

The Road to Jerusalem

by Mary Gentle

Banners cracked in the wind and the hot grass smelled of summer. Sweat stung Tadmartin's eyes. Long habit taught her the uselessness of clashing mail gauntlet against barrel-helm in an attempt to wipe her forehead. She blinked agitatedly.

Sun flashed off her opponent's flat-topped helm; that brilliance that gives mirror-finish plate the name of *white harness*. A momentary breeze blew through her visor. Unseen, she grinned. She cut the singlehanded sword down sharply, grounding her opponent's blade under it in the dirt.

She slammed her shield against the opposing helm. "Concede?"

"Eat *that*, motherfucker!"

Knowing Tysoe, Tadmartin's unseen grin widened. She slipped back into fighting-perception, apprehending with the limited peripheries of her vision all the tourney field (empty now, the formal contests down to this one duel), the ranked faces of the audience, the glitter of light from lenses. A soughing sound reached her, muffled through arming-cap and helm. Tournament cheers.

Tysoe launched an attack. Tadmartin panted. Both moving slow now after long combat.

Strung out so tight, nothing real but the slide of sun down the blade, the whip of the wind coming in on her left side; foot sliding across the glass-slippery turf, heat pounding in her head. The body remembering at muscular level all the drills of training. Tadmartin moved without thought, without intention.

She felt her hand slide on the grip, the blade's weight cut the air - Tysoe's two-handed sword smashed down, parried through with her shield, her own blade cutting back; Tysoe's wild leap to avoid the belly cut - all slowed by her perceptions so that she watched it rather than willed it. Felt her body twist, rise; bring the thirty-inch blade back up and round and over in a high cut. Metal slammed down between Tysoe's neck and shoulder. The impact stung her hand.

"*Shit!*"

Tysoe dropped to one knee. Now only one hand held the greatsword; the other arm hung motionless. Tadmartin stepped in on the instant, footwork perfect, sword up:

"Yield or die, sucker!"

"Aw, shit, man! Okay, okay. I yield. I yield!"

Tadmartin held the position, shield out, sword back in a high singlehanded grip, poised for the smash that - rebated blade or not - would shatter Tysoe's skull. Through the narrow visor she caught the lift of the marshal's flag. A sharp drum sounded. Instantly she stepped back, put down the shield, slipped the sword behind her belt, and reached up to unfasten the straps of the barrel-helm.

"Fuck, man, you broke my fuckin' arm!"

"Collarbone." Tadmartin pulled off the helm, shaking free her bobbed yellow hair. Sound washed in on her: the shouting and cheering from the stands, the shrill trumpets. A surgeon's team doubled across the arena towards them.

"Collarbone," Tadmartin repeated. "Hey, you want to use an out-of-period weapon, that's your problem. That two-hander's *slow*."

"It's got reach. Aw, fuck *you*, man."

Tadmartin held the barrel-helm reversed under her arm. Casually she stripped the mail gauntlets off and dropped them into the helm. She shook her head, corn-hair blazing against the blue sky. Conscious now of the weight of belted mail, hugging her body from neck to knee; and the heat of the arming doublet under it, despite the white surcoat reflecting back the sun.

"Tysoe, babe." She knelt, and put her helm down; awkward with the blunt sword shoved through her belt; reached in and undid the straps and buckles holding Tysoe's barrel-helm on. The steel burned her bare fingers. Gently she pulled the helm loose. Tysoe's arming-cap came away with it, and her brown hair, ratted into clumps by sweat, spiked up in a ragged crest. The woman's bony face was bright scarlet.

"Shit, why don't it never *rain* on Unification Day?"

"That'd be too easy." She loosened the taller woman's surcoat. Tysoe swore as the belt released the weight of the mail coat, and leaned back on the turf. "They're going to have to cut that mail off you, girl. No way else to get to that fracture."

Disgusted, Tysoe said, "Aw, *fuck* it. That's my hauberk, man. *Shit*."

"Gotta go. See you after."

The drum cut out. Music swelled from the speakers: deliberate Military Romantic. Tadmartin, not needing the marshals' guidance, walked across the worn turf of the stadium towards the main box. Breath caught hot in her throat. The weariness not of one fight, but of a day's skirmishing in the heat, knotted her chest. The muscles of her legs twinged. Bruises ached; and one sharp pain in a finger she now identified as a possible fracture. She walked head high, trying to catch what breeze the July day might have to offer.

The PA blared: "- *the tournament winner, Knight-lieutenant Hyacinthe Tadmartin* -"

It's PR, she reminded herself. The Unification Day tournament; blunt weapons; a show; that's all. Aw, but fuck it, I don't care.

The applause lifted, choking her. She walked alone; a compact woman with bright hair, looking up at the main box. A few of the commanders' faces were identifiable; and her own Knight-captain with the white surcoat over black-and-brown DPMs. Tadmartin saluted with all the accuracy left to her. The steel mail hauberk robbed her of breath in the suffocating heat. She plodded up the steps to the platform.

Spy-eyes and bio-reporters crowded close as Marshal Philippe de Molay, in white combat fatigues with the red cross on the breast, stood and saluted her. He spoke less to her than to the media:

"Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin. Again, congratulations. You stand for the highest Templar ideal: the protection of the weak and innocent by force of arms. The ideal that sustained our grand founder Jacques de Molay, when the Unholy Church's Inquisition subjected him to torture, and would have given him a traitor's death at the stake. The ideal that enabled us to reform the Church from within, so that now our relationship with the Reformed Pope at Avignon is one of the pillars upon which the Order of the Knights Templar stands. While there are women and men like you, we stand upon a secure foundation. And

while we stand upon the past, we can reach out and claim the future."

Tadmartin at last gave in to a long desire: she smeared her hand across her red and sweating face, then wiped it down her surcoat. The grin wouldn't stay off her face. "Thank you, *sieur*."

"And how long have you been in the Order, lieutenant?"

"Seven years, *sieur*."

Questions came from the spy-eyes then, released to seek whatever sightbites might be useful for the news networks. Tadmartin's grin faded. She answered with a deliberate slowness, wary in front of camcorders and Virtual recorders. Yes, from a family in Lesser Burgundy, all her possessions signed over to the Order; yes, trained at the academy in Paris; no, she didn't watch the Net much, so her favourite programmes -

A blonde woman, one eye masked by a head-up Virtual Display, shoved her way between Tadmartin and the Marshal of the Templar Order. Philippe de Molay's long face never changed but his body-language radiated annoyance.

"Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin," the young woman said, with a precise Greater Burgundian accent. "Louise de Keroac: I have you on realtime for Channel Nine. Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin, will you confirm that you were in charge of the company responsible for the Roanoke massacre?"

5 July 1991

One estate over, the houses and the cars are newer and there's more space between everything. Here the cars are old, knocked about, and parked bumper-to-bumper. Heat shimmers off pavements. Terraces and semis shoulder each other. Pavement trees droop, roots covered in dogshit.

"Hey, Tad!"

Both Hook and Norton wear old Disruptive Pattern Material combat trousers, the camouflage light brown on dark brown; and Para boots. Hook's hair is shaved down to brown fuzz. Norton grinds out a cigarette against the wall.

"So what about the Heckler & Koch G11."

Tad ruffles Norton's hair; he catches her arm; she breaks the grip. Time was when bunking off school left them conspicuous in the empty day. Now there are enough anomalies - unemployed, sick, retired, re-training - that they merge. Tad with braided hair, jeans; pockets always full.

"Caseless ammo. Eleven millimetre. This one *really* works. Low penetration, high stopping power - they want to use it for terrorist sieges."

Tad knows. She can remember the excitement of knowing the litany of technology. The skill in knowing all measurements, all details; all the results of firing trials. She can remember when it was all new.

Tad and Hook end up in Norton's house, watching films on the old VCR. The living-room smells of milk and sick, and there are dog-hairs on the couch. Someone - Norton's older sister, probably - has left a clutch of empty and part-empty lager cans on the floor, along with stubbed-out cigarettes.

"So what's he say?"

"About training camp?"

Tad snorts. "Of *course* about training camp." Norton's brother is in the forces, and sent somewhere we don't talk about. Not if we want Norton's brother to remain the healthy, brutal, nineteen-year-old that they remember him.

"He says he nearly couldn't hack it."

There is an awed pause: Norton's brother transformed from the squaddie in uniform to the sixteen-year-old that Tad remembers from summers ago. Word came back to Tad that Norton's brother and his mate done a runner from basic training; later she will know this is not true. Not and stay in the forces. Which Norton's brother does for five years - until, in fact, some New Amsterdam paramilitary unit fires a rocket launcher at a garrison. The rocket goes literally between the two squaddies on Norton's brother's truck, giving both of them a bad case of sunburn: injuries from the rocket-motor. Norton's brother is inside talking to the on-duty watch, and there isn't anything of him left to find.

Tad, two years from knowing this, says, "But did you *ask* him?"

"Yeah. He says you'll get in. They'll take you."

Norton goes quiet after this. Hook prods him with one of the endless arguments about the stunts in the aerial sequences of *Top Gun*. Tad sprawls against the broken sofa. She is among clutter: a folded pushchair, someone's filthy work jacket, Tonka toys. She makes three separate efforts to join the argument and they exclude her. She feels bewilderment and hurt.

Remembering that hurt, it comes to her that they shut her out because they can see what she, at that moment, still cannot. That she will be the one to do what they never will - follow Norton's brother.

And more, that she has always meant to do this.

"I have nothing to say."

The blonde woman spy-eye persisted. "You *were* at Roanoke, Knight-lieutenant? You were at Roanoke at the time when the incident took place?"

Tadmartin let her face go blank. "Nothing to say. You can talk to my company commander, Demzelle Keroac. I have no comment."

"Will you admit to being on service in the New World at that time?"

"You can't expect a junior officer to comment on troop movements," Philippe de Molay said smoothly. "Thank you, Lieutenant Tadmartin."

She saluted smartly. Shoulder and arm muscles shrieked protest, stiffening after exercise. She about-faced, trod smartly down the steps; heard the woman's voice raised in protest behind her as the security detail closed in.

Lights and camcorders crowded her face as she stepped off the platform into a crowd of reporters.

"Just a few words, Knight-lieutenant -"

"- you think of the European Unification -"

"- opinion on the story breaking in New Amsterdam; please, Demzelle Tadmartin?"

She knew better than to react. Still, *New Amsterdam* in that colonial accent made her blink momentarily. She looked between jostling bodies - and memorised the face of a tall man, wispy-haired, with a tan skin that argued long Western service or Indo-Saracen blood.

"And your view of the Order's investment holdings in the New World-?"

She wiped her wrist across her nose and grinned at him, sweaty, breath eased from the long combat "It isn't my business to have financial or political opinions, sieur. If you'll excuse me, I have duties to attend to."

Voices broke out, trying for a final question, but her patience and control ran on thin threads now.

"Yo, Tysoe!" She broke free and jogged across the field to the surgeon's van. The large, gawky woman waved her uninjured arm, beaming groggily through pain-suppressants.

"Wow, man. You look pissed off. What did they give you, six months' hard labour?"

Tadmartin heaved the buckle of her belt tighter, gaining more support for the mail hauberk. Disentangling herself from mail was an undignified operation - arse-skyward and wriggling - that mostly required help, and she was damned if she'd do it for an audience on the network. She swung herself up to sit on the van's hard bench seats. The orderlies snapped Tysoe's stretcher in place. Tadmartin saw they were ordinary grunts.

"I'll go back to base with you," she stated, and pointed at one of the orderlies. "You! Get my squad leader on the radio. I want him to supervise the cleanup detail here. I said *now*, soldier."

"Yessir - ma'am!" Tysoe said, in a broad Lesser Burgundian accent. "Boy, are you pissed off. What happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened, Knight-lieutenant Tysoe."

Tadmartin leaned back against the rail as the van coughed into gear. The sun slanted into the stadium, ranked faces still awaiting the final speeches that she need not sit through; and a granular gold light informed the air. She wiped the sweat-darkened hair back from her face.

"Someone wanted to interview me about Roanoke."

Tysoe grunted. Pain-suppressants allowed a shadow of old grief or guilt to change her expression.

"That was settled. That was accounted for."

"No," Tadmartin said. "No."

5 July 1992

Tad hits cover at the side of the track, body pressed into the bank. Her body runs with sweat. She stinks of woodsmoke survival fires. Listening so hard she can hear the hum of air in the canals of her ears. She risks a glance back. She can't see the four men in her squad who are down the track behind her - which is how it should be. They can see her. Their responsibility to watch for silent signals.

Looking up the track, she can see Tysoe, Shule, and Warner flattened into bushes and behind trees. On

ceaseless watch, Tysoe catches her eye: taps hand to shoulder in the sign for *officer* and pats the top of her head, *come to me*. Tad immediately slips up to join her.

"We've got to move up. What's the problem?"

Tysoe: all knees and elbows, face plump with puppy-fat. She shrugs. "Warner and Shule. You put them on point. They keep going into cover."

"Jesu Sophia!" Tad, bent double, dodges tree-to-tree as far as Shule, who's belly-down behind soft cover. "For fuck's sake *move!*"

"The scouts -"

"*Just fucking move!*"

She picks up Shule bodily by the collar, throwing him forward. He opens his mouth to protest. She slams her rifle-butt against the back of his helmet. His head hits the ground. He and Warner move off. She signals the squad forward in file, settling in behind point, shoving Shule on every ten or fifteen yards. Too late to change point now: Tysoe would have been better, but she needs Tysoe as her other team leader, so - command decision.

At low volume she thumbs the RT. Out-of-date equipment, like so much else here. "Sierra Zero Eight, this is Oscar Foxtrot Nine. Give sit-rep, repeat, sit-rep. Over."

No voice acknowledges. The waveband crackles.

"Sierra Zero Eight, do you copy?"

White noise.

"*Fuck.*" She looks back to catch Tysoe's eye, signals *close up* and *move faster*; slides the rifle down into her hands and jogs off at Shule's heels. The kevlar jacket weighs her down; her feet throb in her boots; and the assault rifle could be made from lead for all she knows.

Running, she can hear nothing.

The forest is a mess of brushwood, high trees, spatter-sunlight that's a gift to camouflage; noisy leaves, her own harsh breath in her ears; sweat, anxiety, frustration. Her eight-man squad moves tactically from cover to cover, but all of it soft cover. No time to check her watch but she knows they've exhausted all the time allowed for this flanking attack and then some.

"Fuck it!" She skids to a halt, signals *cover* and beckons Tysoe. The young woman spits as she hits cover beside Tad.

"What?"

There should be silent signals for all of this: she's forgotten them.

"We haven't got time for this! We're leaving the track. I'm taking them down through the wood; we'll come out above the camp and take them from there. Pass it back."

She hears Tysoe go back as she moves forward to Warner and Shule. The woods are still. Not a crack of branch. And no firing from down by the base-camp. Nothing. A hundred square miles and there could be no one else there...

"Move!" she repeats, throwing Warner forward bodily. He stumbles into the brush. Giving up, she takes point; ducking to avoid snagging her pack on branches. One look behind assures her Tysoe - thank God for Tysoe! - is taking the back door and moving the squad up between them by sheer will.

Sacrificing tactics for speed, she cuts down a steep pine slope, over needles and broken branches; pauses once to thumb the RT and hear nothing but white noise; hits a remembered gully and slides down into it, feeding Warner and Shule and Ragald on and past her.

Just turned sixteen, Tad is not yet grown; a young woman with her hair under the too-large helmet shaved down to bootcamp fuzz. She hooks her neckerchief up to cover her mouth and nose and crawls down the gully, placing each of the eight-man squad at intervals.

Now she can hear voices, or is the fool-the-ear silence of the Burgundian woods? Let it ride, let it ride...and yes: a voice. The crackle of a voice over an RT, muted, a good twenty-five yards over the far rim of the gully. She gives the thumbs-down for *enemy seen or suspected*, points direction, holds up three fingers for distance. Looking down the line, she sees Tysoe grinning. All of them acknowledge. Even Shule's smartened up.

Eight sixteen-year-olds in soaked and muddy combats, weighed down with packs and helmets, assault rifles ready.

She signals *stealth approach*.

Up to the edge of the gully, assault rifle cradled across her forearms, moving in the leopard-crawl. One hand lifting twigs out of her way; not resting a knee until she knows the ground is clear underneath.

Concussive explosion shatters the air. The rapid stutter of fire: still so noisy that she hardly believes it. She flattens down to the turf, the camp spread out below her, anyone who so much as glances up from the APCs and tents can see her -

The basecamp grunts are hitting dirt and hitting cover behind the gate barrier. Tad grins. There goes the diversionary attack, in on the gate. Blanks, loud and stinking.

She jerks her arm forward, and the dummy grenades go in; then the squad, charging, yelling, running as if they carried no weight at all. Firing on automatic.

Tad never sees the end of it.

A stray paint-pellet rips open across her stomach, splattering her scarlet. It is assumed the attacking grunts' blanks mostly miss. It is established that the training sergeants' pellet guns rarely do. The impact bruises. Tad goes down.

The wilderness training range echoes with gunfire, shouts, radio communications, orders, pyrotechnic explosions. She lies on her back. Men and women run past her. A smoke grenade goes off. Orange smoke drifts between the trees. Tad, with what she assumes for convenience's sake to be her last conscious effort, puts on her respirator. The choking smoke rolls over her. The firing continues.

An hour later, exhausted, dirty, hungry; Tad calculates that, within the confines of this exercise, the medivac team failed to reach her before she became a fatality. She resigns herself to latrine duties.

"Sieur Tadmartin."

She grins. "Sarge."

The sergeant kicks the foodpack out of her hands; she's up, outraged; he hits her fist-then-elbow across the face. "You're a dead grunt - *sieur*. Why? I'll tell you why. Because you're a shit-stupid, dumbass excuse for a soldier. What are you?"

"A shit-stupid dumbass excuse for a soldier." Sergeants run armies; she is not, even at sixteen and in officer training, stupid enough to answer back the company sergeant.

"And just *why* are you a shit-stupid dumbass excuse for a soldier, Tadmartin? Speak up! These people want to hear you."

"Don't know, sergeant."

This time she sees it coming. When his fist cracks across her face her nose begins to leak dark blood.

"Because you set up an opportunity and you blew it. You took your people in like fucking *cowboys*. Next time you start a stealth attack you keep it up until you're in charge distance, you don't fucking *waste* it, you pathetic bitch, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sergeant."

"Coming in from the gully was good. You weren't spotted at all until you broke cover. Not," he raised his voice to include the trainees guarding the base, "that that should particularly surprise me, since none of you hick-stupid *officers* can see your arses without a map and searchlight. Now you're going to clean up the area and *then* you might eat. Move it, fuckheads!"

The next day they repeat the exercise.

And the next.

The mess hall still had the smell of new buildings about it. Pre-stressed concrete beams, plastic benches, tables bolted to the floor; all new. Only the silence was old. Tadmartin, changed back into the white fatigues of a Knight-lieutenant, ate with the Sergeant Preceptors in the familiar silence. She fell into it as she fell into combat-perception: easily, as a body slides into deep water.

The bell for meal's end sounded.

"Knight Brothers and Sergeants of the Convent. Every perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of Lights and the Mother of Wisdom, Christ and Sophia, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration."

The *frère* at the lectern cleared his throat, addressing the grunts in the main body of the room.

"The reading today is from the bull of Pope Innocent-Fidelia. 'For by nature you were children of wrath, given up to the pleasures of the flesh, but now through grace you have left behind worldly shows and your own possessions; you have humbly walked the hard road that leadeth to life; and to prove it you have most conscientiously taken up the sword and sworn on your breasts the sign of the living cross, because you are especially reckoned to be members of the Knighthood of God.'"

Tadmartin sat easily erect on the hard bench. Sunlight slanted down from the clerestory windows on shaven heads, DPM fatigues. The smell of baking bread drifted out from the kitchens: the esquires and confreres working in silence except for the clatter of pans.

The words slid over her and she busied herself remembering equipment maintenance and duty rosters;

found herself looking down at her hands in her lap: short-nailed, calloused, and with a perceptible tremor.

The bell took her by surprise. She rose, saluting with the rest, about-faced and marched out.

"Tad." Tysoe, arm strapped, fell into step beside her. "You know where the rest of the company are now?"

"They were split up." She didn't break stride.

"We should talk."

"No." She walked off without looking back at the taller woman.

Once in her quarters, she ripped the top off a can of lager, drank, and vocalized the code for network access. The cell's viewscreen lit up with the public channel logo.

"Search *Tadmartin*," she said morosely. "Then search *Roanoke*. Backtime forty-eight hours."

The small viewscreen beeped and signalled a recorded sequence. Green leaves. Shells: the flat thud of one-oh-fives. A soundtrack:

"Here in Cabotsland, in the Indo-Saracen states, gunfire is an everyday sound. Terrorist explosions mingle with the artillery barrages of brushfire wars between settlements. For generations there has been no peace."

The shot pulled back to show a spy-eye reporter standing below the walls of Raleighstown. Sun, swamp, forest, and mosquitoes. Tadmartin smiled crookedly. The reporter was a blonde woman in her twenties, eye masked by head-up Virtual Display.

"This is Louise de Keroac on Channel Nine, at Raleighstown. Centuries of settlement - our reformed Gnostic Saracen settlements imposed on the indigenous Indian population - have brought about not the hoped-for melting-pot of civilization, but a constant boil of war for land and hunting rights. The Crusades suppress this temporarily. But, as we all know, even if governments are reluctant to admit it, after the troops are withdrawn, the fighting breaks out again."

The woman's visible eye was a penetrating blue. She spoke with a breathy, cynical competence. Tadmartin raised the can to her mouth and drank, the alcohol pricking its way down her throat. She raised a thoughtful eyebrow. The alcohol combatted the cell's official 55 degrees F.

De Keroac's voice sharpened:

"But Roanoke is different. Roanoke: our oldest successful settlement in the New World. Five years after the unexplained deaths of fifty-three civilians, as well as fourteen Knights Templar and thirty-three Knights Hospitaller, here in Roanoke, rumours continue to grow of a quasi-official shoot-on-sight policy. None of the soldiers wounded in that battle have ever been available for interview. Official sources have always spoken of 'surprise heathen attacks.' But now, finally, New Amsterdam is demanding an official enquiry."

A shot of the shitty end of the settlement; Tadmartin recognized it instantly. In the arms of a great forest, dwarfed by trees, the wooden buildings hug the ground by the river. The palisade fence winds off out of shot. The stone crenellations of the Templar castle came into shot as de Keroac's spy-eye panned.

Tadmartin rested her chin on her chest as she slumped back, watching Raleighstown. Bustling, full of

men and women in short flowing robes and buckskin leggings, veils drawn up over their mouths against the mosquitoes and the White Fever. Crowded market stalls, with old petrol-engine taxis hooting against herded buffalo in the streets; women with children on their hips; the glitter of sun off low-rise office blocks. The camera caught *Franks go home!* and *To Eblis with Burgundy!* graffitied on one wooden wall.

"This is the garrison. The locals call it the garrison of the Burgundian Empire -"

Tadmartin groaned.

"-rather than that of United Europe. Whether partisan attack, terrorist bombs, or one lunatic with a grudge was responsible for the destruction of half its troops has never been known. Now, however, new evidence has appeared."

"It's the sakkies." A man leaned up against the door of Tadmartin's cell. Tall, young, broad-shouldered; and with the Turcoplier's star on his collar.

"Yo, Vitry."

"Yo." He stubbed out a thin black cigarette against the concrete wall and walked in. "That one's all bullshit. You want Channel Eight realtime."

"Eight," Tadmartin said. The video channel flicked obediently.

"-ever-present knowledge that the European governments could bomb them back into the Stone Age." A bio-reporter looked to camera: the man with the faded skin, Indo-Saracen blood. "Talk to the Templar grunts and sergeants. They call them sakkies. Their word for Saracen. No one I've spoken to will believe that a small paramilitary group of sakkies could destroy a trained Knightly garrison-"

"Bollocks." Vitry squatted beside Tadmartin's armchair and reached for her can of lager. "Every damn local regime gets lucky some time or another. We all know that. And that's the answer he'll have got. Lying bastard."

"-attempted to talk to the winner of this year's Unification Tourney; the lieutenant who, as a junior officer, found herself in charge of this Burgundian frontier outpost; Knight-lieutenant Hyacinthe Tadmartin."

She regarded the screen morosely, watching the stadium from a different angle than the combatants saw. Dust covered the melee in the main field. Vitry peered closely at the screen.

"There's you - and there's me, look!" He lifted his voice without looking away from the screen. "Yo! You guys! We're on the network!"

"Jesu Sophia!"

She watched herself walk down the steps from the main box. The mail hauberk glittered and the stained surcoat's red cross blazed. The camera zoomed in and held the image of her face: oval, youthful until the eyes. The Knighthood of God. She thought that she looked both older and younger than twenty-six: fitter in body than most, but with weathered crows-feet around her eyes.

She snapped her fingers to mute audio, not being able to stand the sound of her own voice; bringing it up again only when the camera cut back to the bioreporter.

"Hiding within the strict rules of the Templars - a Templar *frère* may never 'disclose the House', that is, give out information on Templar activities, on penalty of losing their place within the Knighthood - hiding

under this cover, no one can cross-examine this member of Burgundy's most elite force -"

"Yo!" Vitry roared. "That's one for the Hospitallers. We're the most elite force!"

The rest of the mess, crowding Tadmartin's narrow cell, swore at or yelled with Vitry according to temperament.

"-no one can even establish who did command at Roanoke; even less what happened there, and why. Moves are being made to take this to the High Council of Burgundy when it meets with Pope Stephen-Maria V in Avignon later today. But will the truth, even then, be brought to light?"

"This is James de Craon, for Channel Eight -"

Talk broke out, the Templars dispersing back to the mess.

"Ah well. Bullshit baffles brains." Vitry shrugged. "You never had an overseas posting as far north as Roanoke, did you."

Since it was not a question Tadmartin felt no obligation to give an answer. She snapped her fingers to kill audio and video. As the crowd moved away from her door, a grunt anxiously saluted her. She returned it.

"Yes?"

"Message from Commander St Omer, sieur. He'll see you in his office at oh-six-hundred hours tomorrow morning."

5 July 1994

"Fine brother knights." The Preceptor Philippe de Molay clears his throat and continues to read. "*Biaus seignors frères*, you see that the majority have agreed that this woman should be made a *frere*. If there be someone amongst you who knows reason why she should not be, then speak."

The dawn sun hits the mirror-windows of Greater Burgundian office blocks and reflects back, slanting down through ogee arches into the chapel, failing to warm the biscuit-coloured stone. Tad, at attention, can just see her instructors - in formal black or brown surcoats - to either side of her. The stone is bitter cold under her bare feet. The Preceptor's voice echoes flatly.

"You who would be knightly, you see us with fine harness, you see us eat well and drink well, and it therefore appears your comfort with us will be great."

And so it does appear to Tadmartin, used now to being provided with combat fatigues, formal uniforms, assault rifle, all the technology of communication and destruction.

"But it is a hard thing that you, who are your self's master, should become the serf of another, and this is what will be. If you wish to be on land this side of the ocean, you will be sent to the other; if you wish to be in New Amsterdam, you will be sent to Londres ... Now search your heart to discover whether you are ready to suffer for God."

One does not go through the specialist training - the suffering for man? Tad wonders - to refuse at this late stage. But some have. When it comes to it, some have refused in this very ceremony.

Outside, the deep blue sky shines. She can hear them drilling, down on the square. Voices, boots. Here

in the cold chapel, the commander and turcopliers in their robes stand side-by-side with the medic and psychologist - to certify her fitness - and the solicitor.

"...Now I have told you the things that you should do, and those you should not; those that cause loss of the House, and those that cause loss of the habit; and if I have not told you all, then you may ask it, and may God grant you to speak well and do well."

"God wills it," Tadmartin says soberly, "that I hear and understand."

"Now your instructors may speak."

De Payens is first. A short, dark-haired woman; worn into service; a sergeant who will do nothing else but train now, although Tad knows she has been offered command of her own House.

De Payens' warm voice says: "She passed basic training at 89 per cent and advanced training at 93 per cent. We consider this acceptable."

Six o'clock mornings, runs, workouts, assault courses; field-stripping weapons and field-stripping your opponent's psychology; all of this in her memory as de Payens smiles.

"Advanced strategic and tactical studies," St Omer concedes, "85 per cent, which we accept."

"Combat experience," de Charney's voice comes from behind her. "No more errors than one might expect with a green lieutenant. I don't give percentages. Christ and Sophia! She's here, isn't she? And so are her squad."

The Preceptor frowns at that, but Tad doesn't notice. The cold of the chapel becomes the cold of fear. Brown-adrenaline fear, and the boredom and the routine; and the training that takes over and takes her through rough southern days fighting mercenaries on the Gold Coast.

The Preceptor commands, "Appear naked before God."

Her fingers are cold, fiddling with the combat fatigues, and it is a long moment before she strips them off and stands naked. The chill of the stone reverberates back from walls and weapon-racks and the altar crowned with the image of St Baphomet. Her skin goosepimples. She has learned to ignore it, resting easy in her body, unselfconscious with their eyes on her.

The Preceptor, de Molay, searches her face as if there is something he could discover. Waiting long minutes until the other Templars stir impatiently.

At last he asks, "Do you wish to be, all the days of your life, servant and slave of the house?"

She meets his gaze. "Yes, if God wills, sieur."

"Then be it so."

He doesn't look away. She takes the white livery with the red cross from de Payens, who helps her rapidly dress; she signs the document the solicitor gives her, assigning all possessions now and for her lifetime to the Order; she takes the congratulations of the officers relaxing into informal talk. All the time, de Molay's eyes are on hers.

She does not - cannot - ask him what he sees. Woman, *frere*, special forces soldier; none seem quite to account for that look. As if, before the altar of God, he sees in her what God does not.

"Roanoke was Border country, sieur."

"You might as well say bandit country and be done with it." St Omer spoke quietly and rationally, not looking at her. "It's still a devil of a long way from being an explanation."

"I know that, sieur."

A truck rumbled past outside the window. The dew was still on the tarmac of the camp; grunts doubling across wide avenues to kitchen and latrine duties. Tadmartin ignored her griping stomach. The commander's office smelled of photocopier fluid. Three of the six telephones on his desk blinked for attention.

"Emirate Cabotsland..." Knight-Commander St Omer sighed. "I'm formally warning you, Knight-lieutenant, that it may become necessary for an enquiry to be held."

"Permission to speak, sieur."

The middle-aged man responded tiredly. "Speak as God bids you."

"The Roanoke House already held such an inquiry, sieur. Report dated 10 July 1997. You can access it above rank of captain, sieur."

Tadmartin stared at a middle-distance spot six inches to the left of the commander's eyes, wondering what particular circumstances had left him manning a desk while other, younger knights gained field promotions... She steered herself away from seeing her image mirrored in him.

"You misunderstand me," St Omer corrected. "It may become necessary to hold a public enquiry. I suspect that that's what Avignon will come to, ultimately. You're to hold yourself in readiness for that event, and, if it should come about, act in all things in accordance with your vows of obedience to us."

Tadmartin stared. Caught, for the first time in five years, unprepared. She dropped her usual pretence of just-another-grunt-sieur and responded as Templars do. "They can't ask me to disclose the house!"

"Normally, no, but his Holiness Stephen-Maria may release you from that vow. Publicly."

"That - sieur, excuse me, even his Holiness can't reverse a vow made before God and the chapter!"

St Omer stood and walked to the window. He remained facing it, a black silhouette against brightness. Tadmartin returned to staring rigidly ahead.

"The *magister Templi* requires me to inform you, Knight-lieutenant, that - if necessary - you will answer questions on the secret history. Is that clear? Of course," the level voice added, "what you perceive as a necessity will prove of interest to us all."

Maps of Cabotsland's settled east coast on the walls, satellite photos of its Shogunate west coast; network terminals, old mugs half-full of coffee: the commander's office is one Tadmartin has often stood in, on many different bases. And there are the insignia on the walls, of course. Banners of campaigns. Some traditions do not die.

"You'll leave at oh-nine-hundred for Avignon; you will be accompanied at all times by a security detail; you will report to me immediately on your return. Go with God. Dismissed."

5 July 1995

Tadmartin hefts the sword in her hand. It's lighter than she expects, no more than two or three pounds. A yard-long blade, a short cross-guard, a brazilnut-shaped pommel.

This is a live blade. Bright, it nonetheless has the patina of age on its silver. But a live blade, with a razor edge, and it slides through the air as slick as oil. It flies, it dives. The weight of it moves her wrist in the motions for attack, parry and block.

"And that's the difference." The combat instructor takes it back from her reluctant hand. He replaces it in the weapons rack. The sun from the gymnasium window lights his sand-coloured, whitening hair.

She wants to hold it, to wield it again. She has the height and strength now of adulthood; a woman of slightly less than medium height, with strong shoulders. She wears new white combats, with the Templar red cross above the breast pocket.

"You, however, are going to use this for today."

He hands her, single-handed, a greatsword.

Two-handed grip, wide cross, forty-four inch blade. Tadmartin takes it, coming into guard position: the balance is good. But it weighs as much again as the single-hander.

Probably her body-language broadcasts impatience: she would rather be out on the ranges. Possibly he has had to deal with other recruits to the House of Solomon. The instructor, Sevrey, shifts into combat speed; and she is left defenceless, holding the grip in sweating hands, as his blade swings to cut at face, belly, groin: the blunt edge barely touching the cloth of her combats each time as he stops it. Ten, twenty blows.

"It's a discipline. *The* Templar discipline."

A yard of steel, rebated or not, is an iron bar that can break and crush. She freezes - after all her training, *freezes*, like any green conscript or civilian - and the blade flashes back brilliance.

"We've never broken this tradition. From the first Holy Land until now." He stops, sudden but smooth; he is not breathing any more strenuously. When he wields the sword he becomes something other than a forgettable-faced sergeant. The sword and the body are one.

"It's what we are."

She has seen him fight. Nothing of grace in it, unless it is the grace of chopping wood or driving stakes; the whole body weighing into the movement.

"I'll teach you," Sevrey says. "At the moment you're thinking about it. Where's the blade coming from, how do I move to parry, can I block that, where shall I attack? Train. Train and practise."

"And then?"

As he speaks she moves out onto the mat, gripping the sword, swinging it through the drill movements of parry and blow. Sometimes the blade is inert. Sometimes it moves like running water.

"*Sword and intention.*"

She will understand intellectually but not in her gut. That comes later. With some it never comes at all.

"The sword is not part of you. You have an intention to use it." Sevrey moves out onto the mat with her.

They circle. She watches, watches his eyes, the blade. Later she will learn not to watch any particular point in her field of vision, but to see it all, central and peripheral, simultaneously.

"First comes *no-sword*," Sevrey says. His blade comes out of nowhere, feints; she pulls back from a parry and his sword connects firmly across her stomach. An inch and a half behind the peritoneal wall coil thirty yards of intestine, and how much pressure does it take on a razor-edge to split muscle?

"No-sword: when the sword becomes an extension of yourself. You don't move the sword. You and the sword move."

She flips the blade back, lets the weight carry it over; and he cuts behind her cut and parries her through, the steel clashing in the echoing gymnasium.

"And then -" the first break in his stream of words as he almost follows her feint; gets back in time to block - if you're good, then *no-intention*. You'll have done so much fighting that in combat you don't even think, you don't even see an opening. You just watch the sword come down and cut home - it'll seem *slow* to you. No-sword, no-intention. But for that you're going to have to spend a lot of time at it, or be naturally good, or both."

If he says more, she doesn't hear, the fight speeds up now. Combat speed.

In three months she will find herself fighting in this same gym, in a multiple melee; she will - and she only realizes it after the moment, and stands still in mid-combat and is cut down easily - strike down one opponent to her right and, in a reverse movement, block a stroke coming at her from behind with a perfect glissade. Nothing of it conscious. Nothing. But to the end of her days she will hear that back attack connect with her blocking blade, and hear Sevrey's profane astonishment at her getting it there.

Air-conditioning hummed in the room without windows.

His Holiness Stephen-Maria V sat at the centre of the horseshoe-shaped table. He intently watched a small monitor, resting his chin on his gloved hand. Two priests stood in readiness behind his chair. Incense drifted from their censers, whitening the corners of the room and smelling of sandalwood.

Tadmartin came to attention the prescribed three yards in front of the table and knelt, bowing her head. The heavy material of her white surcoat draped the floor. She noted with detachment the shoes of the others seated at the horseshoe-table: officers' boots, politicians' shoes, and the fashionably impractical footwear of the media. Everything impinges itself on the detachment of combat-vision.

"Rise, demzelle."

She rose easily. Only her eyes moved, checking the faces. Civil servants. Priests. Mostly unknown: these would be the power-brokers, and not the men put there for show. Military: the heads of the Templar and Hospitaller Orders. And two other known faces - Channel Eight and Channel Nine seated side by side, all rivalry gone; James de Craon bending his ruddy countenance on her blind side as Louise de Keroac murmured some comment.

Outwardly calm, Tadmartin waited.

"I think we may offer the demzelle a chair, don't you?" His Holiness Stephen-Maria glanced at one of the dark-suited men on his right.

"I prefer to stand, sieur."

Outside the claustrophobic secure room, Avignon's baroque avenues and domed cathedrals shone with rain, the last of it dampening Tadmartin's red-crossed surcoat and white combats.

The Pontiff leaned back in his chair. Fluorescent lighting glittered from his white and golden robes, stiff with embroidery. He shone against the beige walls like an icon. His small owl-face creased with thought.

"Knight-lieutenant, will you summarize for the board of inquiry the purpose of the Order of Knights Templar, please."

At this moment and in this place, a minefield of a question. Tadmartin responded instantly. "We're a trained elite force, sieurs. Founded in 1130 AD, in the first Holy Land. We do undertake Burgundian missions where necessary, but we see action primarily overseas in Cabotsland. We operate out of the Templar fortresses down the east coast. Our main objective is to keep the pilgrim roads clear from the coast to New Jerusalem. It's therefore necessary for us to keep civil order."

The bio-reporter De Craon raised his hand. The priest at Stephen-Maria's side signalled assent.

"Lieutenant Tadmartin." De Craon turned to her, the room's fluorescent lights shining in his wispy hair. "These fortresses are garrisoned with Templars?"

"Yes, and with lay-brothers."

De Craon smiled. Skin creased lizardlike around his mouth. "There is another Order, am I right, who assists you in this?"

She kept her eyes from the Knight-Brigadier of St John. "The Hospitallers provide auxiliary services, yes, sieur."

"But they also see action?"

"After a fashion, sieur, yes."

An almost imperceptible lifting of Stephen-Maria's hand and the bio-reporter became silent. The Pontiff, amiably smiling, said, "Demzelle de Keroac, do you also have a question?"

"Sure I do." The woman planted her elbows on the table. Her curled hair glittered yellow in that suffocating light. She fixed Tadmartin with a brilliant blue eye. "You know your Templar organization also provides a banking service for the United governments?"

"I know that one exists." Tadmartin paused. "I don't know how it functions, demzelle. It never occurred to me that it was my concern."

The woman twitched a muscle in her cheek. The spy-eye whirred into zoom, closing on Tadmartin's face. "Do you know just how rich the Templars are, Knight-lieutenant? Do you realize why that makes them close advisors to presidents?"

"I don't know anything about banking, demzelle. I don't have any money of my own." Momentarily amused at the disbelief on the woman's face, she added, "The Order provides my housing, uniform, food, and equipment. Anything I own was signed over to them when I joined the Order. I never handle money unless I'm getting supplies from the locals round a garrison."

Louise de Keroac snorted. "You're telling me soldiers never go out drinking, or to the local brothels?"

"We are the Knights of God." Tadmartin, not able to hear the tone in which she quietly said that, was

surprised to find the room silent. "Some backslide, yes; if they do it repeatedly they lose the house."

A movement snagged peripheral vision. Tadmartin turned her head. Not the Templar Marshal de Molay, sitting still and expressionless. The stout man next to him in black-and-red DPMS and Knight-Brigadier's insignia.

"Harrison, Order of St John," he introduced himself briskly to the media. "What *is* your view of the Knights Hospitaller, Demzelle Tadmartin?"

Dangerous. She refrained from saluting, which was some return for the *demzelle*. A coldness touched her which was not the air-conditioning. Thoughtfully, she said, "I suppose there's a competitive spirit between all the knightly Orders, sieur."

"But between Hospitallers and Templars? Wouldn't you call it more than 'competitive'?"

She looked towards Stephen-Maria's small, bland face. "Competition is strong, yes, sieur. The Hospitallers being under worldly jurisdiction."

Abruptly Stephen-Maria snatched off his gold-rimmed spectacles, leaning forward and pointing at Tadmartin with a gloved finger. "Knight-lieutenant, do you ever think of the young Indo-Saracen women and men whom you fight? Although they are terrorists and heretics, do you think of them as people, with souls? Human feelings?"

Tadmartin gave that due consideration, relieved at the change of subject. "Not really, sieur. I don't think you can afford to. I tend to think in terms of target-areas."

"But you are aware of it."

"Yes, sieur."

"One should thank God for it. Since there is wheat among the chaff - innocent civilians among the terrorists."

His eyes were an exact faded blue. It was not possible to tell his age. Tadmartin remained easily at attention. The security detail at the entrance to the building had relieved her of her automatic.

"Under what circumstances is it permissible to kill, lieutenant?"

"I do my job, sieur. It's a professional job, and I've been trained to do it very well. Yes, it says in the holy texts *Thou shalt not kill*. It also says *Suffer not the enemies of God to live*. Sometimes that has to be done, and it's better left to trained personnel."

"Pariahs for the Lord." Stephen-Maria smiled. It was not, despite his creased face, a gentle expression. "Who are the enemies of God in Cabotsland, lieutenant?"

Knowing he must know all, Tadmartin nevertheless blinked uneasily at that question. "Indo-Saracen terrorists, sieur. Natives. Tokugawa-backed paramilitary groups."

"Yes... and *only* those. Lieutenant, remember one thing. Your Order answers to no president or government on this earth. It answers to us. We think it would be as well if you answer us truthfully."

"Yes, sieur."

How much for the media? How much for the anonymous suited men and women around the table? And who is to be the scapegoat? Tadmartin relaxed imperceptible muscles so that she still stood effortlessly to

attention under their scrutiny. "Lieutenant Tadmartin, you know what is meant by *the secret history*."

"Yes, sieur."

"Will you give us your understanding of the term, please? For the benefit of these people here."

Tadmartin cleared her throat. "It's a traditional term for the Cartulary of a knightly monastic order. It contains the full details of campaigns."

"Full details?" Louise de Keroac pounced. "So what's given to the outside world is censored?"

Tadmartin politely took the offensive. "Not censored, demzelle, no. Condensed. Would you want all the details of how many water-bowsers were sent to which port and when; how many aerial refuellings took place on any given mission; how many sergeant-brothers were treated for blisters or heat exhaustion-?"

"Just how condensed is the history for public consumption?"

Stephen-Maria V said, "Demzelles, sieurs, you can judge for yourselves. Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin, we're going to ask you to answer according to the secret history. We want your own account of the Roanoke incident. You were there. You were, however temporarily, the officer in charge of that company. Regrettably, innocent people died. The reports the public can access through this-" Stephen-Maria tapped the computer console "- are official. You now have our order to speak without reservation."

For whom does one tell the truth? Tadmartin let her gaze go around the table, seeing bankers and politicians and the media; and she did not let her gaze stop at the Templar knight Philippe de Molay in his white and red. No question. Finally, there is no question at all.

Tadmartin said, "No, sieur."

"We," Stephen-Maria V said, with a deliberate gravitas, "are granting you absolution from your vow."

Unspoken, his gaze tells her this is enough of the obligatory refusals.

"You can't absolve me from the vows of secrecy, sieur, no one can. I'd lose the House and the habit."

He scowled at her stone-wall morality. "My daughter, there have been public accusations made, that the Order of the Knights Templar operates a shoot-on-sight policy in the emirate lands. These talks are to give an equally public refutation of that accusation."

But truth is a seamless whole. Part told, all will be told. Tadmartin shrugged. "Sieur. You don't understand. If I speak, I'll have to leave the Order; I couldn't stay - I couldn't face them."

The Supreme Pontiff remained silent, but the priest at his left hand said quietly, "For refusing to obey the supreme head of your Order you will lose the House, demzelle. I remind you of this."

"Yes." Tadmartin did not say *I know*. She let the media frustration wash over her, standing steady, her gaze fixed just slightly to the left of the Pontiff's head.

James de Craon interjected, "What have you got to hide, lieutenant?"

"Nothing. This isn't about me. It's about the Rule of the Knights Templar."

Pope Stephen-Maria V said, "Will you speak?"

Tadmartin shook her head. "No."

"You must."

She allowed herself the luxury of showing, in full, what she felt in part. "Sieur, I can't!"

For the first time her voice varied from its reasonable calm. A soldier's voice, roughened with shouting over the noise of firefights; a woman's voice thinned by the heat of bandit country. Now she heard her voice shake.

"We're Templars. We are what we are because of how we behave. You don't break vows. You *don't*. We're not just any body of fighting men. Sieur, you *must* understand, you're the Pontiff. I can't obey the order you're giving me."

The priest leaned forward and murmured in the Pontiff's ear. "I warned you, your Holiness. The men won't speak, the officers won't speak; it was most unlikely you could persuade a junior officer of the Templars to speak out in open court."

"We are the head of the Order!"

Tadmartin made as if to say something, opening her mouth, but her throat constricted and she was silent. All muscles tense, as if her body urged her *speak out!*, but she literally could say nothing.

Am I really going to do this? she thought. Am I going to let them - no, am I going to *make* them throw me out of the Order? Jesu Sophia! I'm too old to go back to the regular army - and they won't take me anyway.

"For God's sake, sieur." She at last appealed to the Templar Marshal seated midway down the righthand side of the table. She spoke doubly: in her role as stolid knight, and with her own secret knowledge. "I've got nowhere to go if I leave the Order. I couldn't even buy civilian clothes! Don't let them force me out. Sieur, please!"

"There's nothing I can do, lieutenant."

De Molay's tone let her know he was aware of duplicity. The man's face was flushing a dull red: anger at her display of emotion, anger at his own embarrassment. Not until he looked away from her to the Knight of St John, and then back, did she catch his expression properly. Seen once before, in a chapel, one cold dawn.

"Get rid of these people!"

The Pontiff swore at his attendant priests and shoved his chair back, rising. The chair clattered over. The swirl of his robes as he turned caught a censer, tipping out burning sandalwood coals. One black-suited man stamped furiously on the sparks. Stephen-Maria stalked out.

The men and women at the table rose, caught by surprise. Talk broke out; the media people checking recordings; the rest debating uncertainties.

Tadmartin stood, undismitted. Even now, hoping against knowledge for a reprieve. Praise, even, for her steadfastness. Nothing came.

A quartet of military police officers filed in to escort her out.

5 July 1997

When it comes to a question, which do you choose?

There is no question.

The truck jolts and her ribs slam against the rim of the cab-window. The road to New Jerusalem winds up into the high lands, white under the moon. An exposed road, here.

The Hospitaller APCs judder past, tracks grinding white dust that falls wet and heavy from their passing.

"What's the intelligence report on hostiles?"

"They're saying up to sixty hostiles, heavily-armed. Fucking sakkies." Tysoe spits.

Tadmartin has never seen that trail's end. Has never been posted to that tiny Vinland settlement where, one millennium since, Sophie Christos came to preach her gnostic gospel and reap the reward commonly given to reformers. But Tadmartin has, on the same chain as her dog-tag, a tiny fragment of the Second True Cross embedded in clear plastic.

"Give the Hospitallers sixty minutes dead," she directs Tysoe. "If they can't get their half of the ambush set up by then, fuck 'em."

"*Bastards.*"

Brown cam-cream distorts the angles of moonlight on Tysoe's face. She's leaner than she was in training, five years ago; a long-jawed, bony woman.

"Something you should have reported to me, girl?"

"Pfc's Johannes Louis and Gilles Barker aren't on duty."

The captain absent, Tadmartin is senior of the four lieutenants at the garrison. Tysoe has Squad One, Cohen Two, and Ragald has Three; sergeants are keeping the fort secure. Close on a hundred men, a company-size operation. Needless to say she has not commanded at this level before, or not officially, and not under combat conditions. It tends to blur the minutiae.

She notes now that Squad One has a replacement man on heavy-weapons support, and a woman Tadmartin recognizes from the garrison taking the RT. She misses Gilles Barker's snap-on laconic radio technique. Johannes Louis will be missed by no one, realistically, but that's not the point; he was part of the squad.

"Brawling, wasn't it? They're both on the medic register."

The exigencies of ambush take her away from the vehicle for a minute, sending Two Squad and Three Squad up into position to approach the valley. Trees sway and creak. The night is uneasy, and the full moon an annoyance. And all the time that white, white road runs east away from her, dusty with the feet of a million pilgrims, trudging or riding broken-down trucks from Templar fort to Templar fort, all the way to the end of the trail.

She hauls herself up into the back of the truck.

"We'll move out in five."

Tension. Final checks of equipment - grenade launchers, heavy machineguns, flamers, assault rifles - and the mutters of *shit* and *fuck* and *Jesu Sophia!*, and the churning gut that always comes with action; the fear that stops the breath in your lungs. Tadmartin puts her head down for a second, inhaling deeply, and straightens with some electric excitement replacing breath.

"Barker and Louis." Tysoe says, joining her. "Hospitallers jumped 'em last night."

"*Sophie Christos*," Tadmartin says, disgusted.

Raleighstown, a spring night, Tadmartin new in the *outramer* territories; she and the other Knight-lieutenants gone drinking. In downtown bars where the whisky is rough and cheap, and there are the young men and women who naturally congregate around military bases: who know what to offer and what to expect in payment. But Tadmartin tells herself she is only there for the drink. And Tadmartin, leaning out of a bar door and throwing up in the street, is hit in the kidneys from behind, sprawls face down in her own vomit, white DPMs stained yellow and brown.

"Fuckin' Templar *cunt!*"

Tadmartin does nothing but come easily up onto her feet. Head clearing, the night slipping past in freeze-frames: herself on hands and knees, herself standing, three Hospitaller squaddies grinning - a redhaired man and two sharp-uniformed women.

"Yo," she says softly. Turns smartly, unsteadily, on her heel and walks back into the bar, back where Tysoe and - names? names forgotten, but the company lieutenants are there, and two sergeant preceptors, so there are six of them; and out into the night, where one of the Hospitaller women is still visible down the road, and off and running into the downtown quarter. Following her down the road at a sprint, streetlights failing, and swinging down one alley and across into the next -

Where there are thirty Hospitaller squaddies waiting. Her buddies. Tadmartin finds out that they even call it *Templar-bashing*.

Arrests and enquiries do not follow, not even for a shit-stupid dumbass excuse for a lieutenant. Templars and Hospitallers have to police the same territory, after all. There are nominal noises of disapproval on both sides. She is out of hospital in a matter of months and feels pain in her hands for two winters after.

"Stupid *cunts*. Aw, shit, Tysoe, girl!"

Warnings go out from the company captain's desk, strict warnings with penalties attached. *Leave the Hospitallers alone*. There will always be grunts who regard them as challenges, or a matter of pride.

"Louis'll be back." The woman puts on her helmet, clips the strap, checks the internal RT. "They blinded Gilles Barker. Left eye. Going to be invalidated out."

"*Christ.*"

Implications flick through her head. For a shared op.

"Where's the report on this?"

"It's on your desk."

"Shit. Okay-" Too late to change the plan now. All she can do is keep a closer eye on Squad One.

"Okay, I'll come in with you guys; Ragald can take Three up the road. That's time - let's roll."

Out of the truck and into the forests. Maybe a mile to cover, but a mile in silence. They melt into night and quiet, each one; going down into a silent crawl, shifting twigs and branches as they move, falling into the rhythm of clear ground, move elbow, clear ground, move knee...

Fifty minutes.

The terrain changes. Leaving the forest for wet heather, and then up along drained hillslopes and into pine. Tadmartin moves in the night, combats soaked, warm with the weight she carries. Slow, slow. Cold breath drifts from her mouth; camo-cream is cold on her skin. She crawls past a fox. Unspooked, it watches her go. The night wind moves the creaking pines.

"Delta Alpha, sit-rep, over?"

"This is Delta Alpha, in position, out."

"Hotel Oscar, sit-rep, over."

"Hotel Oscar to Romeo Victor, say again, over?"

"Romeo Victor to Hotel Oscar, sit-rep, say again, sit-rep, over."

"... Victor, in position, do you copy?"

"Hotel Oscar, I copy, out. Sierra Foxtrot, sit-rep, over."

"In position, Romeo Victor. Out."

She curses the moon. Too much light. It blotches the ground under the gnarled pines, splashes the jutting rocks at the edges of the deep valley. Low-voiced zip-squirts over the RT assure her Tysoe's got Squad One in position along the cliff top, Three's further up; Two covering flank and rear.

Tadmartin moves up, assault rifle cradled, crawling silently from cover to cover. She edges on her belly into the brushwood that overhangs one jutting rock.

The night wind is cold against her eyes. At least the noise will screen movement - but that's a two-edged weapon. She stares down into the valley.

A bright flicker of light is moonlight on the stream, thrashing in its rock-strewn bed. The road winds along the valley floor, sometimes beside the river, sometimes crossing it. The overhang she lies on is fifty yards upstream of a bridge. Nothing moving down there yet. No sound of engines. She merges into the stripes of moonlight and brushwood, thinking *tree*.

And across the other side of the gorge a glint of light shows her someone using night glasses. She sub-vocalizes for the helmet RT and zipsquirts:

"Romeo Force to Juliet, repeat Romeo Force to Juliet, do you copy? Tell your men to lay off the night scopes, they can see 'em back in town, for fuck's sake! Over."

There is the split-second time-delay of zipsquirt transmission, then:

"Juliet Force to Romeo, wilco, out."

Curt to the point of abruptness. Tadmartin grins but it stiffens, becomes a rictus on her face. Thinking of Johannes Louis and Gilles Barker.

She lies on her belly and stares across the gorge, idly pinpointing the more unwary of the Hospitaller troops. The ambush will lay fire down into the valley and nothing will walk out of it. Assuming that the hostiles come down the valley and not around it. Assuming that intelligence is right and an arms-shipment is due. Assuming.

Always assuming.

"Romeo Victor, this is Sierra Foxtrot. We have a possible contact, repeat, possible contact at Falcon Station. Advise, over."

"Sierra Foxtrot, this is Romeo Victor. Confirm sighting and advise numbers. Let them come past you. Out. Romeo Force to Juliet -" She swallows, continues with a level voice. "Possible contact at Falcon Station. Over."

"Juliet to Romeo, I copy, out."

Each of the valley bends has been assigned a name. She listens to the zipsquirt transmissions: Falcon, Eagle, Duck, and Crow all passed, and then the sound of engines is clear to her. She blinks up visual enhancement, closing one eye and staring down the valley. Patches of moonlight blot and blind. She blinks enhancement off and relies on one eye's night vision.

There.

Nosing around the corner of the gorge, one... two... three closed trucks, rolling with the movements of heavily-loaded vehicles. An artic, straining at the gradient. Three more trucks, and a battered old limo. The engines shatter the silence of the woods.

"Romeo Victor to all units, confirmed sighting at Bluejay Station." Sliding the assault rifle up the length of her chilled body so that it will not catch on the rock. The way behind her is clear for retreat. The gorge in front of her is one killing zone. "Hold your fire until I give the signal -"

Silence shatters. The night coughs a throat of flame. The abrupt noise stutters her heart. The limo at the rear of the line swerves in a pall of fire, hits the edge of the stream and rolls half-over. Shouts and screams come from the valley, the advance trucks gun their motors.

"- *fuck!*" Tadmartin rolls over on her side.

Muzzle flashes burst down the whole other side of the valley: the Hospitaller troops opening fire.

"Okay. Okay. Take out the front vehicle!"

Two of the rear trucks accelerate into the shadows of overhangs. Inside seconds there is the rattle and crack of small-arms fire. The flares blaze in. Tadmartin hears the *whumph!* of a grenade launcher and ducks her head into her arms, comes up and looses off suppressive fire down towards the rear of the column. There is the amputating roar of claymore mines as hostiles abandon the trucks.

Explosions deafen her. Hot air hits her cheek, splinters of wood spatter the rockface. The grenade explosion takes out a chunk of the bank and starts fire in the brushwood.

"Heavy weapon! Tysoe, take that truck out!"

Tysoe's yell from ten yards away: "Assault team move up!"

"Romeo Victor to Sierra Foxtrot, close up the back door, repeat, close up the back door. Out. Romeo

Victor to Hotel Oscar, Cohen, cover our fucking arses, we've got an illegal firefight going on up here, watch our backs, out; Tysoe, do you copy? Repeat, do you copy, over?"

Now there is no answer.

"Romeo Victor to all squads. Bottle the bastards up. Out!"

Two rounds clip the branches above her head and she swears, sprayed with exploded fragments of pine wood. The stink of resin fills the air, sickly-sweet with cordite and woodsmoke. She glances over her shoulder at the brushfire.

"Move 'em down!" She falls into cover, finding Tysoe a few yards ahead. In the valley, one of the trucks swings around in an impossible turning-circle and accelerates back towards the bridge. Someone screams. "Medic! Squad One Medic - through there."

She pushes the medic on down through the trees and leaves him squatting over a grunt with a shattered face. Hair blown black, face glistening red, eye and jaw mincemeat. There is blood on her combats to the elbow, she doesn't remember touching him.

"Where's it coming from?" Tysoe and the assault team hit cover beside her. "It ought to be a fucking turkey-shoot, where's it *coming* from?"

"You!" Tadmartin grabs the woman with the heavy weapon: a shoulder-fired rocket launcher. "Take that bridge out - *now*."

The grunt belts past her, kneels. Two successive blasts shake the air. Flame shoots from the rear of the rocket launcher as the shell projects. Line of sight into the valley is obscured by flare-lit shifting smoke. Muzzle flashes gleam through it, and the roar of brushfire whipped up by the night wind. Tadmartin hears voices screaming - on the banks? in the valley? - and the *whoomph!* of a truck going up. Hot air blows against her face. She smells the charred stink of cooking meat. Rounds whistle through the pine trees. Belly-down, crawling; and then there is a hollow concussive sound from the end of the valley and a cheer from the assault team.

"Bridge is down, L.T. We cut off the retreat."

"Good. Lay down fire into the valley -"

There is a *crump!* and the night lights up like Christmas. That one landed *behind*: a cut-off shot. The pine trees burn like pitch torches and the night is hot; she is sweating and covered with black ash and her hands are blistered.

"L.T., that came across the valley!"

"Give me a range and direction!"

"Fifty metres, two o'clock."

"Lay down suppressive fire. Tysoe, take 'em down the south side of the valley. *Now*." Tadmartin falls into cover behind a rock outcrop. The stuttering cough of a heavy machine-gun vibrates through the earth. Flashes of light strobe the night: give her lightning-strike views of branches against the night sky, grunts running, a casevac team with a bodybag. Her face bleeds. "Romeo Force to Juliet, do you c-"

"*They're* firing on *us*. The fucking Hospitallers!" Tysoe, camocream smeared with blood, stands up waving the assault rifle. "For Christ's sake tell them to cease fire!"

"Romeo Force to Juliet, repeat, Romeo Force to Juliet. Cease firing on friendly targets. Repeat *cease fire on valley wall*. Juliet Force, do you copy? You're firing on us! Do you copy? *For fuck's sake answer me.*"

Her dry throat croaks. She is aware of her split lip, bleeding in the night's chill. The helmet RT has insufficient power in this atmospheric muck; the woman with the RT was the casevac case; and Tadmartin pushes up from her cover and leans round the outcrop, spraying the far valley wall with undirected fire. "Cease fire! *Cease fire!* We're in a fucking killing zone here!"

The rifle is hot, magazine almost exhausted; she with swift precision removes it and snicks another one home. She feels the slick, greasy heat of shit down her thighs.

"Squad One reform and move up!" Tysoe bawls. She dips for a split second beside Tadmartin. "They're asking for it - they're asking for it! We're going to take them out! It's the only way!"

Another shell lands behind, up the valley wall. Rock splinters shrapnel the woods. Pull out? The way's blocked. Back to basic procedure: fight through.

Tadmartin yells, "*Take* the fuckers out. Go!"

Squad One are gone, pounding through the brushwood. Tadmartin goes a step or two after them and then falls into cover. The situation's sliding out of control, and she's got two other squads to contend with and the hostiles in the valley: let Squad One go do it. Cut losses.

"Romeo Victor calling Delta Alpha, move up into position at the valley wall above Bluejay Station, I repeat, move up into position at valley wall above Bluejay Station. Fire at will. Out. Romeo Victor to Hotel Oscar - get your asses up the south side and give Squad One covering fire. Move it!"

At daybreak she will walk through the floor of the valley, past burst and burnt-out trucks, when dawn glitters through the trees and off the stream. The track is puddled with red mud for two hundred yards. There are bodies and bits of bodies in the vehicles, charred and black. There is meat hanging from the trees.

She will walk the far side of the valley wall and watch the casevac of Hospitaller troops. Flying out to the same field hospitals as her own troops. She will hear the Hospitaller captain's oddly apologetic offer of help; an offer that vanishes when it emerges his troops are chewed up twice as bad as the Templars.

What will she feel? Satisfaction, mostly. Righteous satisfaction.

Daybreak, and things become visible.

There aren't half a dozen rifles together in the column. Of course, it wasn't a shipment of arms. Nothing for a stealth ambush to make an example of. It was, it later transpires, thirty families of paramilitary terrorists being shifted out from an up-trail district (in secrecy) into Indian territory. For their own safety.

Families with a small guard. Civilians.

Anything more than a quite minor investigation and it is unlikely Templar and Hospitaller troops will be tenable in the same territory. When it comes to a question, truth or something you can live with, which do you choose?

5 July 2002

"Did you hear? They want to cancel the Unification Day parade next year." Knight-lieutenant Tysoe leans morosely against the doorframe of the cell. "Because *the ordnance damages the streets*, for Chrissakes! Fucking government shit. When they start worrying about tanks chewing up a few roads, then you know you've lost it."

Tadmartin ignores her. The cell containing only a small mirror, she is studying her full-length reflection in the metal door.

"Shit..."

A woman something under medium height, shoulders stretching the cloth of her demob tunic. Blonde hair far too short for a civilian. A young woman with a sunburned face; moving uneasily in the heeled shoes, smoothing down the plain cloth skirt.

"Who'd be a fucking Templar? You ain't missing nothing," Tysoe assures her uncomfortably.

Tadmartin looks.

"Well, *fuck*, man..."

"It's all right," Tadmartin says. "It's all right."

"*We* know what you did."

Tadmartin hefts her small shoulderbag. Gifts, mostly. Facecloth, toothbrush, underwear, sanitary towels. "Write or something, will you?"

It is a momentary lapse. Some lies are easier than others. Tysoe says "Sure!" and ducks her head uncomfortably, waits a moment in the face of Tadmartin's calm, then shrugs and leaves.

Little now to do. Tadmartin reaches up to the weapons rack on the cell wall and takes down the rebated eleventh century sword.

The TV snaps on, on autotimer: she ignores the whispering voices.

Tadmartin sits on her bed, her back against the wall, the rebated sword resting with its hilt against her shoulder and the blade across her body. She rubs microcrystalline wax into the metal with a soft cloth, the movements rhythmically smooth.

It is the last piece of equipment she will return to the armoury.

She finishes with maintenance, stands; holding the hilt and letting the blade flip up into first guard position. The sun shines into the monastic cell. There is just space enough to lose herself in the drill of cut, parry, block...

The blade moves smoothly in the air. The solidity of the grip, the heft of the blade; moving in a balance that makes it all - edge, guard, grip, pommel - a singularity of weapon.

She loses herself in it.

Becoming *no-sword*, one culminates in total resignation, abandoned to the skill of the blade. Nothing matters. One cannot care about winning, losing, survival, dying. One cannot care, and act right. She enters the complete, balanced resignation of the fighter: dead, alive, alive, dead. No matter. No difference.

The face on the TV screen focuses in her combat-widened peripheral vision; The fair-haired woman, de Keroac; capable and triumphant. Tadmartin hears her speak.

"The government's denial of accusations that they are operating a shoot-on-sight policy in emirate Cabotsland was further complicated yesterday by the breakdown of the Avignon talks.

"Talks broke down when a Templar officer, Demzelle Hyacinthe Tadmartin, refused to give any eye-witness evidence whatsoever about her command at Roanoke. Claims will now continue to be levelled at the government that the civilians killed at Roanoke were innocent casualties of what is, in all but name, a war in the New Holy Land. It is five years to the day since the Roanoke massacre claimed fifty-three civilian lives. This is Louise de Keroac, for Channel Nine."

The words are heard but they do not matter.

She is a sword, a sword now out of service. But held in the balance of that resignation she knows, *no-intention* will carry her far abroad. Alone. Away from bystanders who she may, instinctively, hurt.

Tadmartin walks out of the cell, putting the first foot on the pilgrim road - unrecognized as yet - that will take her, solitary and one day in the far future, to the New Jerusalem.

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