that the old communist regimes didn’t give a damn about casualties. The citizens were there to serve the state, and its self-appointed hierarchy and anyone who challenged that or counted casualties would find themselves in a re-education camp.”

“These guys aren’t communist,” protested the second.

“True, they’ve got some sort of tribal structure and tribal chiefs would mostly consider they have an obligation to their own people so we gotta be having some effect, I guess. Even if most of the Midis we’ve been killing are these cheap imitations, whatever they are, there’s still plenty of actual Midis in there being killed.”

A trumpet sounding off to his left diverted Gideon’s attention. The smoke from the fires was still swirling over the battlefield and seemed to be thickening, but another attack was about to hit his left. A female musketeer called Sweet, came running up, wearing one of the emergency search radio headsets now being used for communications. She should have been in her final year at school but instead had volunteered for a non-combat role and had ended up as an aide in corps headquarters.

“Captain Hannigan reports that a cloud is forming opposite her,” said Musketeer Sweet.

They were going to attack his left and right at the same time, thought Gideon. “Stay with me,” Musketeer Sweet, he said aloud. “Relay reports and orders.” He should have thought of establishing an arrangement like this before.

Sweet nodded. Her hair was auburn, cut short, and her face smooth. She would have plenty of guys vying for her attention, if she survived the war. Most of the musketeers who had come back from the left were sent to that wing again. Gideon heard the now familiar shouts of “Neno huff,” and an echoing “Beeno haff,” Was the response louder than the first time? That was a worry. This time the artillery, not distracted by counter-battery work, opened up the moment the front of the cloud was within range. The gunners, keeping up an impressive rate of fire, stripped off their shirts as they worked, the girls retaining their bras. This was not the time for modesty. One told Gideon later, somewhat disappointed, that the guys had been too busy to look.

The Midis pushed through the curtain of artillery fire at a trot, to be met by a hail of rifle bullets. The Midi musketeers had started working in two man teams well away from the main body, one holding a large wooden shield, which they hoped might protect the team and a second Midi firing a musket when the team got within range. Gideon searched for his sniper squad led by Skull and Padre, trailing Sweet, and told them to target those musketeer teams. None should be left alive.

“The Lord has guided us to that work already,” said Padre.

“He means we’re on it,” said Skull.

“Captain Hannigan says the attack opposite her is coming within artillery range,” said Sweet, blocking one ear with her left hand as she tried to listen to the messages above the din. She had to yell at Gideon. “She’s asking for reinforcements.”

“Tell her she’ll have to wait for artillery. C and D companies are coming.” Gideon ran to where those two companies were waiting and sent them on their way. Hannigan would have four companies, plus mortar teams, while Toms had three plus mortars and artillery support. That left him with just A company, his most experienced, plus two mortar teams who plainly thought they were missing out on the fun.

Sergeant Besser of his headquarters unit ran up and thrust a tablet in his hands.

“Email from base. Problems, sir,” he said.

Gideon read:

“Midis with a human have attacked here. Got into visitors centre. A few of us shut ourselves in Witches’ building. Don’t know what’s happened in v centre yet. All phones are out. Agnes came down. She says the human was with Colonel Swift’s group originally and Colonel Swift knew him. Waiting for them to go.”

“Shit!” said Gideon. He’d forgotten all about Boothroyd.

Boothroyd and his malcontents had not been heard of for months, Gideon thought as the battle continued to rage about him. A musket bullet whined well above his head. He thought so little about the former HEO driver’s band that Gideon had only left a handful of musketeers at the base, almost all non-combat. But of course, as Gideon now realised, the human must have been able to contact Black Robes through the Midis in his gang. How else would Boothroyd have known when to attack? He must have been watching at a distance the whole time, sending reports to Black Robes for all he knew, and that might be how Robes knew about the loading and firing sequence for artillery. It wasn’t as simple as that of musket/rifles. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. They had no choice but to deal with the problem in front of them.

He handed the tablet back to Sergeant Besser, still thinking.

“Is that the guy you ransomed Kat from sir?” asked Besser.

Gideon nodded. “And Boothroyd will pay for what he’d done, after we deal with the Midis.”

“Yessir, what do you want me to reply to this email.”

“Just say they are to remain in the structure until the gang is gone then try to find survivors, but everyone is to sleep in the Witches structure until help gets there. We’re in the middle of a battle so just when that’s going to be is a good question. Just say as soon as we can.”

“Yessir”.

It was just as well that the Witches had locking mechanisms on their front door that prohibited all but musketeers from entering. There were other internal barriers, in case anyone did get past the first door. Gideon doubted that Boothroyd and his Midi band would try to force the door or stay for long once they had taken what they could find at the visitor’s centre and camp. If they took prisoners and hurt those prisoners, the Musketeers would settle with him and his band later, assuming they survived.

Artillery shells were still whistling overhead, as the crackle of rifle fire intensified on his left. Firing started on his right. At that moment Lieutenant Lapping, A Company commander now that Captain Toms was commanding the left wing defence, strolled up.

“Pardon me, sir,” he said, “have you noticed that the haze is getting thicker?”

Now that Lapping had mentioned it, Gideon realised that the haze had become decidedly thicker in just the past few minutes. The artillery explosions off to the left were visible as flashes of light in the gloom.

“Guess it has, Lieutenant. Been wondering myself.”

A thin, bespectacled youth Lapping had been a business major – not that there was much business in Haven – on a skiing trip when the Midis struck and had been among the first to volunteer. He had proved to be a good officer.

“It just that some of the musketeers say that it doesn’t seem natural, sir. It’s not a smoke haze from the fire and it’s not from the explosions. It’s more like a sea mist, but it’s too late on a warm day, and the others say mists here are very rare.”

“It’s artificial?” said Gideon. “Why would anyone go to the trouble of an artificial mist?”

Lapping shrugged. “Hide troop movements, sir. Really tough to surprise us here, even at night. A mist might do the trick...”

That line of reasoning made Gideon uneasy, and the more he thought about it the greater his unease.

“The Midis have been hammering both wings all day,” he said half to himself and then stopped.

“Blenheim and Gettysburg,” said Lapping catching Gideon’s train of thought.

“John Churchill hammered the French wings until Marshall Tallard weakened his centre to reinforce the wings,” said Gideon, still half to himself, “then sent his main attack against the weakened centre.”

“General Lee was trying the same thing at Gettysburg, sir,” said the Lieutenant, “but the attack on the centre, Pickett’s charge, failed.”

“Sergeant Besser?” roared Gideon turning from Lapping. “Can you get those drones up yet?”

“All ready sir, but with the mist there doesn’t seem much point.”

“Get one up now,” snapped Gideon, “and send low altitude through the centre. I’m looking for big bodies of troops. Lieutenant get your people up on the walls, there.” Gideon pointed at the centre of his position, opposite the destroyed bridge. “And smartly. Monster, Honey, Fred, Sam come with me.”

They stood on the wall’s parapet as A Company assembled beside them, Gideon looking into the mist, as the drone roared out just above their heads. The battles on either wing continued to rage.

“What are we looking for, man?” said Monster. “This is the only part of the wall that’s quiet.”

“Too quiet,” said Gideon.

“Captain Hannigan’s asking where her artillery support is, sir,” said Sweet, pressing the ear piece of her radio set to her ear.

“Tell her there are problems all over the field.” Gideon’s uneasy feeling of before had now become full blown anxiety. He thought he could hear something over the din of battle. Monster’s head was cocked to one side, as if he also heard something. Honey brought up her sword. “Sweet, tell the artillery they are to pause and swing to fire at the centre one hundred metres beyond the bridge and keep firing. On my word they are to unleash hell.”

“Hey, that old film Gladiator,” said Lieutenant Lapping.

Before Gideon could glare at him, Sergeant Besser ran out from the command post, yelling. “Midis, sir, thousands of them directly in front of us and heading this way.”

“We got company people,” said Gideon then yelled. “Sergeant Besser, every person” (he nearly said every man) “who can bear a rifle should get up here and bring a rifle for me. Sweet, tell Captain Toms and Captain Hannigan we’re got big problems in the centre and we need musketeers back here. Anyone they can spare and those they can’t, at least a company from each plus mortar teams.” He saw Skull within yelling distance, killing Midi musketeers. “Skull! Collect up Padre and your guys and get them here.” Skull looked around, startled, saw A company on the wall and realised what must be happening. He nodded.

“You guys!” Gideon pointed at his two reserve mortar teams who suddenly realised they were about to have more fun than the rest of the mortar teams put together. “Get ready and keep your rifles handy.”

“I see them,” said Honey.

Then Gideon could see them through the mist, an advancing, seemingly solid wall of Midis, then the inevitable cry of “Neno huff,” met with a “Beeno haff,” where this time the “haff” was shouted.

“Kill! Kill!” screamed the humans, Gideon along with them, although the response seemed flat and feeble in the mist. Then the killing started.

Gideon and Monster, who had learned how to use a rifle, were side by side loading and firing. Besser was besides them trowing grenades lit by Sweet. Mortar teams and the artillery simply fired for all they were worth, the shells arching overhead. There was no need to aim and observe the fall of the shot. Every shot would tell in that vast mass.

The Midi horde reached the stream. They had not brought any ramps or ladders. Those opposite the bridge clambered on to its ruins, still visible in the water only to die but with their bodies acting as sandbags, making it easier for others to cross. Gideon was aware the water in the stream had fallen and the ground to the right of his fort had become distinctly marshy, thanks to all the Midi bodies clogging the

stream. Other Midis jumped into this reduced steam and started wading across, often to die and for their bodies to add to the growing islands of dead. But still they came on, getting to the human side in numbers and then to the wall.

Gideon stopped his endless cycle of loading and firing for moment to tap Lapping on the shoulder. "Get your guys to fix bayonets," he screamed above the din. "A lot with bayonets missing."

Lapping looked along his line and then screamed "fix bayonets!", with the order being repeated along the line. The human firing diminished briefly while the musketeers did so then resumed, with increased intensity. The humans knew what the fix bayonet order meant. Midis reached the wall. Honey hefted her sword. Colin would be remembered with more headless Midis. Fred and Sam, who had not been taught how to use muskets, raised their spears.

"Monster," screamed Gideon over the din. "I want you, Honey, Fred and Sam to get down and behind the wall. If the Midis get through take 'em head on."

Monster, surprised to be given this new job, looked at Midis now clambering over the side of the stream, like ants, and nodded. He had learnt what discipline meant under fire with the musketeers.

Along the line musketeers stopped firing to throw grenades or jab with their bayonets. One female, Gideon noted out of the corner of his eye, got her bayonet stuck in a still wriggling Midi and had to kick the body free, nearly falling backwards herself. A comrade, a big man, absently half turned put his leg out and pushed her back, all while still loading.

Then it was load and fire, bayonet thrust, load, bang the rifle butt down hard on a head just below the parapet, then fire again, as shells arched overhead. The fight counted for little beside the big battles of earth – of Americans fighting Japanese for a heap of volcanic ash in the middle of the Pacific, British fighting Japanese around a tennis court in the Burma highlands, Germans fighting Russians street to street, building to building, room to room in a model Soviet town on the Volga, Italians fighting Austrians and Hungarians across a river in Northern Italy, British fighting Germans around a river in France where the mud was considered to be a thing with its own malignant life, Russians fighting Turks over a frontier town in Bulgaria and French fighting Vietnamese in an up country clearing in the jungle.

Terminus counted for even less beside the ultimate battle, the machine gun chopping, artillery thumping, mud-soaked, blood-splattered, barbed wire festooned, poison gas drenched Armageddon of a horror on earth – Verdun. Once more a handful of French poilus would rally beside a utterly shattered wood; once more German Storbtrippen would move up to attack the ruined village of Fleury which

changed hands sixteen times in the battle. Once more French 75s would start their characteristic drum fire, yet again the German Feldcanone would respond and the poor bloody infantry would be caught in the middle huddled in their trenches, before clambering over the dead of both sides to have at each other yet again with rifle, bayonet and grenade.

But the taste of combat the humans had by the Terminus stream that day was bad enough.

By sheer weight of numbers Midis forced themselves onto the parapets a little to the human left of the bridge, pushing a handful of musketeers onto the ground behind. For a moment the tear in the defences threatened to open into a rift through which warriors would pour. Then the musketeers heard the battle cry “Colin!”, and “Vipers!” and then Sam also yelling “Kill! Kill!” - the first time anyone had heard him yell – threw themselves on the intruders. Heads flew. Monster bayoneted one after another with his own technique of stabbing the throat where the point wouldn’t stick. Sam skewered two Midis then waved the bodies, on the end of his spear back and forth, knocking over warriors who had gotten over the wall. Fred punched his spear into one Midi after another – not as stylish as Sam but just as effective. The musketeers who had been pushed off picked themselves up and, inspired, flung themselves on the Midis. Then a platoon sent from Toms’ force on the left arrived, helped kill the leftovers and pushed back on to the wall. A full company arrived from the right. The battle raged.

Gideon was aware that he could look around between shots. More mortar teams arrived then another platoon from the left. The attackers were now simply unable to get through a wall of fire. Visibility was still limited, but by the glow of firing Gideon could see that the wings had held. The endless flow of Midi warriors in the centre slowed then stopped. The artillery shifted its target to keep Midis away from the left while the sheds were cleared out, yet again, by grenade and bayonet. Then the battlefield fell silent. The artillery crew collapsed around their cannons, the medical staff, frantically busy, looked up for a moment and then went on with their work.

After half an hour of silence the wind blew the haze back to wherever it had come from to reveal a field littered with Midi dead and mounds of corpses beside the walls and in the stream. The Midi survivors, with no fight left in them were huddled in shocked silence, out of range. The Musketeers started howling and continued howling into the night until Gideon told them to stop. The line had held. They had won.

Later when the sun set and one of the planet's moons rose the humans heard the moans of the wounded being taken away and heard relatives screaming with grief as bodies were brought in and were sorry for what they done – almost.

Chapter Nineteen – Aftermath

Unlike his great contemporary Napoleon The Duke of Wellington was affected by the casualties in his battles, and at the close-run victory of Waterloo he lost friends and colleagues who had been with him for years. "Next to a battle lost," he wrote later in a letter, "the greatest misery is a battle gained."

The final casualty count for the two days came to forty one dead and about four times that wounded, mostly through survivable spear thrusts but a few from musket balls that caused fearful damage - close to one fifth of the defending force. A Company, which had taken the brunt of the final thrust in the centre, including hand to hand combat on the parapets and inside the redoubt, had suffered the worst. Those were the figures. The loss of individuals brought those figures to sorrowful life.

Musketeer Sweet had died a pace behind Gideon without him being aware of it until he discovered the body. She had been told to get a musket, but it was not clear that she had been armed. The luminously beautiful Angela was dug out from underneath a pile of Midi corpses. She was one of those who had rallied in the final, desperate fight at the centre and had gone down fighting. Her boyfriend Gustav had been fighting beside her but had been unable to save her. His own left arm hanging uselessly, he was led away to the medics, weeping uncontrollably. The card-playing Dean died clearing out the storage buildings on the left after the first attack.

"Good card player," Sam told Gideon several times after seeing the body. "Pity."

The hippie who had handed Gideon the peace symbol took a sword thrust to his throat in one of the fierce assaults on the right. None of his companions had the heart to reclaim the cheap peace symbol and it remained on Gideon's desk. But the casualty that affected the colonel the most was that of Turnbull, the musketeer he had kicked out for being unable to stop listening to music and who had snuck back in. He

found him in the hospital tent heavily bandaged from a stomach wound, in obvious pain and sinking fast.

“Now can I use my earphones, colonel?” he asked, shakily, on catching sight of Gideon.

“Rule doesn’t apply to wounded,” Gideon heard himself say.

“Thanks man,” said Turns, fumbling for them in his jacket pocket.

He died an hour later, his earphones on.

After visiting the casualties, Gideon thought to look for Kat and found her, sitting back to the wall and chatting with another female musketeer, quite unharmed despite being in the thick of the battle on the right. Her bayonet was still smeared with blood.

“Well, you’re safe,” said Gideon.

“Colonel Swift!” she exclaimed, standing up and hugging him, to Gideon’s surprise. After a moment’s hesitation he hugged back. The musketeers around them grinned. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me. Sure beats threatening me with double guard duty.”

“That never did any good anyway.”

“Have you seen BD today?” asked Kat, releasing him.

“I know she’s over there somewhere, well back. She texted me before the phones went out. But this isn’t a social occasion. As soon as we can figure out what’s left, over there,” Gideon indicated the other side of the wall, every musketeer within earshot had stopped and was listening intently, “we’ll move. Now the drones are back we’ll be able to see what’s coming.”

“Wasn’t there some trouble back at the Witches’ building?” asked Kat.

“There was, and that’s what I’m going to have to deal with next before we move far from here.”

The musketeers were not now angry with the Midis. The creatures had been cruel to humans. They had killed relatives of many of those at the fort. But the Midis had now paid a terrible price, one far greater than the musketeers had expected to exact. The musketeers were angry, however, about being stabbed in the back by Boothroyd’s gang. There had to be a reckoning but there were details to attend to first.

He walked along the length of the wall, answering questions from musketeers and telling them they had done their job well. They nodded. Most didn’t feel like being congratulated – as with soldiers throughout history a big battle had left them drained – but they appreciated the gesture. Then Gideon was called to the ruins of the bridge. By that time the haze, where ever it had come from, had lifted revealing the

true extent of the human induced carnage. The field around terminus was littered with corpses, on the right blackened and scorched where the fire had got to them and heaped in silent ridges where the fighting had been fiercest around the bridge and on the two wings. The log jam of bodies on the right had broken down but there were still so many bodies in the stream itself that the water had lapped over its banks creating a marsh on either side. Gideon could hear the water trickling around the islands of dead that had formed. As he watched a Red Band corpse floated free from one of these islands, only to get caught up on another a little further downstream. Many of these were the ersatz Midis flung into the fray, probably by Black Robes, but there were plenty of the real Midis. The stink of roasted flesh where the fires had caught the wounded hung over the battlefield but Gideon knew that when the bodies started decomposing the stench would become truly appalling.

BD was on the other side of the stream, standing on what remained of the roadway with two grim-faced Midis under a White Flag. She was obviously upset.

“Are you okay?” he called to her.

“Yes – it’s just that I know women who’ve lost husbands, brothers, sons. It’s – it’s hard..”

“Of course,” said Gideon.

“They want a truce to collect wounded. Maybe until midday tomorrow?”

“You’ve got it,” said Gideon. “No weapons and my guys won’t fire, but no coming over this stream. We’ll collect wounded on this side.”

No one mentioned wounded in the stream. They would have long since drowned.

BD nodded, and spoke to one of her grim-faced escorts who glared at Gideon but then grunted and nodded.

“Okay,” she said.

“Shame we couldn’t meet under better circumstances.”

She smiled slightly, nodded then left.

On his return Gideon gave his least popular order. Having killed the Midis the Musketeers had to dispose of those bodies they could reach, while the truce was still in operation. In the mean time Gideon and a small force of musketeers had to return to the witch’s structure at once. They had business with the Boothroyd gang.

Monster had the final say on the field of dead in front of the Terminus redoubt. “What we got here,” he said after standing with Gideon on the wall for a time and indicating the field in front of him with a slight motion of his left hand, “is real fucked-up shit.”

Chapter Twenty – Loose Ends

French writer Voltaire had the last word on the execution by firing squad of English Admiral John Byng, as a scapegoat for the disastrous Battle of Minorca. “In this country it is good to kill an admiral from time to time,” he had a character say later in a play, “in order to encourage the others”.

They found the body of Captain Janice Morrison, head of Room Nine, off a track in the bush leading away West from the visitor’s centre. Her throat had been cut, which meant that Boothroyd had killed her. The Midis did not kill in that fashion. They found out later that she had stood up to Boothroyd and had tried to get his other captives released. The former biker had then cut her throat and watched her bleed out as a warning to the others.

“He’s getting worse,” said Gideon to Monster. “Has he killed before?”

“Dunno man,” said Monster. “But Captain still has her clothes on – no rape. Need to settle the fuck.”

As far as the others who had escaped into the Witch’s building could work out Boothroyd would have six captives including three female musketeers, after killing Captain Morrison. Gideon had ten musketeers plus Monster, Sam and sniper Skull with him and thought that should be plenty. Sam carried the same heavy spear he had been using at Terminus still smeared with Midi blood. None of them were trackers or hunters but the trail left by Boothroyd’s not so happy band was easy to follow, in any case they were simply moving along an existing, well-used trail.

They set off, moving deeper into the forests around The Witches’ structure and the Summer Camp than any of them had ever been. Gideon knew Boothroyd’s camp was a long hike from the Musketeer base which was why he had not paid much attention to the man before this – an oversight Captain Morrison had paid for with her life. They spent the night, without a fire munching the witch’s bread for dinner and breakfast. Gideon thought he could see a glow, possibly a campfire, far ahead of them. The next night, the fire was a distinct glow in the distance.

“We go in tonight?” asked Monster.

Gideon shook his head. “We’d just blunder around in the darkness and Boothie would escape. I want to be sure we grab him.”

“Grab the fuck?” said Monster being uncharacteristically loquacious, “then what? No prisons on Haven.”

Gideon shrugged. "Take him back to the structure for identification then a fair trial and a firing squad I guess."

"Why fuck around?" said Monster. "Catch Boothie, shoot him. Walk back."

The next day Gideon sent out scouts, then took his small force off the track to loop around to the North of Boothroyd's camp. Any traps or guards, he reasoned, would be set on the approach trail. By the time they were close enough to see a collection of shacks and lean-tos which made up down town Boothville, the town bonfire had been lit and Boothroyd himself had settled in for the evening's entertainment. They walked right up to the clearing in the dark – there were no guards except on the approach trail and no walls – just as one of the captive girls, a Sergeant Deborah Flinders had been forced to her knees in front of Boothroyd, hands tied behind her, as he sat on a log. A group of Black Band Midis sat on a log close to the fire to watch this strange human camp theatre.

Flinders had been deputy to Captain Morrison. As she was also a good-looking brunette Flinders was being courted by a number of musketeers but had not indicated any choice. She was not about to choose Boothroyd.

"Time you girls learnt I ain't that bad," they heard Boothroyd say. "I'm getting horny here and you c'n make this difficult or you c'n make it easy."

"Oh sure, you're not that bad," said Flinders. "I realised that when you killed my boss."

In response Boothroyd produced a Midi knife and cut the top button of Flinders' blouse. She jerked back then spat in her face. He got up and punched her hard enough for her to fall in the brown grass by the fire.

"Like I said, easy or hard," said Boothroyd.

"Time to stop this," said Gideon and they walked up to the fire.

Boothroyd did not see them until they stepped into the fire's circle of light then whipped around. He would have grabbed Flinders except that she was still lying on her side and the musketeers were pointed the weapons straight at the former biker. They pulled the hammers back in what sounded like one, menacing click. Sam had his spear out. The Midis on the log, sensing a regime change, promptly vanished into the bush, never to be seen again.

"How did you.." he said, knife back in his hand. "I was told phones were all down and you'd be wiped out."

"Email still works, and reports of our deaths were exaggerated," said Gideon.

"Shit you guys are like cockroaches. Real hard to kill."

“Funny, I was going to say the same thing about you,” said Gideon. “Now that you’ve mentioned killing, it’s sort of on my mind. Skull, cut the sergeant’s bonds and find the others.”

“Yessir.”

“Morrison was a class lady,” said Monster. “Why cut her throat, man?”

Boothroyd pretended to think about this for a second then shrugged. “Bitch had it coming.”

There were angry rumblings from the musketeers. Monster brought his own rifle up, waist high and pointed it at the biker.

“What’s the matter,” sneered Boothroyd. “You soft on her.”

Gideon noticed that the biker was moving closer to them, and shifting the grip on his knife, but before he could warn anyone Boothroyd struck, lunging straight for Gideon, knife out.

Four rifles, including Monster’s, cracked. Sam brought his spear up so that the charging Boothroyd ran onto it – the weapon’s tip disappearing into his chest and then emerging on the other side.

“Kill! Kill!” yelled the Android.

Impaled on the spear, as well as hit by all four of the shots aimed at him, Boothroyd tried one wild swing of his knife which glanced harmlessly off Sam’s jacket.

“See you in hell,” he said to Gideon with almost his last breath.

“Keep it warm for me, Boothie,” said Gideon, smiling. The biker’s action had saved him a lot of paper work. “No doubt I’ll be along soon.” Boothroyd’s eyes closed and Sam dropped his spear point so that Boothroyd’s lifeless body slid off the weapon onto the ground with a distinct thump.

“Now we’ve got a fire,” said Monster. “What’s for dinner?”

Gideon thought about just leaving Boothroyd’s body where it had fallen as a final mark of disrespect but then thought that was the sort of detail that would get him into trouble – or rather more trouble than he was already in – if and when contact was re-established with Earth, particularly if the man had any family. They dug a grave deep enough to discourage the forest creatures and rolled the biker into it, marking it so that anyone sufficiently interested in reclaiming the biker’s body could find it again.

A search of the camp uncovered a tablet with distinctly Witch-like styling. Gideon tapped the screen which glowed then, as Monster watched with him, cleared to reveal a wall of deep blue. To one side, visible in the screen was another wall with

what might be a picture frame viewed from below. It took Gideon a few seconds to realise the table was showing the field of view of another tablet lying on a table so that it was looking at the ceiling and part of one wall. The humans barely had time to process this when they heard footsteps and a creature in black robes looked into it.

“You’ve decided to make contact at last,” said the creature. Its accent was faintly English, like that of the Witches and he had a witch face with the distinctive half-curved nose but perhaps broader and harder. A male face? “I have bad news.” The creature stopped. Its eyes widened.

“Boothroyd already knows the bad news, my friend,” said Gideon.

“I see he does,” said Black Robes calmly, then added something in the bird-like Witches language and terminated the connection.

“Boothie’s in bed with the Black Robes guy?” said Monster.

“Seems so,” said Gideon. “Must’ve used this to show Black Robes how we loaded and fired the cannon and how they were built. He must not have realised we’d shifted to explosive shells and indirect fire, not to mention rifles. If Black Robes had made any of the large artillery pieces with explosive shells our casualties would be a whole lot higher.”

“Boothie’s a fuckup,” growled Monster. “Good riddance.”

Gideon could only agree.

When the Boothroyd hunting band and its free captives got back to base, Gideon found that The Witches had finally unhacked the gate to the extent that email was now flowing freely both ways, which was a mixed blessing. They found out what had been happening on Earth during the news blackout but, more importantly, Earth finally found out what had been happening on its only off-world settlement.

It was typical of the HEO that the staff had been so busy in meetings about almost everything else except the work of the office that it was a full month after the gate had been closed before the mid and lower tier staff noticed anything amiss, only to be reassured by seemingly confident senior managers. By that time, the baby-killer communications consultant Gideon Swift had been all but forgotten. Everyone assumed that Benson had fired him.

Another two months went by before a website pointed out that earth-based relatives of Haven settlers had been getting strange replies to emails and there had been no postings, videos or phone calls from the planet for months. This story was picked up by what was left of the mainstream media, with the resulting stories prompting the UN, which was supposed to oversee the operation, into being seen to be doing something.

Initial, fumbling UN attempts to find out stuff were easily deflected by senior HEO managers skilled in obstruction. Requests for an external review of the office's dealings with the settlement just before the information flow stopped were countered with statements that a "rigorous internal review" had been conducted. The results of that review could not be released at that time due to privacy concerns, as well as confidentiality issues. HEO officials needed to be able to discuss matters concerning the settlement on Haven without fear that those internal discussions would be made public.

The UN directed the HEO to comply with disclosure requests. The office refused. The matter went to court where it might have stayed for months, if not years, but then one of the HEO senior managers got stoned at a party and confessed that the office was concerned that the colony had been overrun by alien creatures – concerns that found their way onto a blog.

All hell broke loose. Officials from several different regulatory authorities turned up in the office of HEO director Dr Benson, who had sent Gideon to Haven, waving warrants and subpoenas. Computer records were seized. Finally, despite the best efforts of the HEO, the truth came out. The earth's first and only interstellar settlement and one dedicated to equality, non-violence and peaceful co-existence, had been overrun by primitive spear-armed creatures. Those captured rather than killed had been enslaved, and all contact lost.

The UN officials now charged with investigating the HEO and events on Haven itself, uncovered Dr Benson's last despairing effort of sending a reserve quartermaster sergeant who had been working as a contractor at the HEO, plus a rag tag band of former convicts and a discharged soldier to Haven, but they dismissed the effort as a gesture. What could such a band hope to achieve, especially as the records also showed an inquiry was pending over confiscated weapons? These were the three rifles which Gideon didn't get. Dr Benson did not mention that they had all been Shanghaied into going. The fact that most of the younger Havenites had been sent to the Summer Camp was also noted but it was assumed that the camp had been overrun.

So much for the facts, but what could Earth do now? The gate was closed. No one knew whether that closure had anything to do with the spear-carrying creatures but, in any case, it was closed. As Earth scientists had no idea how it worked they could not be expected to fix it, and they had no other means of reaching the Haven. UN officials had come to the regretful conclusion that they might never hear from the Haven settlement again when, just as Gideon led his small party off into the bush to find Boothroyd, the data connection was re-established.

Information poured through. Too much information. The musketeers had not just been listening to music on their phones, they had recorded the conflict in excruciating detail. The phones still might not have been working but enough had been stored on laptops to dump significant amounts of recorded information onto earth's social media, without anyone consulting Gideon, musketeer officers or HEO officials. What was known about The Witches was passed on. Fredericka had been able to get a selfie with Agnes – the alien had been bemused by the process but stared at the camera. Another taken of her looking a little more relaxed with the beautiful Angela flashed around the world.

Pandemonium!

The entities in the structure said they wanted military protection all along and the younger humans, with the help of these entities and a reserve quartermaster sergeant and two ex-convicts, had started a full-on rifle and artillery interplanetary war against the creatures who had overrun the settlement.

WHAT?

There had been three major engagements including one resulting in forty one human deaths and several times that number of casualties, as well as many thousands of alien fatalities.

...WHAT?

Questions poured back through the unhacked link. Who was this Colonel Gideon Swift? What was the formal name for The Witches? Who said that these creatures just wanted military protection from humans? What was this about The Witches giving medical treatment to humans? (In fact, Agnes had got to the point of being able to restore shattered limbs, albeit with some difficulty.) Bishop, at the summer camp, did his best to muddy the waters by claiming that Musketeers had committed war crimes, but had to admit he knew of no actual crimes. He also admitted he had seen The Witches who had not listened to his sensible talks on passivism, but he had no direct access to them and no control over the musketeers. The officials had to speak to Colonel Swift.

Gideon had been issued with an email address while he contracted with the HEO and that still worked on Haven, but its inbox quickly filled while he was off hunting Boothroyd. Sabrina, who had unhacked the gate, alarmed at the material flowing through it, thought to direct all the correspondence with Gideon's name on it to a separate file. For want of a better way of passing it on, this material was printed out. As a result, when Gideon returned from his hunt for Boothroyd, he was confronted with several enormous stacks of paper. On top of the stack closest to his chair was a printed note.

“Tell us if any of this is important – Tabitha.”

Out of curiosity he riffled through a part of one stack. There were requests for media interviews, several demands from the HEO to hand over control of all military units to Dr Bishop with threats of criminal prosecution if he did not, and requests from various UN bodies for information on The Witches. That was just the official stuff. Activists of all kinds asked for an official name to replace The Witches, as the popular name was thought to be demeaning. Academics complained that he had upset decades of careful research by actually speaking to the entities in the structure, and this business about them wanting military protection had to be “clarified”. Gideon suspected that “clarification”, in this instance, meant trying to argue around or redefine an inconvenient fact so that it went away.

There was also advice. Earth could not send actual help but they could send advice, lots of it. Gideon was told to hold where he was, retreat at once as he was too exposed, attack with everything he had, that the musketeers should disarm themselves at once as a gesture of peace and goodwill, and that they should adopt new terror weapons. One group suggested that The Witches could probably make Sarin gas, why not use that?

“As if I’m not in enough trouble as it is,” thought Gideon.

He arranged these stacks of paper into a wall of columns besides his chair, weighting them down with rocks, and then visited the Witches.

They waved away the request that they state a more formal name for themselves.

“Why not ask BD?” said Tabitha. “She understood our language and can think of some adaption humans can readily speak, but we don’t mind the term Witches. We understand what it means in earth culture and do not mind.”

They heard that the human and Midi gang that had disturbed them would not disturb them ever again. Sabrina took the tablet recovered from Boothroyd’s shack declaring that she would work on it, although she was still trying to unhack the gate so that ships would pass through.

“One other thing,” said Tabitha, after they talked about what the Musketeers would do next. “I found our security android, the one you call Fred, using these.” She produced a pack of playing cards.

“Oh I see,” said Gideon taking the cards. “The musketeer Dean Greenburg gave it to him. He had been teaching Sam to use them. I didn’t realise he was also teaching Fred and that it would cause problems.”

“We do not see a problem,” said Tabitha. “We were curious about just how they worked.”

“Oh, right! Well, they don’t work as such. They’re just square pieces of plastic. You play with them.” He shuffled the deck, thinking of poor Dean and put five cards in front of himself, and then five cards at the hem of Tabitha’s robes. “The cards come up randomly and there are rules for deciding which combination of cards are better than the others.”

“I see,” said Tabitha. “You are given five cards as the starting move of this.. game?”

“Correct. As a starting move. There’s a lot more to it and many different types of games. Dean was the person to explain it all but unfortunately he died at Terminus.”

“Died?” queried Tabitha looking up.

“Yes, he was killed in a tough fight on the left.” Gideon trailed off. He had already said how many had been killed and Agnes had been treating the seriously wounded, but now they were looking at him in horror. “I know that Agnes met Musketeer Angela Macdonald and Fredericka took a picture of them together.”

“Tall, female, a light inside her,” said Agnes.

“She also died,” he said. The Witches continued to look at him. They had left the cycle of birth and death so far behind that they had trouble grasping the concept of death. The numbers quoted by Gideon had meant nothing to them. It was only when he mentioned individuals that, for all their intellect, they finally began to comprehend the drama that had been unfolding literally on their doorstep for months.

“To be heard from no more,” said Tabitha, half to herself.

“That’s right, they’re gone,” said Gideon, “and more must go before we can win this.”

“More deaths to win?”

“That’s the way,” said Gideon. “To win we must attack and attacking means casualties - deaths.”

“I hope you will not be amongst those killed,” said Tabitha.

“Thank you,” said Gideon thinking that the only other person besides BD who had expressed concern over his safety was an alien. “I will try not to be dead.”

He left not realising what he had done. For the witches, reminded of the cycle of life and death, began to turn aside from their path of imprinting their personalities on the fabric of space-time itself and to help the humans, to allow doctors to observe their healing technologies and answer questions from scientists. In that sense, the casualties incurred by the musketeers had achieved more than all the other deaths on all the other human battlefields in all of history combined. The process was not

complete. Another factor had to be introduced. In the meantime. Gideon returned to Terminus. He had a war to win.

Chapter Twenty-One – Liberation

It was a common, black joke of the time. The diary of a British armoured unit records the reaction of an American military policeman dropped off at a French village flattened by the artillery of both sides, after D Day. “This place,” said the MP surveying the smoking ruins of the village with awe, “sure has been liberated.”

The moment Gideon returned to Terminus, the day after talking to The Witches, he knew that the musketeers could not stay there. Although some progress had been made in clearing away the bodies the musketeers could reach, including many from the stream, a lot of bodies were left on the Midi side and they were beginning to stink. Clearing them all would take time and they should now be moving, fast.

As many of the Midis warriors had been killed and the rest now knew the consequences of attacking a human formation, the victory at Terminus meant that the Musketeers could move around without being constantly worried about being surrounded and then overwhelmed. There was also the external factor. None of Gideon’s officers even mentioned the order that he was to hand over control of all military forces, although it had been sent to everyone. No one wanted Bishop in control. But it was best to get moving before any fool thought to take such directives seriously.

“Maybe we could build a fort each night, like Roman legionnaires,” suggested Captain Toms, when he told his officers what he intended to do.

“That’s a lot of work,” said Captain Hannigan, “after we’ve been marching all day. The Romans use to build a full fort from scratch.”

“We can just do a ditch and palisade with stuff we bring with us,” said Toms.

“Officers, we will be doing something along the lines of a marching camp but just the ditch and maybe stakes,” said Gideon, “but first we’ve got to lay in supplies and get some sort of bridge across the stream.”

Gideon had no combat engineers. His musketeers had to evoke the spirit of the Roman legionnaires, who were engineers as much as infantry, and build a bridge

strong enough to take an e-car plus an artillery piece in just two days – that was the deadline Gideon set. He may not have been Napoleon but he could galvanise his troops into action, like the master, when the need arose. The musketeers set to work with a will, using the ramps the Midis had thoughtfully supplied plus whatever material they could salvage from the sheds in Terminus. Other parties crossed the river and continued the work of clearing bodies, particularly from the road. Any Midis who tried to interrupt the work were forcibly reminded of the power of rifles and artillery. Cavalry patrols ranged further, happy to trade the extra risk of a fight for not having to clear bodies.

A whole group of slaves came in, released by a village that wanted to be left in peace, which increased Gideon's anxiety to be away. He scented that something was happening in the enemy camp. On the third day the whole force marched – artillery, ammunition, food and all. He opted not to leave anyone on his lines of communications. The musketeers carried Witches bread for about three days in their packs and the supply train had another three days of rations. Gideon understood that he was taking a risk, but he also thought that a bold push now might do a lot to win the war he had found himself in.

Glad to be away from the increasing smell of decomposing bodies, the musketeers marched out eagerly and in much the same spirit that Union soldiers marched towards Richmond in the final stages of the American Civil War, on foot with Minie rifles slung on their shoulders and sacks of cartridges tied to their packs. Time to finish this. The image was spoiled somewhat by e-cars pulling the artillery and supply carts, not mention the drones, just visible in the distance, keeping watch on all sides, but the spirit was the same. Gideon strode along with his headquarters unit, disdaining to ride in a car.

About mid-afternoon a force of perhaps three hundred Midis tried to contest a bridge crossing. A charge by one company supported by mortars scattered them, and cavalry harried them to a nearby forest. Then the humans reformed their marching lines and kept on going. They tramped through several Midi villages, collecting humans who had been slaves as they went. A few of the Midis tried to flee but most did not, knowing that once they had freed their slaves the humans would pay no attention to them. A few of the Midi women whose husbands and sons had fallen at Terminus cursed them as they marched past. They would put a closed fist back behind their heads and then bring the fist down hard in front as if they were hammering an enemy. No-one paid them any heed. If cursing made the Midi women feel better, then let them curse.

Gideon selected a camp site besides one of the many streams that coursed through the Haven plain with about an hour left of light and the musketeers set to with a will digging a ditch, setting stakes, moving rocks and cutting down the occasional tree to give a semblance of an outer wall. They had brought plenty of sandbags with them and these were filled and stacked at apparent weak points in the line. Fodder was cut and brought inside the perimeter for the horses.

Sweeps by fighting patrols as the light faded found nothing. Fires were lit briefly to cook tinned stew they had brought with them, to relieve the monotony of the Witch's bread then put out on Gideon's order. They were not on a summer camp, he pointed out forcibly, but on campaign in enemy territory and that meant keeping low, lying down where possible, and shutting up. Quiet conversation was permitted but sentries were to remain alert. For once Gideon did not have to threaten dire punishment if he found anyone talking on their phones. The entire phone system remained unusable, and the musketeers were now disciplined enough not to listen to music while on sentry duty.

About midnight, one of the sentries heard a rustling noise, and peeked around a sandbag stacked on rocks. A spear hit the sandbag and punched through to jab him in the shoulder. He yelled. Several musketeers shot at the likely source of the spear.

"Don't fire unless you see a target," yelled a sergeant.

Just as the camp settled down again, this time with most of the force listening for noises in the bush, another spear came over the wall, without hitting anybody. This time no one fired. The pattern was repeated several times, causing another casualty, until Padre thought he saw a shape move against the night sky and fired. The shape jerked and a Midi yelled. At dawn they found a blood trail leading east but Gideon vetoed any pursuit. This taste of Midi guerrilla fighting was not to their liking at all but it was something they would face later, if they had to, once the main forces were defeated. The musketeers broke camp and marched out.

On the outskirts of Haven City they found the remnants of the Midi forces behind a hastily constructed wood and stone wall which stretched between the main river of the plain, the New Rhine, and a thick wood. A ditch had been dug in front of this wall, cutting across the human road, and filled with water from the river. It was a strong position in a natural choke point and the Midis kept low behind their new wall. They had learned something from fighting humans, but not enough. Gideon could outflank the position by sending cavalry through a trail in the wood which had been left uncovered – a point he knew from reconnaissance well before the came to the wall. The humans were also learning. But he did not intend to just outflank it.

“Captain Chifley, pick a spot and show Midis how artillery should be used to blow a hole in walls. Captain Toms get the mortar teams up and make life miserable for those guys. Get companies making ramps to cross that ditch and charge the hole that will soon be there. Captain Parker get around to their rear and wait until we’ve driven them from the wall, then charge in and take them all.”

They all yessired and went about their business. Captain Parker’s cavalry disappeared to the left but Gideon could keep track of them through one of the radio sets. After that he gave no further orders, content to sit back and watch as the subordinates he had trained did their jobs. Cannons, using solid shot this time, pounded the wall, concentrating all their fire on one section until the structure crumbled and fell. All the while mortars arched over and exploded on the other side of the wall, spreading musket balls among the defenders. It was not much of a contest. The Midis had no way of returning fire. The musketeers had wiped out all the cannon crews and musket teams they had met. The Midis could do little more than hope that a musketeer came close enough for them to throw a spear or shoot an arrow.

Two companies stormed the breach in the wall, wading across the ditch, while others sniped over their heads at any Midi foolish enough to show themselves at the breach or on the walls. A number of archers and spearmen stayed behind the wall and fought the humans as they came through the breach, causing a few casualties, before the defending line disintegrated. Then the humans were through, shouting “Kill! Kill!” bayonets glinting in the sun. Most of the Midis still living surrendered, many others fled to another group which was forming up into a traditional column, only to be scattered by a cavalry charge.

If it had not been for a handful of casualties caused by the archers and the loss of a horse which was speared and had to be destroyed, the battle would have been a massacre. Gideon, however, was not about to let the musketeers rest on their laurels. He wanted to drive on Haven City and it seemed apparent to him that the Midis did not have much left in them. Time to move and move fast – just like Napoleon, or perhaps General Patton or Rommel, he drove his troops on.

“C Company, Captain Yeon, start shifting dirt! Fill in that ditch where the road is, up to road level! Use rocks, whatever you can find. I want the cars and carts to be able to move over it and I want it now. The rest of you collect Midi wounded, use their own medical guys. Captain Parker have your people scout ahead.”

Thanks to Gideon’s stream of orders and his moving around, ensuring that it was all done, the force was back in the road in two hours, less one company and a

few medics which had to be left at the wall. The Midi wounded could not simply be abandoned.

When they constructed a marching camp that night, the musketeers knew that they were within a morning's march of Haven City where most of them had grown up. More slaves came in, bringing tales of Red Bands just pointing them in the direction of the human forces and telling them to go. Maybe the end was near?

"My guys have been right down to the city, sir," reported Captain Parker that night. No-one had tents and the camp fires had been put out for the night, so the reports were given with the officers sitting on camp stools under starlight. "No organised groups between us and the city and the Midis we see run from us. But the civic quarter could be a real problem."

"Civic quarter?" asked Gideon.

"Grand name for the public buildings, governing council and such around a square with a fountain," said Toms. "The council building is a whole three storeys high."

"Yep," said Parker, "and a heap of die-hard Midis have been building barricades across the entrances. Red Bands mostly that have taken up spears, bows and arrows and a few muskets. But there are a few black bands and they've got human slaves in there. Might have a time convincing them we've won."

"Don't fancy using artillery, mortars or grenades if humans are in there," said Gideon.

"Artillery could make holes in the building," said Chifley, "but its easier to blow a door down or knock out one of the lower windows and climb in. Arrows can be nasty but they're not automatic weapons."

"Guess we gotta do that," said Gideon. "House to house, room to room and clean them all out and we do it hard and fast. No messing around when we get there."

"Yessir," they chorused.

The next morning, as they were breaking camp, Sergeant Besser of the technical section showed Gideon a display on his laptop.

"What am I looking at, sergeant?" said Gideon, with his back to the HQ e-car.

"It's the nuclear reactor page, sir," said Besser.

"This already doesn't sound good," said Gideon.

"I was just checking out power output, if we're going to reoccupy Haven City, sir," said the sergeant. "And there's something wrong. Someone's messing with the operating system. The read out is in the panel at the bottom."

Gideon read:

*“safety protocol shell: override.
 Cannot override at this time.
 Command override emergency procedures.
 Code required.
 22456
 Invalid code...”*

This went on for half a page. As Gideon watched, another line was added.

*“Operating output 100 per cent, pumps to 15 per cent
 That exceeds safety specifications. Restate requirements.”*

“Whoever is doing this is trying to get around the safety blocks on the nuclear reactor.”

“Isn’t that thing supposed to be inherently safe?” said Gideon.

“Well yeah, sir, and its got a containment shield, but just look at Chernobyl. If you work hard enough at doing dumb things with a reactor you can get a bad outcome. Maybe this guy – Black Robes – also has some way of cracking the containment shield...”

Gideon nodded. “As the Midis still don’t understand electricity they’re not going to be messing with nuclear plant control systems and even the green crazies on Earth won’t want to tip a nuclear plant over the edge, so that leaves Black Robes and he’s been supplying the explosives the Midis have ben using. Can we shut this off?”

“Here’s the thing, sir,” said Besser spreading his hands. “We’ll have to go to the facility itself, and Black Robes must be there.”

“He must, sergeant?” said Gideon looking up.

“It’s a fail-safe, sir to prevent hacking. The plant AI is completely self-contained. It gives stuff out, like that read out, but the only way you can change anything is from a keyboard at the site. Even then it’s tough. Black Robes is good – even The Witches haven’t yet figured out what he’s done to the phone system - but he’s not making much headway.”

“Where is this place?”

“About twenty five clicks due West of here, sir,” said Besser, pointing West. “We passed a side road a ways back yesterday that should go right to the plant.”

“Hmmm! There’s nothing for it, we have to go there. I’ll take a small party in one of the e-cars and you’re coming.”

“I am, sir?”

“Grab a rifle and bring that laptop. Captain Toms!”

“Sir.”

“Seems I’m urgently required elsewhere. You take the Musketeers and clear out that Civic Quarter as we discussed yesterday. Captain Parker!”

“Sir.”

“Take your guys and check the rest of the town. Freed slaves should tell you if there’s anyone left to fight. Then scout out the countryside on the other side of the river. You are to report to Captain Toms until I return.”

Gideon held Captain Parker’s eyes when he said this. There had been previous discussions with the cavalry commander about the musketeer chain of command. Parker and Toms did not like each other and Toms was younger than Parker. Gideon had been forced to lay down the law on who was second in command.

“Yessir,” said Parker, looking away.

Shortly afterwards, Gideon found himself at the wheel of an e-car, leaving the transport guys to reorganise the supply train. Sergeant Besser was beside him. In the back seat were Skull, Preacher and Musketeer Jessica Jimenez, a swarthy, heavy-set older musketeer who wore her hair in a single pigtail and had proved lethal with a rifle. The drive proved to be surprisingly pleasant. The e-car’s battery was full - there had been a recharging point where they stopped for the night - and the roads, having been built to last, were still in good condition. Gideon filled in his companions on the way. They passed Midi villages whose occupants stared at them from their doorways, then they stopped for one human slave who wanted to know what was going on. He asked for a lift. They gave him some bread, without getting out of the car, and told him to head towards Haven City.

“Nothing on this road except the nuclear place,” said this human, a middle-aged man with long hair and a beard, dressed in, of all things, the tattered remains of a business suit.

“That’s where we’re going,” said Gideon. “A threat to it. Gotta check it out.”

“Yeah? I saw a small band of Midis, all Red Banders, head that way this morning.”

“Thanks,” said Gideon, “but I have to ask, yours is the first business suit I’ve seen since I came here. I didn’t think anyone wore them on Haven.”

The man looked down ruefully at his ruined, stinking suit. “Yeah, well, I was negotiating team sent through by the HEO when things really turned South.”

“You were in that negotiating team?” said Gideon. “The office have been asking what happened to you.” He had read only a fraction of the messages the office

had sent but one of those messages had been a request to find out what had happened to the team.

“The Midis came to the meeting we asked for,” said suit, “then took us into slavery, without listening to a word we said. Been kept working out by the reactor all this time. Dunno what happened to the others. There was another team sent through asleep for some reason. We didn’t wake them up before we left. I also don’t know what happened to them.”

“Now you do,” said Gideon, extending his hand through window for the man to shake. “Gideon Swift. I’ve taken the rank of colonel. I was one of those you left behind.”

“Oh, you’re this Swift guy,” said the man, shaking his hand. “Gordon Davis. You were in that soldier team?”

“Yep, but we’ll talk later. Keep heading towards Haven City,” said Gideon, pointing. “It should be under our control by the time you get there.”

He drove off, leaving Davis standing on the road, staring after him. After a few moments the negotiator walked off in the direction of Haven City.

They saw the reactor building loom out of the landscape long before they reached it. The reactor itself – a standard, modular facility sold on earth to overcome the problems of the variation in supply from renewable networks - was ninety metres long. The unit had been upended and buried so that thirty metres or so showed above ground with its entire length sheathed in concrete. At the base of this monolith was the administration building and electrical substations, surrounded by a wire fence. The single-story administration building wasn’t much more than a visitor’s centre and rooms for storing electrical grid servicing equipment, as well as one room at the back that contained displays showing what the reactor was doing, plus a control panel. That was their target.

They rolled up to within about twenty metres of the open gate where a half dozen or so Red Band Midis, all armed with swords, eyed them warily. The humans got out of their car, having already loaded their rifles, and fixed bayonets ostentatiously.

“Swords, really?” said Jimenez. The Red Banders were obviously gearing themselves up to charge. “These guys should learn the human rule about not bringing a knife to a gun fight.”

“Pick your targets,” said Gideon. “Shoot one after another so we don’t double up.”

Then the Midis charged. The humans all fired and hit – difficult to miss at that range – but Jimenez and Besser hit the same one. That left two. One of those ran straight onto Jimenez’s bayonet but managed to give the musketeer a nasty cut on the arm.

“Youch!” she said holding her arm. Blood spread over her jacket sleeve. “I take back the stuff about bringing a knife.”

The other went for Padre with a wild, overhand swing. The musketeer sidestepped calmly then hit the creature in the face with the butt of his rifle. It went down, out cold.

“Thou shalt not kill,” said Padre mildly, then added “mostly.”

They reloaded and drove through the open gates only to find the doors to the administration building – glass in wooden frames that could have come from any official building on Earth – had been locked tight, and a bicycle chain with a combination lock wrapped around the handles.

“Bicycle chain?” asked Skull. “I didn’t know the Midis rode bicycles.”

“Probably all Black Robes could find,” said Gideon.

“Um guys, in need of medical attention here,” said Jimenez swaying slightly. Her hand as well as her left sleeve was now red with blood.

“We haven’t got any bolt cutters with us,” said Padre.

“Don’t need ‘em,” said Gideon and he hammered on the bottom glass panel of the right hand door with the butt of his rifle. Skull caught on at once and hammered along with him. The glass was locally made and thick but shattered nicely with the whole pane falling inwards with a crash to lie in bits on the floor. They hammered out a few shards left behind in the frame.

“There’ll be a kitchen place with a table back here, I bet,” said Gideon, “put Jimenez in there. Might even be a first aid kit somewhere. Just be careful of the glass.” He bent down and stepped through.

H Company commander, Captain Ivor Gunderson, was also thinking about breaking windows. His company had been given the job of storming the rear of the council building, the side facing the New Rhine, which ran beside Haven City. B Company was trying to do the same thing to the three storey brick building from the square side and, to judge from the noise, was exchanging fire with spear and bow and arrow armed Midis – a drama being repeated around the City square as other musketeer units hunted for the last pockets of resistance.

The Midis may have been hopelessly out gunned but they were angry, desperate and showing signs of being inventive. One of Gunderson’s sergeants had

tried kicking in the back door only to have a brick dropped on him from a window above. The sergeant had reacted to a warning shout by ducking out of the way but had still incurred a cracked rib. Gunderson then thought to put one of his platoons on Midi watch.

“A Midi shows a head or an arm, blow it off,” he said.

The other two platoons had found step ladders in near-by houses which Gunderson proposed to prop under one of the building windows and get in that way, once the window had been opened. They debated ways to jimmy it open with a knife or to just bust it open with a rock before one of the younger male musketeers suggested, “Why not just shoot it out, sir, before we go in?”

Why not, indeed. His company promptly shot out all the ground floor windows on their side and rushed one at each end, howling. The first musketeer at the window on the left, got an arrow in the gut. A brace of musketeers now able to see into the room, blew away the archer, filed in over the ladder, reloaded, then kicked open the room door, without thinking to throw a grenade into the corridor beforehand, and charged straight into a party of spear-armed Midis. They were down to the grim work of clearing the building, room by room with rifle, bayonet and grenade.

Gideon only saw the Midi waiting, bow drawn, when he stepped through the door. A moment later, an arrow sliced into his calf muscle. He yelped and threw himself behind the thin cover of a display stand extolling the virtues of nuclear energy, only to see his opponent notch another arrow and take aim at his precious person all in one, fluid motion. The colonel remembered what he read about the adoption of gunpowder weapons and how, almost everywhere, people would drop the traditional weapons such as bows and arrows in favour of gunpowder arms. Those who wrote lightly about such trends, Gideon decided, had not been targeted by a Midi with a bow and arrow. Then Skull, kneeling just outside the door, saw enough of the Midi to fire. The warrior collapsed just as he released his missile, the arrow hitting the wall above Gideon. Skull and Padre ducked through the door and checked the area beyond.

“You all right?” asked Besser who came through after them. Jimenez brought up the rear, still holding her arm.

“No, I’m not alright, sergeant,” blazed Gideon, more harshly than he intended. “I’ve just got an arrow in the leg.”

“Sounds as if the colonel’ll live,” said Skull from the next room.

“God be praised,” added Padre, “I guess.”

Despite her wound Jimenez giggled.

The two snipers came back. “A break room back there, like you said,” Skull declared, then “Whoa! Blood.” Blood from the arrow wound had soaked all the lower leg of Gideon’s pants and left a small puddle on the floor.

“Don’t think it’s hit an artery,” commented Besser, trying to see the wound through the cloth.

“Youch! Don’t try and take it out!” The shock of being wounded had hit Gideon – nausea and the feeling that the world was closing in, an overwhelming desire to close his eyes and curl up. The worst part about any wound, including an arrow through the leg, was the shock. He fought it. “Break off the shaft. The medics will have to dig it out, but not yet. Tie it up with what we’ve got and let’s go. Padre, stay out here with Jimenez, fix her up and both of you can keep away undesirables who want to crash the party.”

“Gottit, sir,” said Padre.

“Skull and Besser you’re with me. There must be a door to the reactor control room somewhere.”

“There’s a door just off the café area back here with a sign ‘Control Room’ on it,” said Skull. “That sounds good. But it’s got a pass card security lock.”

“Good thing I’ve got a security card,” said Sergeant Besser, before Gideon could ask. He felt in his pockets for a few moments before holding it up triumphantly.

“Where did you get that?” asked Gideon.

“Just asked around the freed slaves before we left. One of them still had his. The hackers’ motto is ‘be prepared’.”

“Isn’t that scouts?” said Skull.

“Whatever.”

Leaning on Besser, Gideon hobbled around to the door. Besser passed his borrowed card through the security lock and Skull went through weapon up as if it was an assault rifle. A few paces beyond was another door and a room that glowed with computer screens. In the middle of this room, tapping on a keyboard was a figure in Black Robes. Gideon thought he heard another door open and close somewhere behind this figure and was wondering about it, when the creature turned around and pulled the robe hood off his head. It was the same face that Gideon had seen in the tablet at Boothroyd’s camp. The creature’s bald head and skinny neck bore a passing resemblance to the head and neck of a vulture.

“I wasn’t getting anywhere with these safety blocks anyway,” said this creature. “They must be hard wired. I see the guys I left outside caused a scratch.” He gestured at Gideon’s leg. Besser pulled up an office chair and dropped Gideon in it so

that he faced his adversary. Both the colonel and Besser still had loaded rifles, bayonets fixed.

“An arrow in the leg isn’t a scratch,” said Gideon. “We can show you the difference between a scratch and a major wound if you like.”

“I don’t think the offer is a friendly one,” said Black Robes. “But I do not plan on staying. We can exchange information if you like, before I go.” Black Robes drank from a cup. Gideon thought that he had not seen a cup on any of the tables. “I was curious about some things.”

“So am I,” said Gideon. “The Midis, the creatures we’ve been fighting, where did they come from?”

Black Robes shrugged – a very human gesture. “Copied them from a system perhaps three hundred light years from here as humans measure the distance. My sisters had already invited humans here by that time. I considered copying something from your planet, but it takes a while and I would have been noticed. The warriors you have been fighting are the best I could find close by. Even then the bodies had to be modified for these conditions, and I had to set up facilities to cook-off, as you might say, a whole batch at once. Wouldn’t do to have a few come out and humans get used to them, or find out where they come from, before the rest were made and delivered, so to speak.”

“You say sisters, are you related to the – ah – entities in that structure?”

Black Robes shook his head. “No, not related. We live far too long for that concept to have any meaning. It’s just an expression. My turn. How did you make those guns you’re carrying,” he gestured at the rifles the Musketeers were carrying, “suddenly so accurate. You were killing warriors at half a kilometre or more – see I know your units – at the fort, but the musket I took from one of your soldiers and copied couldn’t hit anything much beyond perhaps one hundred paces when I tested it. You also stopped that practice you had of firing all at once on command.”

Startled by the sudden change in subject, Gideon considered not replying. It was military information after all, but then he thought he was likely to gain a lot of information in exchange for a little.

“That first weapon was all we could make initially but we realised we could convert the existing muskets so that the bullet could be spun while it goes up the barrel. If it comes out spinning it’s much more accurate.”

“Ah!” said Black Robes. “The details will be in your histories, I suppose, for such a primitive weapon, and your histories are interesting. My race has been at peace for hundreds of years with mechanisms to resolve all disputes without violence. As a consequence our history has become dull. Earth’s history with its battles, blood

lettings and hatreds – that’s interesting. No wonder my sisters invited you here. With such a history they thought humans would deal with all intruders violently. Instead they collapsed – until your little group came along.”

“The colony had been set up with the intention of being at peace. They wanted to rely on dispute resolution like your race. The office back on earth that administers the colony sent me and the others, without asking properly, as a last ditch effort.”

“So that was it,” said Black Robes, raising the mysterious cup to his mouth again. Gideon wondered where that cup came from and then recalled that he had heard a door open and close when he first hobbled in and he realised what he was looking at. “You trained your people well. I cooked off a really big batch of the warriors, cutting on the quality as you no doubt noticed, waited until you came out of the fort and then threw them at you cutting off that phone system you’d been using at the same time. I thought that if I swamped your people while they were out of the fort, they’d panic. Instead they fell back, without panicking, and the units co-ordinated – coming together to fight. And you had those converted weapons and those small tubes for throwing bombs.”

“Mortars,” said Gideon. Supplying the correct name could not hurt. “We call them mortars.”

“Yes, of course, mortars.”

“We had other means of communicating besides phones. We switched to those. Also, my guys were told to come straight back if they were attacked, to get within range of our artillery.”

“Artillery, hmm, the very big weapons you had? Interesting. I had read that word artillery, but I didn’t really understand what was meant until the battle. We had the guns but not co-ordination. And you blew up that bridge. That was impressive.” Black Robes paused as if to savour the memory. “I’d read of soldiers in your history destroying bridges, but it was interesting to see it done. You humans can be really destructive when you set your minds to it.”

“You could have manoeuvred me out of that fort if you wanted,” said Gideon. “If you’d gotten a substantial force on one side or another I’d have had to fall back.”

Again Black Robes shrugged. “Try manoeuvring with the warriors I’d just cooked up. Even the fully formed warriors didn’t think beyond attacking whatever was in front of them. Working through proxies can be .. difficult. Another lesson from your histories I think.”

“True,” agreed Gideon. “Another lesson.”

“The best I could do was hold onto that central assault until after they had attacked your wings and put up a haze to hide movement.. “

“You were behind that haze?” said Gideon.

Black Robes nodded. “I was going to make it toxic but then thought I might wipe out my own side and your people would move out of range, so I just made it smoke. I’d been looking at your history and thought I could do something along the lines of that battle – hmm! – what was the name, War of the Spanish Succession...”

“Blenheim,” said Gideon thinking that the conversation could not get any weirder. He was discussing a battle of three hundred years ago with an Alien. He had even forgotten that his leg was becoming very painful - almost.

“That’s right,” said Black Robes. “In English, Blenheim. As I said your military history is fascinating. I managed to persuade them to do that big assault in the centre but it didn’t work.”

“It almost did,” said Gideon. “The line came close to breaking.”

“I was there,” said Skull, speaking for the first time. “So was he with a rifle,” he said pointing to Besser. The technical sergeant had fought beside Gideon on the wall in that moment of crisis. “It was touch and go.”

“Touch and go, humph!” said Black Robes. “I like that English expression. Makes me feel much better about the whole thing. As it is, I won’t have to be like your Alexander the Great and weep for more worlds to conquer.”

“Thousands of creatures are dead, just so you don’t have to weep,” said Gideon.

“It was never about humans or those warriors,” blazed Black Robes. “It was about making my Sisters give up their dreams of melding with Space-Time. My employers do not like that. They say it upsets the natural balance. As it is detectors on my ship tells that they have stopped their efforts to meld. I do not know why. I can’t leave just yet, but I can withdraw to assess the situation.”

“Withdraw?” asked Gideon. “Assess the situation of a whole field of dead. We all lost friends and colleagues in that battle at the fort, and you want to assess the situation?”

Again, Black Robes shrugged. “There is a saying by one of your rulers. Let me see now, my mind sometimes does not recall names directly.. in English his name translates as Man of Steel.”

“Stalin, you mean?” said Gideon.

“That’s right, Stalin. Now there was a ruler who really knew how to kill his own people. He said that the death of one man is a tragedy, the death of a million is a statistic.”

“Stalin!” shouted Gideon. Besser and Skull looked at him in alarm. “Thousands dead and you’re quoting Stalin!” He picked up his rifle and fired from

his sitting position, the recoil making his office chair roll back. The bullet sailed through the hologram – Gideon had realised it was just a hologram part way through the conversation - to shatter a blank computer screen behind it.

“Colonel, sir, with the greatest respect,” said Besser, “please don’t fire inside the nuclear reactor control room.”

The hologram of Black Robes vanished when the bullet went through it, came back long enough to say “that was unfriendly!” and disappeared again, never to return.

Chapter Twenty-Two – End Game

The last word must go to that eminently quotable general the Duke of Wellington. “Our soldiers, he once declared “are the mere scum of the earth.” In his day they were from the lowest levels of his society. Then, mindful of the famous victories those trained and disciplined soldiers had helped him deliver, he added “it is only wonderful that we have made them the fine fellows they are.”

Gideon was driven back to Haven City, in considerable pain, where doctors cut the arrow out with some difficulty and he was put on a couch in the administration building. The last pockets of resistance in the city had been cleaned out but there was still smashed glass, destroyed furniture and even dead Midis in many of the rooms. Still woozy from the drugs given to him, the colonel received a string of visitors including his officers who hung around the room.

“It may be over,” said Captain Toms. “We’re still looking for anyone willing to fight but there are no takers.”

Cavalry commander Captain Parker insisted on slapping Gideon’s raised palm. “Wild ride, man,” he said. “Wild ride.”

Gideon considered that comment his greatest complement.

His most welcome visitor was BD who fussed over his leg, which Gideon found to be soothing. Then she gently led forward her three year old son, a fair haired cherub who peeped out at Gideon from behind his mother.

“This is Richard,” said BD.

“Hey there,” said Gideon, extending his hand. “They call you Rich, right?”

Richard nodded shyly, the finger of one hand in his mouth, then he put his little palm in Gideon’s out stretched hand and smiled.

Later BD took Richard to see The Witches and although there the little boy did not venture out from behind his mother, she later told Gideon, the Witches were stunned. He was the first infant they had seen in the flesh in centuries. Strongly reminded of the cycle of life and death, they finally turned aside from their research into space time. In that sense perhaps, Black Robes had won, although not in the way he intended.

Another visitor who arrived when Gideon was having lunch with his officers, BD and Thomas without Gideon having to move from his couch, was an imposing Red Band in the company of Gordon Davis, the negotiator in the ruined business suit Gideon had met on the road to the reactor. He had cleaned up somewhat although he still looked as if he could use a couple of good meals. After a conversation with BD, the Red Band was introduced as General Klaarg, the only surviving senior officer on the Midi side.

“He wants to know what needs to be done for the fighting to stop,” said BD.

Gideon was suddenly conscious that everyone in the room was looking at him. “Well, the one non-negotiable condition is the release and return of all slaves at once. Beyond that, I’m not sure. There’s the river here which bisects the Haven plain as I understand it. Why not we live on this side of it and the Midis live on the other side – does that seem acceptable?” He looked around the room. All those present either nodded, shrugged or spread their hands.”

“Gordon, can you sort out the details with BD’s help?”

“It’ll be my honour,” said Gordon.

“More importantly, are those broad terms acceptable to our friend here and can he get his people to agree?”

BD translated and the general, who was relieved to find that they were not all to be enslaved, replied.

“He agrees to the broad terms,” said BD.

“Okay, but tell him that we expect the broad terms to be kept, especially on the issue of the return of the slaves, or the musketeers will start howling again.”

After another back and forth, BD said the general understood.

“Then that’s it. All officers, a general order. All units are to hold their positions until they receive further orders. They are not to fire unless they are attacked. Now go.”

“Yessir,” they chorused.

“It’s over,” said BD, clutching her little boy. “Hallelujah!”

The End

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
 For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.
 Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
 For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
 Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! :|
 The kingdom of this world
 Is become the kingdom of our Lord,
 And of His Christ, and of His Christ;
 And He shall reign for ever and ever,
 For ever and ever, forever and ever,
 King of kings, and Lord of lords,
 King of kings, and Lord of lords,
 And Lord of lords,
 And He shall reign,
 And He shall reign forever and ever,
 King of kings, forever and ever,
 And Lord of lords,
 Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
 And He shall reign forever and ever,
 King of kings! and Lord of lords!
 And He shall reign forever and ever,
 King of kings! and Lord of lords!
 Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
 The Hallelujah Chorus, Handel's Messiah, 1741

Epilogue

Later the humans built a monument at terminus. Two statues of a musketeer and a Black Band Midi were put side by side on a common stone base, looking out over the plain of death at about where the final, desperate battle in the centre had occurred. A section of the fort walls were left in place and later a cannon was dragged to the base of the monument, the mouth concreted off so that the disrespectful could not force rubbish down it. A car park and picnic tables followed and, in time, the veterans of the Musketeer Corps of Haven brought their own families to this picnic

place. The youngsters would mount the monument and howl across the field just as their parents had done.

The Midis, for their part, avoided the monument and the field of Terminus. It was full of ghosts and demons they told the humans. The Right People who had been there at night had seen the gigantic demon of cavalry that moved with blinding speed, chopping off heads and limbs; the cold, metallic demon of artillery which destroyed The Right People with thunder, and had felt the invisible, all knowing, life sucking demon of Room Nine. But the most terrifying of all was the demon musketeer with a fire stick that banged and a knife on that stick red with the blood of The Right People. On moonlit nights in particular, they said, they could hear the ghosts of the musketeers killed at Terminus howling.

The humans smiled but did not discourage such talk or point out that younger humans sometimes went to the fort monument to howl at the moon. Instead they considered the legend of the demons a useful reminder to the Midis that if they did not keep the peace then the humans would remember their violent, blood stained past and the Musketeers of Haven would reform to howl once more. The Midis did not want that.

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