

# **Steele's Dien Bien Phu**

**By Blood Spilt, #1**

**by Ricky Balona,**

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**Dedication**



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*This book is for my beautiful family  
and in loving memory of my father Aurelio Balona.*

‘Foreigners who have become the sons of France,  
not by the blood they have inherited but by the blood they spilt’  
Operation Castor  
20 November 1953

## **Chapter 1**

It was early dawn on the hills overlooking the north western Vietnamese town of Dien Bien Phu. Meandering through the neatly laid out town with its houses nestled along its banks the Nam Yum River shimmered in the false light of a new day. Down along the tree lined houses a small commercial area unhurriedly awakened. The valley produced large quantities of rice that the Viet Minh valued almost as much as the lucrative opium trade. Opium profits enabled them to buy weapons and European medical supplies on the black markets of different Asian countries. Dark shadows of water buffalo grazing near the two main roads running through the village were barely visible in the light of the cooking fires. Gluttonous rice simmered in fire blackened pots. The smell of wood smoke permeated the cold morning air. A dry fog shrouded the rice paddies and dense bush like vegetation of the valley. A valley overlooked and surrounded by a ring of hills forebodingly covered in a thick mantle of green jungle.

The sky was still dark in the west. Today promised a day of harvesting the last remaining rice situated beyond the old Japanese airstrip, one last remaining relic from their campaign in Indochina. They had dug hundreds of deep holes along its narrow length. This was to sabotage any attempt by the French to land troops. Viet Minh guerrillas of the 148 Independent Regiment set off from their Head Quarters situated in the centre of the village. One of the main supply routes ran from Laos through the valley. From there, material of war would be distributed through the French held areas further afield. A mutually beneficial relationship with the local villagers ensured that they went about their daily lives unhindered by the troops. For the Viet Minh, they held a strategic area from where they launched operations, rested or trained.

Long Thao listened half-heartedly to the Political Commissar extolling the values of the communist system. His eyes scanned a thatched roof house adjacent to the drill square. He desperately sought a glimpse of Tran Phuong, the youngest daughter of a village farmer. In Long Thao's eyes, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He suddenly saw a fleeting glimpse of her slender body crossing the courtyard. He thanked his substantial fortune, this morning the Regiment would be taking part in a training exercise while he remained behind. Tasked with the maintenance of the heavy machine guns surrounding the airstrip he hoped to meet Tran Phuong down by the muddy stream. Every day this week they had kept their secret rendezvous. Today would be no different.

Long Thao cleaned the barrel of yet another 50 calibre machine gun mounted on an anti-aircraft stand. He watched for Tran Phuong, who would soon be bringing them hot tea.

Overhead a French reconnaissance aircraft appeared through a break in the high clouds. It droned over the valley. Long Thao laughed at the comments made by his comrades. They all felt secure in the valley. The French would not be able to surprise them. Reinforced companies defended Dien Bien Phu, and the airstrip was unusable. Any French attack overland would be spotted miles before they got to within striking distance.

"Hey, boy's the tea is here!" Suddenly Long Thao forgot all about the circling aircraft overhead. Tran Phuong smiled coyly filling up the metal cups eagerly pushed toward her by the young soldiers. Long Thao waited until later. His friends were already hunkering down on the far side of the paddy dyke. Hidden from the eyes of the Commissar they sipped their tea while flipping through glossy western magazines. She wore a white silk blouse with a yellow cotton scarf tied around her neck. He knew she had worn it for him. Again the sole aircraft swooped over the valley. Taking her by the hand, he led her toward the heavy machine gun his team had cleaned then loaded with tracer rounds. Placing her hands on the metal grips, he snuggled in behind her playfully aiming at the circling aircraft. She took her hands off of the weapon and untied her yellow scarf. Tran Phuong placed it around Long Thao's neck.

Then dozens of low flying aircraft swooped overhead. Hundreds of paratroopers hung in the air floating towards them like cotton on the breeze. Long Thao pushed Tran Phuong aside as he cocked the weapon before pressing hard on the trigger. He felt the weapon recoiling in his sweat soaked hands. Lines of red tracer stitched their way across the sky toward the defenceless men in their parachutes. Fearing for her family Tran Phuong ran headlong along the narrow path leading back to the village.

Already the paratroopers were landing in the fields all around them. Within minutes, she found the trail blocked by a company of paratroopers regrouping for an assault on the airstrip. Turning around Tran Phuong sought the protection of Long Thao and his friends. White cloth of a parachute descended on top of her. The rigging lines wrapped themselves around her body entangling her in a spider's web of silk. She fought to free herself despite the sheer terror threatening to overwhelm her. Suddenly she came face to face with the body of a man staring up at the tracer streaked sky in a parachute harness. A small hole in his forehead oozed crimson blood. She noticed a Red Cross band he wore on his arm. Spilling

from his cargo bag were bandages and medical supplies. He wore a sidearm on his belt. Fumbling with the webbing holster, she tore the pistol loose.

Looking back, she did not allow herself to feel pity for the young medic shot drifting down over the green fields of Dien Bien Phu. He was the enemy, and they now threatened the lives of her family and the simple existence of the village her ancestors had built. Sprinting she avoided camouflaged clad paratroopers who struggled to regroup amid the chaos of battle. Long Thao emptied belt after belt of ammunition into the crowded sky determined to maintain their position. Tucking the heavy Colt 45 into the waistband of her black trousers Tran Phuong scampered over a paddy dike joining Long Thao. An ever increasing pile of spent cartridge cases lay at their feet. Tran Phuong struggled with a dull green metal box of ammunition. The deafening roar of the now overheated and red glowing barrel of the 50 calibre machine gun spat out its deadly rounds. All around them lay wounded or dead Viet Minh. The paratroopers were regrouping with astonishing speed. Fighting their way to their rendezvous points they became more confident as they gained ground. The Para's were not in a forgiving mood, after having been subjected to intense fire while they had no way of fighting back.

The paratroopers tugged at the leather bindings of the heavy weapons containers setting up machine guns and mortars to support their assault. The men of the 6 Regiment de Parachutistes Colonial were the vanguard of Battle Group 1. A little over 1800 elite troops were to be landed more than 200 km behind enemy lines on a heavily defended drop zone.

## Chapter 2

Steele drifted towards the lush green fields below. Only too eager to exit the plane that bucked and swayed in the air currents. For a few seconds after the initial relief of escaping the metal confines of the Dakota, amid the jostling of his fellow overladen paratroopers the parachute having opened offered a brief respite to the noise and bustle. Warm air relieved a slight feeling of airsickness after the cramped ninety minute flight from Hanoi's Bach Mai military airfield. Searching for the red smoke marker, Steele attempted to direct his 'chute. He drifted towards the rendezvous area marked out for the elements of the French Foreign Legion Heavy Weapons and Pathfinder sections. Steele was part of the Pathfinder section which was to set up the drop zone for the 1 Battalion de Parachutistes Etrangere scheduled for the following day.

His trained eye picked out groups of enemy forces rushing to man anti-aircraft guns. They formed into defensive perimeters, taking up prepared positions. Judging he was approximately fifty feet above the rice paddy Steele pulled on the metal clips attached to his parachute harness. Steele released his equipment bag. Bouncing once it tugged on the cord attached to the harness. Steele felt the ground rush up. Bracing for a front left landing, he felt the shock of the muddy earth as his legs submerged beneath the dank waters of the rice paddy. He rolled forward propelled by the momentum into the brackish water cursing at the

thought of his submerged M1 carbine. Jumping to his feet, he pulled the safety clip and hit the metal quick release disk. Steele was free from his parachute harness. He was ready to get to grips with the enemy. They had attempted to kill him when he had no means of defence Steele was out for revenge. Grasping his end of the white cord connected to the harness, he followed it to retrieve his waterlogged equipment bag.

Bullets cracked through the air overhead. A group of Viet Minh firing a 50 calibre raked the sky. Two more peppered the area to his front with small arms fire.

“A moi la Legion” Steele bellowed the war cry of the Legion. His men were all in the same aircraft as he was. They had jumped one after the other, so reason dictated that they should wind up more or less in the same area. He tossed a yellow smoke grenade then scanned the area to his front where the 50 calibre roared defiance.

“Sergeant, hold your fire, it is me and Adolf. We’re coming in!” Two camouflaged clad Legionnaires squelched through the muddy ankle deep water dropping down next to Steele at the base of the paddy dike.

“Polanski and Voyeur are to the right of us Sergeant. Cover fire!” Kiwi screamed emptying a clip toward the 50 calibre now spewing death inches over the sun dried dike wall. “What is the meaning of this?” A young officer nodded his head in the direction of the yellow smoke wafting over the paddy and the surrounding area. “That is not any regulation colour marker. What unit are you men from?” A burst of machine gun fire drowned out Steel’s words. Diving headlong for the cover of the dike he stumbled, falling face first into the putrid water. “That shut him up.” Adolf sniggered opening the feed tray of his M.G 42 while Kiwi loaded a belt of 7.9mm ammunition. “You could help a chap you know” Steele shot the young lieutenant a withering glance. Somehow he had managed to entangle rigging lines around his legs when wading through the paddy field. He looked up at the Sergeant who now turned his attention back to the enemy. The lieutenant noticed the professional ease at which the sergeant took stock of the situation and commanded his men. His sandy brown hair, piercing blue eyes and rugged good looks were those used for recruiting poster photos, even to the point of a thin scar running down the side of his left cheek. Two figures scurried over the dike landing near the lieutenant. He lifted his M1 carbine only to have it kicked out of his hands. “Take it easy man, were on the same side.” The men joined the Sergeant without a backward glance.

“Adolf lay down covering fire. Voyeur and Polanski flank that 50 calibre to the right and earn your pay.” Adolf proceeded to fire short bursts at the gun emplacement. Bullets kicked up dust around the sand bagged enemy position forcing the gunner to fire wildly. The Voyeur sprinted from cover to a clump of bushes. Polanski followed until they reached a vantage point which enabled them to fire directly at the enemy. Taking a few deep breaths, Voyeur looked through the sights of his scoped M1 carbine. The gunner of the 50 calibre was in a fixed position, as was the loader with two Viet Minh firing automatic weapons crouched down below the parapet as they emptied their magazines blindly firing high over the heads of his comrades.

“Hey, Polanski that guy’s wearing a yellow scarf. I cannot miss at this range” Voyeur took the shot firing four more in quick succession. He watched his targets crumble and fall to the ground. That was all they were. Simply targets he told himself to avoid the guilt.

“Three confirmed Voyeur. I’m not sure if the fourth was a clean kill though.”

“Okay, all clear. Let’s go. Adolf, stay here and cover us while Kiwi and I move in!” Steele vaulted over the dike followed closely by Kiwi. They approached a sandbagged position. Firing into the three bodies lying crumpled on the sodden earth Steele signalled to the rest of the team to join them. “All round defence, check ammo and get these cadavers out of here.” Taking a swig from his canteen Steele felt the warm glow of the vintage cognac seeping through his body. He had “lost” his way back at the airfield. Finding himself at the officers mess, Steele could not help himself liberating a bottle of vintage cognac from their well-stocked drinks cabinet. “Polanski look to the left. I thought I saw a group of Viet’s near the tree line.”

Looking over the parapet Steele scanned the immediate front from left to right. Polanski helped Kiwi throw the bodies of the dead into a ditch filled with putrid water and rotten compost. Out of his peripheral vision Steele noticed a sudden movement among the corpses floating in the murky pool. He kept his eyes on the tree line but waited for another sign of movement among the bodies. There, it was again. One of them must still be alive. He lifted his M1 to finish the job. Squinting down the sights, he watched a hand tugging at a body wearing a yellow blood stained scarf. A young girl attempted to hide beneath a covering of rotten vegetation pulling the body closer. Her hand reached out to close the young man’s eyes only to fumble around his empty eye sockets. Voyeur’s bullet had smashed through his forehead exiting at the base of the skull. His eyes had been knocked back into his head. Steele noticed her white shirt stained in blood. The villagers had thrown human excrement into the ditch. It was a way of fertilising the fields. Steele wrinkled his nose at the smell. It was filthy from where he stood. He could not imagine how the poor girl managed to stay hidden in the cesspool.

“Here goes the last one Sergeant.” Polanski and Adolf threw the last body over the parapet into the ditch. It landed on top of the two other bodies already floating in the muck. An audible hissing sound escaped the mouth of the cadaver that the young girl cradled in her arms. Stomach gas blew straight into her face, only inches from her dead lover’s lifeless corpse. Her eyes were wide with terror and shock. Looking directly at her Steele motioned with his hand. He signalled to her to run. He knew he could keep his men under control if they spotted her. He gave the Lieutenant a quick look. He was too busy rummaging through the ammunition bunker situated behind the machine gun.

“I would not do that if I were you Mon Lieutenant.” Voyeur smiled lighting a cigarette. “And why not may I ask, I am merely taking stock of weapons and ammunition Viet’s have.” He discretely tucked a forage cap with Russian insignia into his battledress pocket. “There is a photograph of Uncle Ho Mon Lieutenant. Take it down.” Adolf smirked. “Very well Legionnaire. I will, cannot have this communist propaganda all over here.” Stretching over a pile of ammunition boxes, the Lieutenant tugged at the photograph. “Get down Mon Lieutenant” Steele tackled the bewildered officer pushing him to the ground. Shrapnel sliced through

the air from the exploding grenade attached to a trip wire behind the photograph of Ho Chi Minh. The Legionnaires had already dived for cover knowing what was about to happen before the officer tore down the photograph. "What the hell are you lot playing at? This is no time for jokes." The officer's face turned white. It crossed his mind that if they regarded this as a joke what would they consider serious.

"That is enough. Check weapons and ammo and let's head for the village." Steele helped the officer to his feet. He noticed the young Lieutenant struggled to keep his hands from shaking. "Target half left!" Kiwi yelled shouldering his rifle. "Let her go boys. I saw her earlier. She is just a scared young kid." They watched her running headlong through the paddy toward the village. Shots rang out from behind them. "Get after her now. Follow me! That is an order. She is an enemy agent and should be treated as such." Smoking pistol in hand, the officer waved the Legionnaires on then vaulted over the lip of the trench. "No sense in missing out on all the action. The fighting seems to have moved in the direction of the village. Let's follow him then. Move you lazy bastards." Spreading out the pathfinder group walked cautiously forward scanning the tree line as they moved from cover to cover.

"There she goes!" Running ahead of the group the officer almost collided with a youthful member of the 6 Para's. Lost and alone the Para smiled broadly secure in the knowledge he had found at least some elements of the airborne drop. "I am so happy to see you, Mon Lieutenant. There are many Viet Minh gathering in the village. I was forced to hide in the undergrowth until I saw you lot here. What company are you from?" "I am Bastien-Thiry, the adjutant officer of the Deuxieme Bureau to be precise." He glowed with pride. "We got stuck with the bloody Gestapo." Polanski mumbled lighting another cigarette. "I heard that soldier. We are all extremely well aware that the Legion refers to the bureau charged with the security and behaviour of its men as the Gestapo. In the case of the Legion, it is well founded. I have heard rumours that ex-members of the Gestapo are used by the Legion as a means of extracting confessions from the Viet Minh prisoners. They may have escaped the hangman's nooses, but justice will be done in the jungles of Indo China. Not even the dreaded Gestapo survive out here." "And how long have you been over here Mon Lieutenant?" Kiwi smiled knowing the answer. "There is no time for all of that Legionnaire. There she goes, after her!" Pushing the newly found Para to the front he pointed at a lone figure approaching a heavily wooded area between the airfield and the village.

"Spread out and keep off the path." Steele waved the Pathfinders forward while Bastien-Thiry and the young Para rushed headlong down the sandy track leading to the village. "Come on men, I want her taken alive." With a look of irritation, the officer attempted to hurry the Pathfinders. To his dismay they moved at a steady pace paying more attention to the surrounding area immediately to their front and flanks. If they carried on like that, she would escape. He wanted a live Viet Minh prisoner. That would look fantastic when he hooked up with his company. "Slow down Mon Lieutenant. I do not like the looks of this place." Holding up a hand Steele brought his men to a halt. They knelt behind cover forming all round defence.

“Let the men of 6 Para show the Legionnaires the meaning of true valour. Get after her soldier!” Grabbing Bastien-Thiry by the shoulder Steele pulled him to the ground, but it was too late for the young Para. His leg hit a trip wire. For a heartbeat, he hoped beyond all hope that it was merely a vine. He turned to look at the officer. Without a sound, a heavy wooden log swung downward suspended by two thick ropes. The razor sharp bamboo spikes driven into the pendulum of death pierced his body in a dozen places impaling the young man. Caught up in the momentum he swung back and forth screaming. Blood sprayed along the path to be soaked up by the sand. He managed to reach out a hand in supplication. “Medic, do something to help him!” Bastien-Thiry screamed in terror. “Polanski do what you must.” Steele looked into Polanski’s eyes. Polanski approached the wounded man glancing back at Steele for confirmation. Nodding almost imperceptibly Steele gave the go ahead. Waiting for the pendulum to commence its downward arc Polanski raised his M1 carbine. Firing eight rounds he ended the boys suffering. Almost immediately he reached out for Steele’s water bottle. Taking a long swig Polanski turned away from the scene of the mercy killing.

“What have I done?” Tears welling up in his eyes Bastien-Thiry vomited the remnants of his breakfast into a ditch. “Try and get the body off then wrap him in a poncho. Adolf come with me. I saw our mortar team setting up their tubes in the field over there. Steele pointed to an open field surrounded by paddy dikes on all sides. The Legions heavy weapons team would need someone to cover them while they concentrated on their fire mission.

Greyish white smoke puffed up among the houses in the village. Seconds later they heard the “crump” of mortar bombs exploding in and around the village square. In a matter of minutes, the Legion mortar crews found the range. Five teams fired round after round using the flagpole on the parade ground as a target indicator. It was not long before the houses in the immediate area were reduced to flaming ruins. A young girl lay on the dirt floor of their battered house clutching her wounded mother to her blood soaked chest. Tran Phuong attempted to tie a tourniquet around her mother’s shattered leg while the mortar shells rained down their death and destruction. Through the smoke filled interior of her shattered home emerged a black clad figure. “Come with me comrade, if you want to seek revenge on those who have taken all from you.” She lifted her face towards the sound of the voice. Alarmed Tran Phuong recognised the strong French accent in the Vietnamese he spoke. Spinning round, she stared in disbelief at the Commissar she had only seen keeping to the shadows during his stay in the village. It was rumoured that a French turncoat served in the ranks of the Viet Minh. “Are you the one who tortures his countrymen in the camps across the border?” His dark shark like eyes betrayed no emotion.

## **Chapter 3**

Through the shimmering haze of late afternoon, Steele watched the bright orange parachute snagged high in the branches of the jungle canopy. He could



barely make out the red and green streamers marking the cargo container as that of the Legion Pathfinder group. He cursed. Their equipment had been the first loaded on the C-47. When the air supply crew dropped the load, theirs was the last one out. Any number of reasons could have caused it to be released a few seconds after the others. A few seconds in the air translated into a large amount of ground covered. It was far from the rest of the containers that had already been collected.

“Hey, Mon Lieutenant, may I ask whom you are calling on our radio set?” Steele moved quickly to where Lieutenant Bastien-Thiry crouched next to the radio crammed into Kiwi’s kit bag. Bastien-Thiry looked up at Steele in amazement. He never expected a sergeant to question his actions. He thought of a tactful way to put the sergeant in his place, but nothing came to mind.

“Sergeant I think there may be a way across the open ground over there.” Adolf pointed toward the field they would have to traverse in order to recover their equipment parachute. He would deal with the Lieutenant later. Through his binoculars, Steele studied the terrain. A trench system snaked along the tree line running toward the jungle foothills. “We cover each other and make a dash for the bunker one hundred meters from here.” He pointed at the remnants of a bunker destroyed by the mortars earlier. “Has anyone got any questions?” The group was already kitting up and forming into pairs. “Good, then Adolf and Polanski go first. Set up the M.G when you get there to cover the rest of the group.”

Voyeur moved his scoped rifle continuously from left to right searching for any sign of the enemy. Perspiration trickled down Steele’s face burning his eyes. Adrenaline pumped through his body. From radio reports, he knew the Viet Minh was in full retreat. “The Drop Zone is now in French hands, but there are groups of Viet Minh trapped inside the pocket. They are prepared to fight their way out or die in the attempt.” Voyeur whistled softly. “Bunker half left, two hundred meters.” A single Viet Minh watched the group from the verge of the treeline. “He seems to be alone Voyeur. Take him.” Squeezing the trigger, Voyeur followed through on his shot. A conical straw hat flew off Viet’s shattered skull. “Headshot cannot miss from this range. He was smiling when I shot him. Maybe he knows something we do not Sergeant.” “They always do Voyeur. Now let’s get moving.”

On Steele’s signal Polanski sprinted while Adolf with the heavier M.G 42 jogged across the field. Steele watched his men set up the M.G 42 on the bunker roof. Polanski hurriedly threw sandbags in front providing them with a small amount of protection. Without taking his eyes off of the treeline, Adolf pumped his arm in the air. “Right Kiwi, follow me, let’s move!” Halfway across the field rounds cracked like a whip over Steele’s head. Suddenly the short distance to the bunker seemed a thousand miles away. He knew if he hit the dirt he would be a sitting duck for the Viet Minh sniper perched in a tree somewhere in the bush. Kiwi shot past bent almost double. He dived into a slit trench. Immediately he reached for the handset of the radio. “Bloody hell, the radio’s had it.” He switched it on and off several times. “I didn’t damage the bloody thing when I hit the deck.” Ripping it out of the canvas webbing bag Kiwi opened the battery compartment. “What the hell. Someone’s taken the bloody battery out mate!” Rummaging through his back pack Kiwi cursed. “The two spare batteries are gone. That bloody stuck up officer was the last one near the radio. I’ll blow his kneecaps off.” Steele slapped Kiwi on the

shoulder. "I'll sort it out later. Right now we have to get a visual on that sniper. Keep your eyes peeled Kiwi. I'll give him something to shoot at." All eyes were riveted on the treeline waiting for a sign of movement.

"Mon Lieutenant, your turn. Get up here!" Kiwi chuckled. Steele was using the lieutenant as a decoy. A shot rang out followed by a burst of machine gun fire. Adolf turned and waved. He had seen the sniper and eliminated the threat before Lieutenant Bastien-Thiry met his ancestors. "That was uncomfortably close Sergeant." Breathless and ashen faced Bastien-Thiry shot Steele a suspicious look. "Get the men together Sergeant. I have wonderful news I wish to share with you all." He vaulted the parapet of the trench joining Adolf and Polanski at the bunker. "Wait until I give him the wonderful news about the missing batteries. He won't think he is so high and mighty then mate."

"Voyeur just got in Mon Lieutenant. What was it you wanted to tell us?" Sifting through Viet Minh documents found on the bunker floor Steele called his men together. "I have been in contact with H.Q over in Hanoi where I chatted to the commander of the operation himself." Bastien-Thiry paused for a moment almost expecting the Legionnaires to be impressed. "Well, after a word with the powers that be he assigned me as your Commanding Officer." Steele shook his head. "No offence Mon Lieutenant but we were doing well until you came along." Bastien-Thiry chose to ignore Steele's remark. "I graduated second in my class at the military academy. How do you think I feel being stuck in a desk job in Hanoi for the last seven months? I came here to lead our forces to victory. You have no officer in your ranks until tomorrow when 1 B.E.P is dropped. You will obey my every command until one of your officers takes over. Is that clear?" An uneasy silence filled the cramped and damp bunker. "As you wish Mon Lieutenant, Steele shouldered past him. May I suggest we recover our equipment and re-join the company down at the airstrip? I don't fancy our chances out here after dark." Unfolding a plastic covered map on the rickety table made out of ammunition boxes Bastien-Thiry haughtily motioned the Legionnaires to form a circle around him.

"I do not know how informed you men are about the operation and the situation at the moment but I will enlighten you. We are here." He struck the map with a sharpened bamboo stick. "We have now gentlemen, successfully taken the Viet Minh village of Dien Bien Phu. We have landed just over one thousand eight hundred paratroopers on a heavily defended enemy position two hundred and twenty miles behind enemy lines." He pointed suddenly at Voyeur. "And do you know why we are here Legionnaire?" Raising his eyes to the heavens, Voyeur replied. "We are here to kill communists Mon Lieutenant." Laughter erupted from the group. "In a way you are correct Legionnaire but more importantly we have positioned ourselves in such a way that the Viet Minh will be forced to fight. They will be obliged to face the might of the French Army in a set piece battle. With our superior artillery, air power and tactics we will annihilate the enemy." He waited for a response until he realised the unimpressed men around the table were not about to show the enthusiasm he had hoped they would. "Colonel De Castries has planned for us to set up seven strong points on the surrounding hills." Kiwi pointed to the heavily wooded mountains overlooking the entire valley." And what happens to us if the Viet's decide to pound us with artillery from the higher

ground over there Mon Lieutenant?" Bastien-Thiry shook his head. "Our artillery and air force will take care of them Legionnaire. The names of the seven strong points are as follows." Once again he paused for effect. Turning the map over Bastien-Thiry pointed to a more detailed area map. "They are as follows Anne-Marie, Beatrice, Claudine, Dominique, Eliane, Gabrielle, Huguette and Isabelle." Adolf held up his hand as if he were at school. "Please sir, is it true that the names were those of De Castries mistresses?" The Legionnaires laughed at the remark. Bastien-Thiry shook the bamboo stick in their general direction. "This is no laughing matter. They follow the alphabet that is all. And it is Colonel De Castries to you Legionnaire." Adolf sprang smartly to attention clicking his heels. "Your wish is my command Mon Lieutenant." A hint of sarcasm in his voice went unnoticed by the officer. "We were briefed last night Mon Lieutenant. May I say we know as much and possibly more about the operation than you do?" Nodding in the direction of the equipment parachute Steele moved toward the bunker door. "With your permission I will take two men and recover our things Mon Lieutenant." Steele hated these pompous young aristocratic officers. Good connections and family ties still ensured a commission. "Vive la revolution," he thought to himself as he headed down the trench system followed by Adolf and Polanski.

Moving cautiously through the ever thickening vegetation Steele and his men approached the orange parachute hanging from high branches above them. "There is not much else for it boys but to climb and cut it loose." He looked at Adolf and Polanski. "Okay, I'll go Sergeant." Polanski dropped his webbing at the bottom of the tree. Tucking a pistol into his breast pocket, he began the perilous ascent. "Keep your eyes wide open Adolf. I don't have to tell you the Viet's are not finished for today." Steele looked through and not at the bushes and scrub to his front in the hope of spotting a Viet sneaking up on them. Adolf did the same listening to every sound emanating from the bushes around their position. Moments later the metal equipment cylinder crashed only feet away from Steele. "Bloody hell Polanski, are you trying to kill me or what?" The heavy cylinder was followed by Polanski landing amid a tangle of branches and parachute cord even closer to Steele. "Was it something I said Polanski?" Pointing to the bunker Polanski whispered. "At least a platoon of Viet's heading for the bunker Sergeant. I saw them from the top of the tree. We are cut off from the rest of our forces at the airstrip, and that idiot of a Lieutenant has popped a red smoke grenade on the roof of the bunker. I had a bad feeling about that one Sergeant." Steele helped Adolf and Polanski shoulder the metal cylinder. "I know its heavy boys but if we take turns, we might make it back to the bunker before the Viet's. Let's move!"

## **Chapter 4**

Lieutenant Bastien-Thiry watched Steele and his two men leaving the trench system. Once they had slipped under the barbed wire, and into the jungle he lost sight of them. Returning to the bunker, he noticed how Voyeur and Kiwi had

reinforced the bunker with sand bags and thick wooden beams. "Time for a mug of coffee Voyeur, what do you think?" Kiwi ground the heel of his combat boot into the sand. Kneeling down he broke Bastien-Thiry's bamboo pointer in half. The two pieces were placed over the indentation in the ground. On top of the sticks Kiwi balanced a metal canteen cup which their water bottles fitted into.

Discreetly sniffing at the contents of four water bottles he eventually found one containing water and not cognac. Pouring water almost to the brim, he turned to Voyeur. "Hey mate, throw us the plastic explosives will you." Voyeur dug into his kit then tossed a block of explosives over to Kiwi. "What are you doing soldier?" Bastien-Thiry began to feel a little uneasy. "Making coffee like we always do, Mon Lieutenant." He cut off a small piece of explosives about the size of his thumb with his bayonet.

Kiwi placed the explosives under the metal canteen cup and lit a match. Within seconds the explosives burned with such intensity that the canteen cup of water boiled and bubbled. "And that's how we heat water Mon Lieutenant. But I suppose you had espresso machines at your office in Hanoi." Kiwi added coffee and sugar. "There you go mate, take a swig." Bastien-Thiry declined with a shake of his head. "Suit yourself, here you go Voyeur." Handing the canteen cup over to Voyeur, Kiwi unzipped the top pouch of his kit bag and pulled out a roll of toilet paper. "I'm going to drop the kids off at the pool mate." Voyeur saw the look of confusion on Bastien-Thiry's face. "He is going for a crap Mon Lieutenant." Voyeur wondered how a man is walking out of the bunker with a roll of toilet paper jammed over the barrel of his rifle and entrenching tool in hand could not have been more obvious.

"Maybe I will have a sip of coffee then Voyeur." He patted Voyeur on the shoulder in what he hoped was a friendly fashion. "I know you scallywags all have nick names or a *nomme de guerre*. I am curious as to how you got yours. Voyeur is surely not your real name is it?" He smiled conspiringly and winked. "Did you get it from the houses of ill repute in Hanoi? I know you men think only of food and women when you descend on the towns while on rest periods." He handed the canteen back to Voyeur, who inhaled deeply on his cigarette. "Yes Mon Lieutenant, it was something like that. I had a miserable experience while on patrol one day. Let's leave it at that." He stood up and scanned the area through a slit in the bunker wall.

"I feel a hundred pounds lighter after that." Kiwi handed the entrenching tool and toilet paper to Voyeur. "Off you go mate. I'll keep him company while you are gone." He looked over to where Bastien-Thiry was examining a captured Russian pistol. "No, I am okay for the moment. Can you see Steele and the others?" Bastien-Thiry was about to object to the informal way the Legionnaires addressed a non-commissioned officer when he noticed movement along the treeline. Deciding it was a water buffalo he turned to Kiwi and smiled. "Voyeur was about to tell me how he became known as the Voyeur. Sit down I am sure it is an amusing little anecdote." Kiwi looked at Voyeur. "Yes, it is a very amusing story, Mon Lieutenant. Why don't you ask him then? I'm sure you will split your sides laughing." He offered Voyeur another cigarette then lit one himself. "Tell him Voyeur. He should at least know what type of war he has got himself into."

"Well, if you insist, Mon Lieutenant." Voyeur sat on the sandy floor with his back against the sandbagged wall. He took out a canteen and sipped the contents.

He smiled faintly when the strong cognac burned down his throat. Running a hand through his sandy brown hair, he looked Bastien-Thiry straight in the eyes.

“A convoy is traveling along the R.P41 had been ambushed by the Viet’s. We received orders to patrol in small groups. Our orders were to find out where the Viet’s were heading or if they were from local villages. There were five of us who set off from one of those ridiculously small concrete forts. The ones with a guard tower that some idiot decided to set up all along the roads leading out of the bigger towns.” Bastien-Thiry stiffened. “I happen to know the officer who thought of the idea. It was an excellent plan. Taking another swig Voyeur handed the canteen to Kiwi. “Only problem was we were ordered to walk from one fort to another. The Viet’s were given the perfect opportunity to test out every damned booby trap along the way.” He shook his head. “So we started the patrol. Halfway to the next fort we were ambushed along the banks of the river. We were heavily outnumbered.” He lit another cigarette.

“We fought as best we were able. I know we killed or wounded a lot of the bastards. Trapped between the river and the Viet’s there was no way out. Once our ammunition ran low the corporal shouted to me to cease firing, and remain hidden. One by one my friends died. Soon the Viet’s were so close I thought they would see me hidden in the undergrowth. The corporal was keeping with the Legion tradition, whenever possible keeping one man alive to tell the others on his return how his comrades died bravely.”

“I had been chosen to bring the word back to our battalion how these few men defied a large enemy force and fought to the bitter end. The corporal and one single Legionnaire were still alive. Down to three or four rounds each there was no question of surrender. Legionnaires had been taught to fall on their bayonet so that it went straight through the heart. We had witnessed the slow and painful death the Viet’s had inflicted on prisoners. We had all seen the bodies of Legionnaires who had been tortured for days.”

Bastien-Thiry turned a whiter shade of pale. He fidgeted with the Russian pistol sensing he had no idea what went on in the jungles and rice paddies of Indochina. “I watched the two men disassemble the machine gun and rifles. They threw the working parts into the river. They shook hands and then the corporal pointed toward the Viet’s. When the Legionnaire looked in that direction, the corporal drew a Colt 45 and put a bullet in the back of the Legionnaires's head. For a second the corporal looked at me, tears streamed down his face. The Viet’s screamed and rushed forward. He shot two of them before putting the barrel of the 45 in his mouth blowing the top of his skull off.”

“I am so sorry Voyeur. I never knew.” Bastien-Thiry was visibly shaken. “Here Mon Lieutenant take a few sips of this.” He took the cognac filled canteen from Kiwi and drank more than he knew he should in a combat zone.

“Well, I lay there for a while watching those bastards dismembering the bodies of my friends. Eventually, they threw all the body parts into the river and melted back into the jungle. It was dark when I crawled out. For a while, I stumbled around in the jungle until I came across a small road. Following the road it led me to a deserted farmhouse. I made my way into the barn and hid beneath a pile of rancid hay. Sometime during the night I awoke to the sounds of voices. A group of Viet’s decided to spend the night at the farmhouse. Whether it was the same lot

who ambushed us, I do not know. They all kept to the main house except a young couple who decided to have a romp in the hay, literally. What was I supposed to do?" Voyeur shrugged his shoulders, a flicker of a smile on his face.

"Well, they went at it for about an hour. Killing them did cross my mind but I decided against it. Eventually, they finished, and I saw the Viet's leave before sunrise. By the following evening, I was still following the road. I walked in the treeline keeping the road in sight. At last, I saw an outpost but by the time I reached it darkness had fallen. I shouted to the sentries, but they were on edge. They screamed the password twice. I did not know the password obviously, so they opened fire on me. This went on for a few minutes until I became so enraged, or I had a breakdown. I am not sure which, but I cursed and threatened them so loudly that they held their fire. I walked close enough for them to see I was not a Viet. They gave me food and wine before sending me back to my unit the following day.

Kiwi held up the cognac filled canteen in a salute to Voyeur. "Needless to say when we heard his story back at the battalion some smart ass called him a voyeur as a joke. Now he is stuck with the name." Both Legionnaires burst out laughing. "I thought it had something to do with your uncanny ability to kill people at long range. You are a deadly sniper Voyeur." Bastien-Thiry looked around the bunker. "What are you looking for Mon Lieutenant?" Shaking his head, Bastien-Thiry walked toward the bunker doorway. "Was looking for my kit bag but I must have left it on the roof when we arrived here." Voyeur looked at Kiwi, who shook his head sadly.

Climbing onto the earth covered bunker Bastien-Thiry lit a cigarette. He knew he would be an excellent leader of men. It was just so hard commanding a solid group of seasoned veterans who already had a strong leader. Sergeant Steele, he knew had more experience than most men in the battalion. It was not going to be an easy task, but it was not one he would shy away from. Gathering his resolve, he crushed the cigarette out under his boot heel. Clutching the shoulder straps of his kit bag he slung it casually over one shoulder.

He froze as heard the spine chilling sound of a grenade percussion cap going off. Red smoke billowed out from under his kit bag. Bastien-Thiry felt his legs shake uncontrollably. Half rolling he fell headfirst into the trench. "Well, that was a stroke of luck old chaps." Kiwi grabbed Bastien-Thiry roughly by the front of his combat jacket. "You bloody idiot. What the hell are you playing at?" He pushed the officer into the bunker. "You cover the bunker entrance! Kill any Viet that gets down the trench, Mon Lieutenant." He shoved an M1carbine into Bastien-Thiry's trembling hands pushing him onto the ground. "Keep your eyes on the tree line Voyeur. I will take the open ground behind us." For a moment, Bastien-Thiry was about to follow orders but then he thought about the promise he had made to himself. He would command, not be ordered around. Especially by a Legionnaire, who was clearly no officer and certainly no gentleman. "I am in command here Legionnaires and what is the big deal?" His outburst had no effect on the two men laying hand grenades within easy reach while scanning left and right. "It was a smoke grenade. That is all it jolly well was. You are both acting like frightened, raw recruits."

Dust clouded his vision. Then another sandbag thrown by Voyeur landed inches from his face. "You had better take cover behind the sandbags Mon Lieutenant. Don't like you lying out in the open." He was thrown the captured Russian pistol which hit him in the small of the back. "Better check it's loaded. It will be easier using a hand gun than a rifle when they come up close." Bastien-Thiry could not tolerate this insolence any longer. "There is no-one out there, and the Viet's have all run to the hills. Any more of this insubordinate behaviour and you will both be up on a charge."

Turning to face the two Legionnaires he was about to stand upright when Voyeur turned to face him and raised his M1. Three shots cracked past Bastien-Thiry's head. "Look out behind you Mon Lieutenant!" Voyeur threw a grenade down the trench as two black clad Viet Minh armed with Russian PPsh41' sub machine guns vaulted over the parapet. Exploding in a puff of grey smoke, the deadly shards of grenade shrapnel whizzed through the cordite filled air. The first Viet slid to the ground. In a semi-conscious state, he attempted to force his entrails back into his lacerated stomach. "Kill him, use you bloody pistol!" Stumbling on the following wounded Viet charged directly at Bastien-Thiry. Blood spurting from the stump of his left fore-arm. Clutching a bayonet in his right hand, he screamed incoherently. Fumbling for the Russian pistol Bastien-Thiry pulled the trigger. He remembered that he had not checked if the pistol was loaded. Frantically jerking the trigger he felt the pistol recoil. Frozen in shock, he fired again and again. He thought he was missing the Viet, who was still advancing and now only a foot or so away. Collapsing on top of Bastien-Thiry the dying Viet plunged the bayonet inches away from the officer's face deep into the sand. "Get him off me!" Bastien-Thiry did not recognise his own high pitched voice screaming in terror. Kiwi pulled the dead Viet off.

He shoved the body on top of the sand bags in front of Bastien-Thiry. "Extra protection if they hit us from that side again. Get that blood off your face and turn to your front." Bastien-Thiry lay behind the body of the man he had killed. Time seemed to slow down. As if in a dream he heard shots being fired. In a daze, he watched Kiwi and Voyeur, back to back firing their weapons at the attacking enemy. A heavy metallic cylinder rolled into the trench. He fired twice before covering his head. "If it were a bomb should it not have exploded by now?" His mind reeled under the strain. Three figures dived into the trench. Pain exploded down his arm as he lifted his pistol to fire. Looking up, he expected to see a rifle barrel pointing down at him. Instead, he saw the cold blue eyes of Steele burning with contempt.

"Get your shit together Lieutenant." Steele pushed his way past Bastien-Thiry followed by the other two dragging the metal cylinder. "Good to see you Sergeant, coffee?" Kiwi propped the tin mug on top of a pile of magazines he reloaded hurriedly. Positioning themselves in all round defence, the Legionnaires checked their arcs of fire and threw up what cover they could in front of their individual positions. "It's almost dark. I would suggest staying the night, as opposed to humping through the bush with this cylinder. If we are not spotted by the Viet Minh, we run the risk of being shot up by our own side as I am not sure of their exact positions." He lit a cigarette and turned to Lieutenant Bastien-Thiry. "Do you have any objections Mon Lieutenant?" All eyes were on Bastien-Thiry. The young

officer decided to go with what sounded the most sensible option. "I was just about to suggest the same plan of action, well done Sergeant. Stay alert men and as we are not far from tomorrow mornings drop zone we will set out at first light and mark the Drop Zone for 1 B.E.P."

"The Viet attack on the bunker seems to be a probe. If they intended over running us, they would have attempted a stronger assault. I wonder what they are up to." The Viet Minh were making no attempt to conceal their presence. Voices could be heard in the darkness between the bunker and the tree line. The occasional shot cracked overhead, but it seemed more as an annoyance than effective fire. A red flare arced its way into the night sky hissing upward until its tiny parachute deployed. Hanging like a Japanese lantern it bathed the earth below in a hazy red glow. "Sergeant, I see a radio!" Steele crouched next to Polanski. Through the narrow gap in the sand bagged aperture, Steele scanned the area where Polanski pointed. He could almost make out what looked like a radio on the back of a dead Viet Minh. The flare sputtered then died plunging them into darkness once more. "I am going to get the radio Sergeant!" Before Steele could protest Polanski wriggled through the aperture.

"Damn, Polanski get back here!" Bushes rustled around the position Polanski had pointed out. Waiting tensely Steele listened for any sign of movement. He heard nothing but the sounds of the mosquitoes circling like dive bombers waiting for the perfect moment to attack. Seconds passed seemingly like hours. The Legionnaires waited with baited breath. Straining to see in the pitch black night they all held their weapons at the ready. "I fear the worst has happened." Lieutenant Bastien-Thiry whispered. He now crouched beside Steele. "Give it another few minutes Mon Lieutenant and if we don't hear from him, I will go out and see what happened."

"Blood curdling screams tore through the night air sending shivers down their spines. They all recognised the voice begging for help. Again the sounds of suffering echoed across the valley. "We can't leave him in the clutches of those commie devils Sergeant. I will take a few men and rescue him. I need volunteers now men." Turning to Steele, the Legionnaires waited for a sign from their leader. Bastien-Thiry called again for volunteers. "What about you Adolf, are you up to it?" A smile creased Adolf's face. "I volunteered once before, a long time ago Mon Lieutenant. I swore I would never volunteer again." The Legionnaires chuckled. Bastien-Thiry wondered what the joke was then turned to Steele. "I will go alone if I have to Sergeant. It is the right thing to do." Steele glanced at the young Lieutenant. He was starting to act like an officer in the face of danger. Perhaps with a little experience he might just make the grade. "I think the men need you here with them Mon Lieutenant. I am going out alone. He is one of us, and we never leave a man behind Mon Lieutenant. If I am not back by sunrise, make sure you have the beacons and radio transmitters set up on the Drop Zone. By morning, the Viet Minh will have melted back into the hills and jungles. I am afraid we have not seen the last of them though" He pointed to Bastien-Thiry. "Listen to him while I am gone boys, or at least don't give him a hard time." They laughed as Steele slid over the trench parapet.

The darkness was complete. A pale moon shimmered overhead, but not even the suns powerful rays fully penetrated the thick jungle canopy. Inching forward on



his stomach Steele froze every few feet. He listened intently for any sign of the enemy. Polanski screamed again. A high pitched shriek, spine chilling in its pain racket intensity shattered the otherwise quiet night. Guided by the incessant screams, Steele worked his way closer to what looked like an abandoned trench system. He was close now, very close. Stealthily he slithered into the trench. A large rat scurried across his legs. In the pale moonlight, he noticed the silhouette of a dead Viet Minh sprawled on top of the trench parapet. Rats gorged themselves on the cadaver. Polanski screamed again, this time he heard Vietnamese voices close by. Working his way to what looked like a bunker Steele noticed a faint light shining through the tarpaulin stretched across the entrance. Waiting for a few minutes Steele detected no sign of sentries. He saw no one at all. Again the screams split the silence. They were coming from the bunker dead ahead. There was no way around it. Steele slid silently over to the entrance. Pulling back the tarpaulin a mere inch he peaked into the bunker. Steele reeled backwards in shock. Before he could react the Viet Minh attacked. Assailed from every side, Steele managed to shoot one Viet Minh before a dozen swarmed over him. Knocked to the ground by rifle butts and clubs Steele stumbled or was dragged into the bunker. His vision blurred. The walls of the bunker exploded in brilliant hues of red and white as he was struck again. His last conscious image was of Polanski seated at a makeshift table, drink in hand. At his side was an officer in Russian uniform. He patted Polanski on the back congratulating him on a job well done. "It was brilliant how you managed to set off the red smoke grenade at the bunker Comrade Polanski, signalling to us where the dreaded Steele could be located. Rendering the team's radio inoperative was brilliant thinking as well, my congratulations. Tell me again how you pushed the blame on an unexperienced officer, I love it. There may be a future in the K.G.B for you comrade." Unable to look Steele in the eye Polanski turned away when a Viet Minh delivered the final crushing blow. Steele slipped into unconsciousness while Polanski drained the last half of a bottle of Vodka in one long guilty gulp.

## Chapter 5

Feeling a little more confident Bastien-Thiry re arranged the men in a way to cover the gaps in the defence left by Steele and Polanski. Adolf lit a cigarette then offered one to Bastien-Thiry. Accepting Bastien-Thiry suddenly realised this was the first friendly gesture any of the Legionnaires had made toward him. "Pretty dark out there Mon Lieutenant." Bastien-Thiry inhaled deeply. He was anxiously awaiting the moment Steele and Polanski would as if by magic suddenly appear back at the bunker with the radio. "You mentioned that you had volunteered once before, never again was what you said. What was that all about Adolf?" He rubbed his hand over the belts of his M.G 42 checking that there was no dirt that could cause a stoppage. "It is true I volunteered once. It was back in 41. France was occupied by the Germans. Petain asked for volunteers to fight the Bolshevik menace in the east. My father and brother were on their way home from work

when they were caught up in a demonstration by a communist mob. This was a few months before the war started. Well, they were both so badly injured by the communists that they spent many weeks in hospital. We are from Calais and as you know many of the workers down at the docks are commies. When the call came to fight the commies, I jumped at the chance to get even with them.” Again the screams made them all rush to their weapons. Their thoughts were of Steele and Polanski.

“And as I was saying. I joined the S.S Charlemagne, the French Waffen S.S Regiment. We fought on the frozen hell of the eastern front. As the war turned against us, we found ourselves as one of the last cohesive fighting units defending the Fuhrer bunker in Berlin on those last desperate days. Knowing full well that we would be shown no mercy by the Russians, we fought like men possessed. After the cease fire, a few of us managed to make our way out of Berlin walking at night and hiding in the ruins by day. By a stroke of luck we came across a column of French prisoners of war heading west. We trailed them from a distance until they camped down for the night in a field. Picking through their back packs at night while they slept we managed to find ourselves each a shirt and trousers. We stripped off our German army clothes which we then exchanged for French army ones. At that time, displaced people mingled with advancing or retreating armies. We were just another group of French prisoners returning home after years in captivity.”

“We had heard of the incident in Bad Reichenhall where General Leclerc of the Second Armoured Division of the Free French had asked twelve captured Charlemagne soldiers why they wore German uniforms. One of them asked why he was wearing an American uniform. Leclerc found this insolent and had them executed. Going anywhere near the French army was out of the question. Eventually, we made it to the American sector. Packed into troop trains we arrived in Metz where as we disembarked from the train we were greeted with the sight of five young women surrounded by a mob. They shaved the girl’s hair and drew swastikas on their fore heads. They had been found guilty of having German lovers during the occupation.” Adolf suddenly burst out laughing. Bastien-Thiry was surprised. “One of the girls Mon Lieutenant remained defiant. I saw the expression of glee and vindictiveness on the mobs face. She turned to them and shouted that her heart was always French, but her ass was international. Lined up alongside the station we were ordered to strip to the waist. It had something to do about delousing. I heard the mob baying for blood while we went through the make shift corridor flanked by what looked like communist sympathisers. In the end, we were required to remove our shirts and hold our arms above our heads while they sprayed us with delousing powder. When it was my turn, I held my arms up and was immediately attacked from all sides. Under a hail of fists and boots, I went down. Our blood groups had been tattooed under our arm pits in the S.S, so that was the way in which the authorities identified Frenchmen, who had served in the S.S. I regained consciousness in a prison cell. A few of my friends were there with me. My face was a swollen, bloody mess. We were given an ultimatum. Serve for five years in the French Foreign Legion and kill communists in Indochina or spend twenty years in prison for killing communists in Russia. I served the first five then decided to stay on a little longer.”

Steele shook his head painfully. His arms and legs burned for some unknown reason. A single electric torch fitted with a green lens filter bathed the dilapidated hut in an eerie glow. "Strange that, is not it?" Sinister figures appeared forebodingly in the dismal light. "Observe our famous, immortal soldier. Steele, the Templar Knight, who chose an eternity of servitude over power and riches!" Slowly Steele's eyes became accustomed to the inadequate light. Rage combined with animosity surged through his body. It was a voice he recognised and one that permeated his nightmares. Picturing the face from which the voice emanated Steele fought to free himself from his restraints. Out of curiosity he lifted his blood soaked head toward the black cloaked figure before him. "It had to be you, didn't it Brother Jean?"

"You will call me Comrade Jean. Mercenary scum like you should be slaughtered out of hand. I am known as Jean le Rouge to my comrades." He spat directly into Steele's face. "As most of you know, Steele and I go back a way. Allow me to introduce the members of the Brotherhood Steele. Jean le Rouge drew a razor sharp knife from an ammunition pouch. In a blur, it flashed through the air pregnant with tension. Blood flowed dark red down Steele's bare chest. "May I present Captain Ivanovich of the Red Army? He is one of the many military advisors here in Indochina. Once again the knife flickered in the light of the electric torch. The cold blade left a deep gash down Steele's forearm.

"I present you with Colonel Long Quan, Political Commissar of the Viet Minh Liberation Army. Jean le Rouge thrust the blade between Steele's ribs. Face to face again Jean le Rouge relished the moment. His gaunt face was inches from Steele's. His dark brown, almost lifeless shark like black eyes bore no trace of mercy. Twisting the knife in the wound, he savoured the sight of Steele grimacing in pain. Slowly Jean le Rouge extracted the deadly blade. "Now brothers sit back and observe." He patted Steele on the head. "I hate to disappoint you Steele, but your brother in arms you so valiantly attempted to rescue is safe and sound." Clapping his hands twice, he turned to face Polanski, who hesitantly entered the hut. Not able to bring himself to look in Steele's direction Polanski simply stared at the uneven dirt floor.

"I can only imagine you struck a deal with this bastard Polanski. But as you will find out you made a deal with the devil." "Come now Steele do you think that I am truly that evil? I had a bamboo crucifix specially made for you, I can't be all bad?" Jean le Rouge laughed pointing to the cross on which Steele was tied, his boots resting in the dust arms tethered to the outstretched beams of the cross. He placed a friendly arm around Polanski's shoulder. "It was a simple business transaction Steele. Your friend Polanski was contacted by one of the K.G.B agents working for the Brotherhood. We made him an offer he could not refuse. I wanted to get my hands on you, and he obliged." He picked up a filthy rag from the floor. Roughly Jean le Rouge wiped the blood off of Steele's wounds. "Let us observe comrades. It has been only minutes since I inflicted grievous wounds on our friend. Do you see anything out of the ordinary?" Both men approached curiously inspecting the wounds. "It is not possible, but they seem to be healing!" Captain Ivanovich prodded Steele's ribs in disbelief.

"Unbelievable, it is simply unbelievable!" His face turned pale, even in the dim light. "It is true. All that which has been foretold is, in fact, true." Polanski

ventured a look. The thought of Steele as a mortal man with a grudge against him scared him to death. An immortal with a chip on his shoulder was unimaginable. Steele would hunt him down. There would be no escaping Steele's revenge. "If it is all the same to you gentlemen I would like to get going. I have done what you asked of me, now it is your turn to return the favour." Nervously Polanski's eyes darted from one man to the other in the group. "Thank you for reminding me comrade. I will have someone escort you straight away." Jean le Rouge called out to someone hidden in the shadows outside. "Let me introduce you to your guide for the hazardous journey through the mountains. "Would you please join us Tran Phuong?" Turning to the open doorway Polanski watched in disbelief as a bedraggled young girl wearing a blood encrusted shirt entered the hut. "I believe the two of you have met, very briefly though." Polanski shook his head uncomprehendingly. "Why yes you have Polanski. I believe it was you who callously threw the bodies of her friends on top of her dead lover." Icy shards of fear ripped at Polanski's heart. His mind replayed the moment he had helped throw bodies into the putrid ditch.

The two members of the Brotherhood sprang into action with a nod from Jean le Rouge. Slamming into Polanski, they bound him hand and foot. "What about our deal, what happened to my family?" He screamed in panic. "Don't think too harshly of him Steele." Jean le Rouge smiled slyly. "Polanski is from one of the Eastern European nations occupied by the Soviets. He fled to the capitalist West with the hope of his family joining him in one of the Bourgeois countries of Europe. Steady streams of letters were intercepted by the Brotherhood, so the plan was hatched." He paused for a moment. Tran Phuong held a sharpened sliver of bamboo against Polanski's groin. He screamed in pain as she hammered down on the bamboo sliver with a wooden mallet.

"Poor girl just can't wait." He smiled amused. "As I was saying we had his wife, and two daughters detained. We split them up. Mother to one Gulag, his four year old daughter to another and the six year old was sent to yet another different one." Through the pain Jean le Rouge's words cut deeper than the bamboo sliver. "They are all dead now or will soon be as not many people survive a Gulag in Siberia. What chance do two young kids have?" A second bamboo sliver sliced through his mouth skewering his tongue. "We have important business here my dear. Please be so kind as to play elsewhere."

"Tell them Steele how it all began. In the brotherhood, it is taught to each and every new member. The story of how I, a humble village priest became the ruler of the world." Jean le Rouge turned to face Steele. Seeing no immediate way out of the perilous situation, Steele decided to humour Jean le Rouge. He spoke softly, slowly drawing in Jean's two men eager to hear the story first hand from their sworn enemy.

## **England 1210 A.D.**

"It all began in the small English town of Saxonwuld. We grew up in the countryside in a village near the sea. Raised on the traditions of our Viking ancestors, I practiced the arts of war. Someday I knew I would fight for my family

and our village.” He paused for a moment testing the strength of the cords binding his wrists to the bamboo poles.

“We had a pretty uneventful childhood, until the priests of the Christian religion arrived in our village. We were raised in the Pagan tradition worshipping the gods of our ancestors. These were same gods who had guided our ancestors from the snowy shores of Denmark to the island of Britain. In those days, the world was so much smaller. We had no real idea of the geographical situation. If I thought of one day being in far off Indo-china, I would have never believed it.” Steele noticed the Viet Minh Colonel leant slightly forward. He listened intently while the Russian stood rigidly with his weapon raised.

“In truth I think it might have been all because of a girl. Her name was Gudrun. She was beautiful. Unlike the girls of her time, she clipped her dark hair shoulder length. She had the most amazing blue eyes. A slim figure and she always wore a smile. With me, Gudrun would laugh and live life to the full.” “No she did not Steele!” Jean le Rouge sprang forward. “She was only happy with me you bastard!” He pistol whipped Steele across the face. Blood trickled down Steele’s cheek. Steele saw the familiar glimmer of madness shining in Jean’s eyes. “Carry on mercenary.” Colonel Long Quan insisted drawn in by Steel’s story. “Gudrun practiced the craft. She had been taught the ways of the wise women from her mother.”

“She was a witch!” Jean screamed. He became more frantic, more unpredictable. “You were the one who led her into temptation Steele. For that, you will burn in hell forever!” Steele smiled. “Gudrun helped with childbirth, something your village women do Colonel. Is it not true?” Turning his attention to Colonel Long Quan Steele caught a hint of a nod. “We had grown up together. Jean le Rouge as he is now called was a weakling. He hid from the conflicts of childhood.” Jean paced up and down fidgeting with the pistol in this hand.

“It was a simple but good life. My father was the village Chieftain. I practiced with a bow and the sword, learnt to survive in the wilderness and trained the other boys in the village to be warriors. Jean, on the other hand, spent all his time with an overweight priest sent to our village learning to write and the religious ways of the Christian gods.” Steele paused. Polanski screamed once more.

“Damn that girl. Go and order her to move further away Long Quan. I enjoy a little distraction as much as any man, but I need to savour this moment.” Long Quan scurried through the open doorway. He curtly told Tran Phuong to move toward the hills before she continued torturing the Legionnaire. Initiated into the brotherhood at an early age the capture of Steele and his interrogation at the hands of the chosen one was something he could not miss. Hurrying back, he nodded to Jean.

“Let them hear the story from you Steele. We have time on our hands. I have a feeling the day’s events are a prelude to a much bigger, even world changing event here at Dien Bhin Phu.”

## Chapter 6

Steele thought back to the fateful day which set him on an eternal quest. He awoke as the morning sun crested the distant horizon. It seemed the perfect summers day was about to bathe the English countryside in its warm embrace. Birds sang in the verdant trees above where he lay cradling Gudrun in his arms. Looking up at him she smiled, her eyes smouldering with the afterglow of love. He held her close running his hands over her naked body.

“Last night was breath taking, my love. This will always be our special place. I wish we could stay here forever.” Gudrun whispered playfully nuzzling his ear with her sensual lips. Her blue eyes sparkled as she sprang suddenly to her feet. “If you catch me you can have me.” Steele propped himself up on his elbow. He would catch her soon enough, but for now he was more than happy to watch her slender body slipping into the waters of the crystal clear spring.

Their secret rendezvous over the summer had left her body tanned, and Gudrun radiated a joie de vivre which the other girls in the village envied. Surrounded on all sides by ancient oak trees intertwined by an impenetrable wall of brambles they had chosen their place of intimacy well. Steele sprang to his feet throwing the rough woollen blanket over a branch. Sidestepping the two empty wooden ale cask and the smouldering remains of the previous evenings fire he ran towards Gudrun. Playfully she splashed crystal clear water in his face before diving under. His hand tugged playfully at her ankle then travelled upwards across her thigh to her waist. Their bodies entwined, passionately kissing the two young lovers submerged beneath the cool waters of the spring.

Thundering hooves reverberated through the still morning air. Grasping Gudrun’s trembling hand, Steele splashed through the water reaching their clothes as the first rider crashed through the bramble hedge. Struggling to pull his trousers over his wet legs Steele searched for a weapon. His eyes fell on a short dagger still embedded in the remains of a leg of lamb skewered over the smouldering fire. Gudrun hurriedly threw her thin dress over her body attempting to regain a semblance of dignity.

“Stand fast heretic, by order of his eminence the Bishop of Saxonwuld.” Four riders circled the couple. Their horses are steaming with sweat in the morning air. Iron shod hooves crushed the campfire and wooden ale casks underfoot. All wore armoured mail and breast plates or thick leather jerkins. Razor sharp swords slashed the air perilously close to their throats. “Gudrun you are under arrest by Holy order. You will accompany us to the Monastery. His eminence finds you guilty of heresy. You will be placed in the chamber until such time as your punishment is decided. A chill ran down Steele’s spine. He had heard rumours of the dreaded chamber. A dark, dank rat infested prison where most died of disease, starvation or torture before they were able to plead their case. “Steele, you are extradited from the church and outlawed from the village. You are cast out and will forever be banished.”

“Touch her and you will die!” Steele snatched the dagger pushing Gudrun behind him. The horsemen laughed circling the couple. “Your good friend Jean has been keeping a watchful eye on you two.” It was the leader of the group who spoke. “Jean is a man of God who has kept a detailed written account of your activities.” He lunged at Steele narrowly missing his body by a hair's breadth. His

men laughed out loud. Another spurred his horse on, into the spring in an attempt to knock Steele down. Side stepping Steele realising it was a fight to death and that they had no hope of continuing their lives as it had been up until now attacked ferociously. He slashed at the horse, the rider's legs and anything that was within his reach. Blood flowed down the mail leggings the rider wore. Cursing he reigned in his horse retreating to the shallow waters. Two of the assailants circled the spring, launching their horses off of the high ground surrounding the spring. Steele turned just in time to face the horsemen. The leader rushed forward. He knocked Gudrun off of her feet. He reached down and roughly grabbed her by the arm. Swinging her across his horse, he galloped off at speed. "Finish him off, and make it quick!" He shouted to his three henchmen. Struggling through the thigh deep water Steele launched after the leader in a vain attempt at rescuing Gudrun. She screamed his name over and over. Steele felt a wave of terror as the horsemen charged. Swords sang through the air narrowly missing. Swords, the weight of the charging horses and their hooves all threatened to end his young life prematurely. Diving to the side Steele lunged at the first target presenting itself. He buried his blade deep into the thigh of a horseman. Blood gushed between the leather jerkin and the chain mail armour protecting his legs. The femoral artery sprayed out bright red blood. Perhaps the horseman had seen a wound like this inflicted on someone before. Maybe he had inflicted a fatal blow similar to his wound. He slipped from his horse, fighting against the pain coursing through his body he attempted to push his finger into the wound. Searching for the artery, he stemmed the flow of blood for a heartbeat. Stepping over the threshold of moral boundaries, Steele entered the world of the hunter and killer. Viciously kicking the wounded man in the face he planted his foot firmly on the thug's back. Blood stained the crystal clear waters of the spring.

Watching their friend's death throws in disbelief the two remaining riders violently pulled on their horse's reins. Side by side they backed away before preparing to charge shoulder to shoulder at Steele. Swords at the ready they waited while he searched frantically for a way out of the spring. He knew he would never be able to dodge the riders. At the same time, he felt a wave of panic sweep over him. With every second wasted in the spring, Gudrun was being carried off further away. Soon he would have no hope of catching up. Once the rider reached the town he would deliver Gudrun over to the Bishops men. Outnumbered and defenceless against the two horsemen preparing to charge, Steele raised his short dagger in defiance. Both riders sneered. "We are going to crush you, and then you will feel the cold steel of our blades cutting into your flesh." They laughed, sure of themselves. "You should know before you die that we will take exceedingly good care of your little girlfriend. Imagine her tied up to the wooden table in the prison." Their vulgar laughter startled a pair of swallows nesting in a tree. Steele burned with rage. He felt his fear dissolve, giving way to a feeling of intense anger. Adrenaline coursed through his body. He made a vow to himself that he would kill both of them. It was the only way to protect Gudrun. Facing the two riders, Steele attempted to devise a plan of defence. "I'm sweating like a stuck pig in this armour and a keg of ale would certainly go down well. Let's finish this and get back to town." Raising his sword, the rider spurred his horse forward. Closing fast, the riders jostled into position, side by side they rushed at Steele. He watched them

dash across the short stretch of sand before plunging into the water. Iron shod hooves crashed through the crystal waters menacingly closing in on him. A number of defensive options ran through his mind. All of them he dismissed as useless. Screaming in rage and frustration Steele waded toward the approaching horsemen. He was determined to take at least one of them with him.

Steele suddenly found himself jostled aside. His shoulder felt as if it had been dislocated. Forced under water, he struggled to regain his footing. A strong hand pulled at his arm lifting his head above water. Amid the confusion of flailing horses hooves and flashing swords Steele struggled to get free expecting to feel the cold, deadly blade of his assailants slicing through his throat. He heard a cry of "Beau-Seant" above the tumult. "Steady on lad. Stay behind me and stop thrashing about like a fish out of the water." Regaining his footing Steele looked up to see three horsemen between the thugs and himself. The first faced his assailants while the two others positioned their horses on either side of him. Steele stared at the warriors. Clad in chain mail armour with polished breastplates and helmets they looked like nothing he had ever laid eyes on before. Chips and dents in their armour testified to the battles they had fought. White cotton tunics bearing a red cross fluttered in the breeze.

"Gentlemen, you will lower your weapons." It was not a request it was a command. Facing a more formidable foe the thugs hesitated. "And what if we don't, what do you intend to do Templar? Do you know who we are?" There was one thing the leader of the three Templars hated and that was when someone asked that question. Their self-importance was way beyond reality. His sword flashed in the morning sunlight. It struck the thug across the jaw. Fortunately for him it was the flat of the blade. The second stroke sent the thugs weapon spinning through the air, and into the water. Thrusting his sword against the man's throat with just enough force to draw blood the Templar smiled. "Well, how about that for a start?" Suddenly spurring his horse forward the Templar smashed his sword hilt into the face of a bewildered man. The force of the attack knocked him off of his horse and into the water. Watching him sink below the surface, the Templars turned their attention to the remaining assailant. "Do you choose to join your friend at the bottom of the spring?" For the first time, Steele saw them smile. Their faces went through the motions of what passed for amusement but, their eyes were chillingly cold, emotionless. "You don't swim too well with full armour do you?" A hand thrashed above the surface for a heartbeat. "Drop your weapon and dismount now!" Trembling, the lone horseman threw his sword into the spring. He then hurriedly slid from his horse. His eyes darted between the Templars and his accomplice who with a last strenuous effort managed to lift his head above water long enough to take a gasping breath of air before sinking to the muddy depths once more. "We were ordered to kill him, orders from the bishop himself!" He stammered raising his hands above his head. A Templar to Steele's right darted forward knocking the man down with his horse. Luck was with him, the spring was shallow enough to enable him to struggle to his knees keeping his head barely above water. "I think we should finish the scum off, Steele or you will be in a heap of trouble when they get back to the bishop." For a second Steele nodded in agreement. Then he turned in surprise to face the Templar who had spoken. He did not recognise the Templar, but he obviously knew Steele from somewhere.



Seeing Steele's quizzical look the Templar smiled. "It's me John, the miller's son. Do you not remember? I left for the Holy Land only two years ago." Removing his helmet John leant down slightly from his horse in a mock bow. Suddenly memories of a childhood friend rushed through Steele's mind. The suntanned man before him bore little resemblance to the smiling, innocent boy of his youth. His face was now weathered with deep creases around the eyes, eyes that had seen death and destruction. He looked older than his years. How war changes a man's appearance. If it were possible to look deeper into a man's heart and soul, there the greatest transformation would be found.

"John, of course, I remember you." Steele lied. He almost smelled the desert sands permeating John's clothes. Strange looking swords hung from John's saddle bags. A golden plate glimmered in the sunlight, strapped to one of the weather-beaten bags. "These are the spoils of war my friend. If I was not a Templar having taken a vow of poverty, I would be a rich man." He smiled again. "What are these scumbags up to Steele?" Taking a step forward Steele pulled the drowning man from the spring heaving him up the bank alongside his accomplice. Steele kicked the first in the groin and then the second under the jaw. Blood and shattered teeth spewed from his mouth. Facing the Templars Steele recounted the morning's events. "Yes, I remember Gudrun. A pretty young thing, genuinely kind she was." John briefly explained how they had grown up in the village together. "That ponce who goes by the name of Jean seems like a coward and a trouble maker. That is typical of his sort to hide behind the cloak of religion." For the first time, the leader of the Templar group spoke. "My name is Gilbert de Lore. You are someone the Templars might be interested in." He pointed toward the West. "We have barracks up near the river. We could offer someone like you a better way of life than pushing a plough or working down in the mill. No offence John. He laughed punching John on the shoulder. "I suggest you remain calm and consider your options Steele. They have your girl. Chasing after her right now would prove fruitless. I would start making plans to free her from the prison." He was right Steele decided. Gudrun would be at the monastery by now. "Off you go, Steele. I have a feeling we will meet again soon enough. Make your plans well and see them through. We will take care of your friends." The Templar smiled a chilling smile which sent shivers down Steele's spine. Arming himself and mounting a horse belonging to one of the men cowering before the Templars, Steele galloped off toward the monastery. Above the sound of the horses hooves and the wind rushing by Steele, swore he heard screams emanating from the spring when he looked over his shoulder. A few minutes later he turned around again. He saw the three Templars riding slowly from the spring. There was no sign of the attackers. Unsure of their fate Steele forced himself to concentrate on the details of the monastery and the prison. If his attackers were dead, then he was sure to be accused of their deaths. He had nothing left to lose. Rescuing Gudrun was his first priority. After that they would have to leave the town and start anew elsewhere. Church bells echoed across the lush countryside as Steele approached the monastery. From a distance, he could see a group of monks constructing a rough wooden scaffold. It seemed as if they had been expecting him. He was determined not to let them down.

## Chapter 7

The imposing double storey, stone building stood amongst carefully tendered gardens. Crawling alongside the neatly trimmed hedge Steele cautiously approached the main building. Narrowly avoiding a group of novice monks returning to the monastery for their midday meal Steele took in his surroundings. To the left of the double storey building, there stood a modest church. Living quarters were on its right. Apart from the sparse cover afforded by the hedges and shrubs, concealment was going to prove Steele's biggest problem. Through a narrow archway in the centre of the double storey building, Steele took note of the interior courtyard. High walls ran in the form of a square with a dilapidated stone building serving as a prison at the far end.

Steele felt a bitter rage building up inside of him. "How the hell am I supposed to reach Gudrun when all of these people are walking around?" He waited impatiently behind the hedge while monks carried sturdy wooden beams and roughly cut planks of wood through the archway leading to the courtyard. The sounds of men hammering nails and cutting wood were audible from a distance. "Wonder what they are up to? There is no way I am going to leave Gudrun in that hell hole." Steele crawled through the hedgerow all the way to his right until he arrived close to the living quarters. His knees and elbows were bleeding from the thorns pushing up here and there along the hedgerow. "Give me a break someone!" He murmured through pursed lips. "How do I get to her? There must be a way. I can't move from cover to cover as there is no cover. I can't simply walk through into the courtyard either."

Horsemen entered or left the building at regular intervals. A group galloped through the archway and into the courtyard. It was clear to Steele that by the amount of noise they were making something was terribly wrong. Peeking through the hedgerow Steele felt his blood run cold. Steele recognised the bodies tethered to the backs of two horses. A group of armed men shouted excitedly pointing to the bodies of their dead friends. More men arrived on horseback. Crouching low Steele watched the horsemen form into smaller groups. Dashing out of the courtyard they sped past Steele's hiding place. He watched them scouring the area around the monastery they galloped off toward the spring.

"This is the only chance I have of getting Gudrun out." Steele crawled stealthily along the hedgerow until he spotted a monk hard at work. Scanning the immediate area for any signs of others Steel made his move. Moving silently behind the monk lethargically digging for weeds in the vegetable garden Steele kept low. He closed to within a few feet of the unsuspecting monk. Suddenly Steele rushed forward slamming his shoulder hard into the man's upper thighs. Simultaneously Steele grabbed the monk's ankles and pulled his legs upward. The monk crashed face first into the ground. Steele finished him off with a rabbit punch to the back of the head. "Forgive me brother." Steele whispered. He hurriedly pulled the monk's cassock over his head and bundled the unconscious man into the hedgerow.

Steele walked hesitantly toward the archway leading to the courtyard. Two armed men stood near the entrance looking over their shoulders at the bodies being dropped from the horses onto the muddy ground. They gave Steele a cursory glance then went back to leaning on their spears, chatting idly. Keeping away from the main building Steele made his way to the prison.

He pushed a small cart filled with hay beside the narrow shaft with rusty metal bars which served as ventilation for the cells situated slightly below ground level. Relief mixed with shock as he caught a fleeting glimpse of a slim figure wearing Gudrun's dress. "Gudrun its me, somehow I will get you out of here. Can you hear me Gudrun?" There was no reply. Tentatively Steele knelt down and grasped the metal bars. Surprised to see they bent slightly under pressure Steele wedged a length of sturdy wood between the bars and forced them open. The gap was wide enough for him to wriggle through. He went in head first tearing the monk's cassock in the process. "Gudrun, speak to me!" He laid his hand on the shoulder of the shadowy figure. In the darkness of the small cell, Steele pulled the woman toward him. A toothless old hag cackled in his face. Her breath reeked of fish. Throwing her arms around him, the old hag chortled again. It made Steele's flesh creep. It was the insane laughter of a demented soul. He pushed her away. "Where's Gudrun, the girl who came in here wearing a dress you have on?" For a moment, she seemed to focus on reality. Pointing a bony finger to the cell next door, she nodded. Rushing through the unbolted door, Steele flung open the adjacent cell. Gudrun retreated to the far corner of the minuscule cell. Her eyes were filled with fear. She looked like a frightened animal caught in a trap. Throwing her arms around Steele when she realised it was her lover Gudrun wept. Together they huddled on the filthy, urine soaked straw. Rats glared at them with their beady eyes from the corners and perches dug into the damp stone walls. He held Gudrun close. She wore tattered and torn sackcloth.

"I knew you would come for me, my love." She snuggled close to him. In the faint light, Steel noticed red welts running down her back. He touched her back gently. She winced in pain almost crying out. "What have they done to you Gudrun?" Steele swore to himself he would make whoever was responsible pay dearly. "We have to move Gudrun. Can you walk without it hurting too much?" Pulling herself upright with Steele's support Gudrun hobbled out of the cell and into a small passage.

Raucous laughter outside the narrow window where Steele had pried the bars reverberated down the passage. "Oh no, they have found us my love." Her eyes widened in terror. He led her down the passage where a heavy wooden door stood between them and freedom. Steele was wondering how he would get them through to the other side of it when the door burst open. In rushed three large men armed with wooden clubs. Steele had no chance in the narrow passageway. He managed to kick one of them between the legs, smash another's face against the rough wall. Suddenly his vision blurred. A stout wooden club struck his forehead. Blows rained down on Steele, when he slid to the floor they kicked him until he lost consciousness. Gudrun's terrified screams were cut short by a blow to her jaw. They were dragged by their feet up a short flight of roughly hewn stone steps and dropped at the foot of the now completed gallows.

One of the men threw the bucket of cold, fetid water into Steele's face. He then threw the bucket as well, for good measure. It hit Steele in the chest knocking the wind out of him. This set the crowd off. They were predominantly thugs hired by the Bishop with a scattering of monks and peasants. It was in their best interests to applaud or laugh when the Bishop did. It was he after all who paid their meagre wages.

Seated on a makeshift dais, he lounged on the dark oak chair which was highly polished and intricately carved. Steele lifted his head searching for Gudrun. Her arms were pinioned by a thug who forced her to kneel in the mud before the Bishop. "Gudrun, you will watch as your lover is hung by the neck until he is dead. You will then be thrown back into the cell until we extract a confession of heresy. After that you shall be burned at the stake, it's for your own good child. We have to save your immortal soul." Holding a perfumed white handkerchief to his nose, the Bishop attempted to block out the stench of unwashed bodies, farm animals and human excrement which surrounded him. He made a note to have the victim of the next hanging brought to his comfortable chambers far removed from the common people he oversaw. "I am a busy man, hurry now and finish this." He waved signalling the executioner to begin his dirty work. He never wore a hood. The executioner craved the notoriety he had earned. Everyone showed him the utmost respect, or fear. In any case both suited him. Drinks flowed freely whenever he walked into the tavern. People wanted to stay in his good books.

Steele struggled in vain. He was dragged onto the wooden gallows. His eyes fell on Gudrun, so young and beautiful. How had it ended like this? A shadowy figure stood beside the Bishop. Steele recoiled from the executioner's rank breath as he pulled Steele close by the back of his hair. His face was inches from Steele's. A glimmer of amusement flickered in his eyes when he flung the noose around Steele's neck and pulled it tight.

Gudrun began to sob uncontrollably. As if on cue the shadowy figure beside the Bishop theatrically threw back the hood of his black cassock. While the monks wore cassocks of brown sack cloth this particular clergyman was clad in black giving him a sinister appearance. Both Steele and Gudrun stared in shock.

Jean glowed with pride. His beady dark eyes radiated fanaticism and victory. Bowing dandily before the Bishop, Jean turned to the crowd. He extolled the virtues of the Bishop, admonished Steele and Gudrun for their lewd behaviour and warned other that they would meet a similar fate if they followed in the footsteps of the two unfortunates before them. By the time, he had finished his speech the crowd was highly charged and volatile. Jean had a way with words that more than made up for his lack of physical strength and moral character. Steele stared into Gudrun's eyes fighting back his emotions. She in turn held out her arms to him. "We will be reunited in the next world, my love." She shouted above the roar of the crowd.

"Do the honours please, Jean. It is time." Jean nodded and once again bowed to the Bishop then hurried up the gallows to stand next to Steele. He looked at Steele then at Gudrun. "I know what you are thinking Steele but I did not want her. This is simply a way to a higher purpose. An extraordinary destiny awaits me, something far greater than this. My true calling is beyond the comprehension of these common fools. You are my ticket out of here Steele. No hard feeling old

friend.” Jean checked the noose then lifted his hand in readiness. All eyes were on Jean, who in turn waited for the Bishop to signal him. The hangman held the sturdy rope in his grubby paws ready to pull it taught lifting Steele off of his feet. It would take some time for his victims to die a slow death. He would on occasion lower the victim until his feet touched the ground giving him a minute’s reprieve before hoisting the unfortunate up again. He could keep a crowd on the edge for quite a while like that. Today would be a perfect opportunity to show off his skills to the Bishop. He felt a sense of pride and self-importance wash over him. The crowd fell silent in anticipation. A cock crowed in the yard. Sheep bleated in an adjacent field and Gudrun’s heart breaking cries drifted across the courtyard.

## Chapter 8

Steele struggled to stand upright. His ribs ached and his face was bloody and swollen. He was determined however to die with dignity. “What’s he waiting for?” The executioner tugged impatiently at the rope. “One way or another I will get even with you, hangman.” Steele managed to head butt the executioner. A small trickle of blood ran down the man’s nose. Jean interceded by grabbing a fistful of Steele’s hair. “Do not make it harder for yourself Steele. Go quietly like a good lad.”

Tugging slowly, the hangman laughed as Steele struggled against the taught rope. He then lowered Steele waiting for the official signal. Casting a last glance over his surroundings Steele noticed with detached emotions how the faces of the people looking up at him were filled with hatred. He wondered how they could bear him such malice when the majority had never even met him before. The sky seemed a brilliant blue, childhood memories flashed through his mind. How his arms burned due to the lack of blood circulation, his bonds had been tied so tightly that he had lost feeling in his hands very shortly afterwards. One last time he looked at Gudrun. She seemed so helpless and so fragile kneeling in the mud. His heart went out to her. He felt pangs of guilt having failed in his quest to see her safe and as far away from this place of suffering as possible.

The sounds of horse’s hooves inexplicably shattered the tension. Turning to look to his left Steele felt a surge of hope shoot through his body. A dozen knights in armour wearing the tunic of the Knights Templars burst into the court yard. “Beau-Seant” they shouted galloping through the archway. Sunlight reflected from their highly polished helmets. Swords in hand they crashed toward the mob sending them scurrying out of the way. Four knights peeled off from the main formation, which had spread out into battle order after passing through the archway. Steele watched in disbelief and gratitude as two of the Templars sprang from their mounts to stand, swords drawn beside Gudrun. Two others jumped from their horses onto the gallows.

A sword flashed above Steele’s head. He felt a sudden tug on the rope as the razor sharp blade sliced through the rope’s fibres. The second Templar cut the cords binding Steele’s hands behind his back. Not used to being disobeyed the executioner advanced on the Templars. “Stand down, scumbag!” Taking no heed of

the warning the hangman raised his hand. He swung wildly at the Templar who nonchalantly raised his shield. Cursing loudly, he nursed his broken hand. Seizing the moment Steele kicked the hangman in the back of his leg. Twisting the rope around the hangman's neck Steele pulled hard jamming his knee in the man's back. Fighting for air, the hangman struggled to free himself from Steele's iron grip. Seconds later his body went limp. "That's enough Steel. I think he is merely unconscious. You cut the flow of blood off from his brain, but it was not enough to kill him. Wait until we discuss terms with the Bishop before you finish him off." John was standing at Steele's side. Jean rushed from the gallows to the Bishops side. He hurriedly pulled a number of the Bishops men between the knights and the Bishop.

"Here we go boys! There's enough for everyone." The Templars had positioned themselves with their backs to the wall. Dismounting the knight drew their swords, formed up into a line abreast and stood their ground. Outnumbering the Templars four to one the Bishops men advanced on the shield wall. They halted a few feet from the Templars. Unsure when facing a well-trained and disciplined force the Bishops men resorted to insulting the knights. "Stand by to advance!" one of the Templar knights shouted. A dozen Templars struck their shields with their swords in unison. The Bishops men closest to the shield wall took a step backward. Raising his sword the Templar was about to issue the command to attack when he was interrupted by the appearance of four more Templar Knights. At their front rode Gilbert d'Arcy, leader of the Knights Templars in the county.

Gilbert d'Arcy rode slowly but purposefully between the two sides. He was flanked by knights carrying the Templar standard which fluttered majestically on the breeze. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the Bishop, who looked on in disbelief. Reigning in his warhorse a few feet from the Bishops dais Gilbert d'Arcy looked down on the velvet and lace clad clergyman. He contemptuously scanned the armed thugs surrounding the Bishop. His eyes rested on Jean for a heartbeat. Jean pulled the hood of his cassock over his head attempting to hide in the crowd.

Pushing through the crowd Gudrun rushed into Steele's arms. Their passionate kiss and hugs drew applause and cat calls from the onlookers closest to them. Suddenly acutely aware of her near naked state Gudrun buried her face in Steele's chest. "Here you go my child, wrap this around you." Gudrun looked down into the face of an elderly nun. Steele smiled his thanks taking a length of white linen from the nun. "Let's get you covered then we will get as far away from this place as possible Gudrun." She snuggled up to Steele holding him tight. Both were extremely aware of the precarious situation they were in. Everything depended on the Templars, but Steele wondered why they would be taking such an interest in him. Perhaps it was Gudrun they sought to protect.

"My dear friend the Bishop, how are you this fine and sunny day?" Gilbert d'Arcy nodded nonchalantly. He remained astride his horse. He enjoyed looking down on the Bishop. It gave him a psychological advantage as well. "I was doing very well until your men forced their way into my holy sanctuary. What gives you the right to intrude on matters of the church?" He waved his lace bordered handkerchief in the direction of the gallows. "We have a murder and a witch and believe you me I intend to see justice done d'Arcy."

“A murderer and a witch you say?” d’Arcy turned to one of his men. “Sergeant, who do you see standing on the gallows?” Smiling wryly, the sergeant shouted “I see a Templar recruit sire!” Looking Gudrun up and down the sergeant continued. “And a pretty young girl who looks as if she needs our assistance sire!” Turning to face the Bishop, d’Arcy fixed him with a challenging stare. “She is a young girl whose father was a comrade in arms. Yes, her father fought side by side with me in the Holy Land. We take care of our own Bishop. She is now under Templar protection.” He smiled as the Bishop turned visibly red in the face. To add insult to injury, d’Arcy continued. “A young lad capable of defending himself and his girl against a number of armed men on horseback shows strength of character. We fight for those oppressed, we stand for justice and above all we never leave one of our own behind.”

“Perhaps we might discuss terms d’Arcy. The matter of the outstanding loan the church owes you.” If he was about to hand over the two prisoners, the Bishop was determined to get something out of it. He had borrowed a considerable amount of money from the Templars who ran the most effective banking system all across Europe and as far as the Middle East. Pilgrims not wishing to travel with large sums of cash were given paper promissory notes which were exchanged for cash on arrival at the Templar headquarters at their journeys end. Europe’s royal houses, merchants and religious organisations all eagerly took out loans with the Templars. Many found themselves deeply in debt, a situation which soured relationships between the Templars and the Kings of Europe.

“And I see the money was well spent Bishop. It was for the repairs on the church roof was it not?” d’Arcy smiled taking in the churches broken tiles and rotting rafters. Yes, money well spent indeed.” d’Arcy’s gaze went from the church roof to the Bishops expensive clothes and decorative chair. “You drive a hard bargain Bishop. I accept and would be happy to offer you another loan if needed. Let’s say this one is for a new brass bell. It should fit nicely in the tower.” Smiling benignly the Bishop nodded. “I accept d’Arcy. I would be happy to release the prisoners into your custody but let it be known that if either set foot on holy ground or in fact anywhere near here I will have their heads.” Rubbing his hands greedily the Bishop signed for a new loan. He later regretted not having read the small print. The interest on the loan was double the previous one.

“Thank you John. We owe you our lives.” Steele shook John’s hand warmly. “Not to worry Steele. To be honest, the lads were a bit bored. Not much action around here. We really miss the excitement and the adrenaline rush you get when in combat. We will be shipping out to the Holy Land in three months. You had better get well enough to do some serious training Steele.” It suddenly dawned on Steele he had just been recruited into the ranks of the Templars. “And what will become of Gudrun? I won’t leave her alone.”

“She will be well looked after in the convent down the road from our headquarters. The nuns will care for her until you return from your first tour of active service. You may then decide if you wish to remain in the order or if you choose to leave upon your return you are free to do so.” d’Arcy smiled. “To be honest Steele, any opportunity to annoy that ponce of a bishop suits me. I am sending four men to escort Sister Traute back to the convent, along with Gudrun.” He paused searching the crowd. His eyes fell on a furtive figure in black

attempting to blend into the crowd. "I have one last request Bishop. It is one that you will surely agree to, being a man of God." Wondering what devious plan d'Arcy was concocting the Bishop listened suspiciously. "As you have heard my men are leaving for the Holy Land in three months' time. They will need someone to attend to their spiritual needs, do you not agree?" Nodding cautiously the Bishop waited for d'Arcy to continue. "We have heard glowing reports about your most enthused novice monk." He pointed his sword directly at Jean, who lowered his head in an attempt to remain undetected. "You must surely be talking about Jean, there is no one more dedicated than he. That is an excellent choice d'Arcy. For once we agree on something." The Bishop could not believe his luck. For a while now he had been wondering how he could be rid of Jean. He had become far too clever for his own good. There had been rumours he had even questioned the Bishops decisions on finances. When questions were raised as to the frequency ladies of ill repute attended confession at the Bishops quarters, he decided Jean had overstepped the mark.

"I cannot tell you how strongly I agree d'Arcy. Jean will be ready to accompany your knights the day they leave on their holy quest." His face broke into a broad grin. "I bet you can't wait to get out there and make a few converts, hey Jean?" Face pale Jean managed a forced smile. This was not part of the plan he decided. For a fleeting moment, he thought about running off to the remote villages situated on the West coast. The tables had been turned on him for now, but Steele would answer for it, even if he were not directly responsible. He decided to accompany the Templars, even if their noble regime was not to his liking.

## Chapter 9

Walking into the main hall Steele felt a little nervous and at the same time impressed. Templar banners hung from the rafters, some battle stained. Enemy shields, equipment and exotic swords decorated the walls. Templar veterans hung around talking or watched Steele shifting his feet self-consciously, not quite sure what he should do.

"Here we go Steele, eat up then I will show you where you sleep. There are cleaning duties to be done tomorrow. And as a new recruit it is your duty to care for the horses, well the stables anyway." John showed Steele to a small stray filled bunk after they had eaten. "Tomorrow you will meet the Sergeant and a few of the men you will train with. They are all vets who have fought in the East. Listen to them or they will have your head." He laughed when he said it but Steele had seen the veterans in the hall. He decided that they were not to be taken lightly.

Day after gruelling day Steele awoke at the crack of dawn. He shovelled horseshit for the better part of the early morning then it was a short break for breakfast. A Templar drummed the Sacred Code of the Knights Templars into his head so many times he was able to recite it off by heart. All the while he thought of Gudrun in the convent close by. He wondered what she was doing, how they would once again be together. After weapons training he practiced horsemanship.



The evening meal was sparse leaving Steele feeling the pangs of hunger each evening.

And each evening he waited until dark before setting off down dusty road leading past the convent. "Gudrun my love it's me." Steele climbed the stone wall under the cover of darkness. Gudrun, as always waited for him at the same spot. She pretended to take solace beside the pond which shimmered in the moonlight. Her work as a healer in the convent drained even the strongest. The worst were the sick or injured children brought in by their grief stricken mothers.

"I give you my word my love. I will see this year through training and serving the Templars. Once my time is up we will leave here to begin a new life somewhere we can raise a family." She snuggled into his arms. "That is all I dream of. We are both learning new skills. We are cared for and spend each night together. Perhaps it is not as bad as we thought." Steele smiled at her holding his hands around his throat. "It could have been a lot worse had the Templars not shown up." She laughed at his impersonation of a man hanging at the end of a rope. "Now what was that about a family? We had better practice then don't you think?" He did not hesitate. Wrapping his arm around her slender waist he pulled her warm body onto him.

"Another thing festering inside me is Jean. I will see him in hell before the year is up." Gudrun smiled nodding her head. "I would see it done too. Make him suffer as we suffer being torn apart each day." Gathering up his clothes Steele hurriedly dressed. In the morrow he would be tested on what he had learnt thus far. Kissing passionately they said their farewells secure in the knowledge that the following evening they would once more be together.

Time passed slowly for the two lovers. One night Gudrun could not hide the worry in her eyes. "I am with child my love. We seem to be starting our little family sooner than we thought." She waited breathlessly for his reaction. She needn't have worried. He scooped her up in his arms smothering her with kisses. "I am going to be a father!" He shouted in delight. "Not too long to go now Gudrun. Soon we will be free of our obligations then we will be together again." He was by now an accomplished horseman skilled in all the weapons of war used by the Templars as well as their enemies. Steele secretly admitted to himself that deep down inside he had a thirst for battle. This was a profession he truly enjoyed "Pity that it is going to end soon though.

Steele walked briskly down the path toward the base. The news that he was going to be a father filled him with intense happiness. Rounding the last corner he stood riveted to the spot. Torchlights lit up the headquarters, orders were shouted. Running into the drill square Steele caught sight of John saddling up his horse. "Better get moving Steele. We are escorting a convoy down to the ships waiting at the harbour. Get your shit together man!" Grabbing his equipment and weapons Steele rushed to saddle his horse. His armour chafed against his skin, he had not taken the time to adjust the leather straps. "Normally we are simply an escort Steele but with a bit of luck we might find ourselves included in the ranks setting sail for France. Who knows it might even be the Holy Land for us. Wouldn't that be a great thing, hey Steele?" He simply smiled not sharing John's excitement. "What would Gudrun think of me if that were to happen?" Steele rode on in silence wrapping his cloak tightly against the chill wind. His thoughts were dark as the

nights. He had been so sure his service was nearly finished and now this. In the morning he would be on the return journey having escorted the convoy safely to the harbour and this would all be a huge joke to share with Gudrun that evening.

## Chapter 10

Men and beasts shivered in the crisp predawn air. On the eastern horizon, a faint glow promised a welcoming sunrise which would warm the Templar Knights. Their convoy consisting of squires, sergeants and a small group of pilgrims snaked its way down the cobbled stone street. Steele took in deep breaths of fresh sea air. His heartache mixed with feelings of excitement and a little apprehension at the thought of the forthcoming sea voyage. The noise of wooden carts and horses hooves shattered the silence. Rickety wooden dwellings stood alongside sturdy stone port facilities. A scattering of seedy ale houses lined the narrow road leading to the wharf. Drunken sailors haggled with women of the night. Men lay where they had fallen, the contents of their spilt beer mugs lapped up by stray dogs.

Seagulls screeched above the dark, icy waters. Tied to a long wooden pier stood four transport ships. Steele stared in awe at their tall masts, their huge imposing structure. "Your first look at ships this size?" John smiled at Steele's naivety. "Growing up where we did, I did not get much chance to travel. This is the first time in a big city." Stifling a laugh, John shook his head. "This is not a city Steele. Wait until we have passed through Paris or Rome. Constantinople is larger than any I have ever laid eyes on. As for Jerusalem, well just wait and see. Let's get to our ship and then move on to more pleasurable pursuits." He eyed a pretty young blonde smiling coyly.

"Hurry up and wait, as usual." John shrugged dismounting from his horse. Steele slid from the saddle. His butt ached and the armour made him feel even colder than those not wearing any. They waited patiently until a scribe called out to the detachment commander. "The transports are ready for boarding Sire. Lead the horses into the hold and your men on the decks, please." Nodding curtly the commander issued his commands to the Knights, who in turn issued brisk orders to the Sergeants. Sergeants growled at the squires who then led the horses aboard. Steele saw to it that his horse was safely tethered to a post amid the straw and supplies loaded in the hold. "I should find a name for you boy, give me a day or two and I will think of a fitting name for a mighty warhorse." Patting the horse's head it responded by thrashing wildly. "I don't much like the thought of taking to sea either horse, but we will be landing in France soon so try and get some rest." Turning to look for John, Steele climbed the wooden ladder leading onto the deck. "Hurry up Steele or you will miss out on the fun!" John was already off the ship and heading for the nearest tavern. "We will not be underway for a while yet." Steele picked his way through the throng of men loading supplies, soldiers milling about on the pier. Pilgrims transferred money in return for promissory notes from the Templar clerks. Their funds would be exchanged for a small amount of interest on arrival at their destination.

Sailors drank their ale in specific ale house while the Templars drank in others. Steele walked into a dark and narrow alleyway. A strange music could be heard above the clamour of the port. Drawn by the peculiar sound emanating from a seedy ale house Steele walked toward the music. Four sinister figures slipped from the shadows. Barring his way they stood menacingly, daring him to approach. Not wanting to show fear, even in the face of overwhelming odds Steele boldly stepped toward them. To his surprise the four hard men of the docks took a few steps backward then retreated into the shadows. "Bloody hell!" Thought Steele suddenly relieved. The sight of a Templar strikes fear into the toughest of opponents. "Hey, Steele watch where you go mate. Some of these places are a bit rough." Spinning round Steele laughed when he saw the Templar squad in the alleyway entrance. Confident in the knowledge he had back up Steele entered the ale house. "What strange music is this?" Seated on a rug in the middle of the floor a thin man with the darkest skin Steele had ever seen plucked at a long, string instrument. A Templar veteran laughed then ordered fourteen beers. "It's called a sitar you bloody rookie." He pushed two ales in front of each of the seven Templars seated at the grimy wooden table. "He comes from the lands far beyond Jerusalem. It is said to be hotter than an ironmonger's furnace." He raised his mug of ale. "Let us drink to brothers in arms and fallen comrades!" He stood up and drained his mug. "Hoorah!" Steele and the others stood and gulped down the first glass of ale. The sitar player stepped up the pace. He rocked his upper body to the rhythm of the sitar across his legs. Faster and faster he played. The ale flowed faster still. "We have to get them in while we have a chance, hey mate!" Feeling light-headed Steele managed to grin in agreement. He began to sweat in the warmth of the tavern. The room spun to the pulse of the music. "Prepare to board the ships men, to the ships!" The command echoed through the streets. Steele was aware of someone pulling him upright. Stumbling out into the frigid morning air Steele began to feel his head clear a little. Stumbling up the gangway, the warriors formed into their respective squads on deck. After a rapid headcount and equipment check the commander signalled to the Captain they were ready and all accounted for.

"What seems the holdup Captain?" Drumming his fingers impatiently on the guardrail the d'Arcy addressed the Captain. "My apologies Sire but we have orders to wait until an important passenger joins us. I wonder who this arrogant bastard is." His question was answered by the sight of a richly decorated wagon drawing up next to the ship. The Templars raised their throbbing heads to glance at the thick dark curtains opening. A monk hurriedly placed a footstool on the muddy ground as a figure clad in a dark cloak stepped down. Treading gingerly through the mud and horse dung the shadowy figure slowly climbed the gangplank. Convinced all eyes were on him the figure swept back the black cloak. For a heartbeat, he felt frustrated his dramatic entrance had fallen flat. Then he locked eyes with Steele. "You are a sneaky little bastard Jean." His hand shot instinctively to the hilt of his sword. "I see your friend has joined us." With a wry smile John nodded toward Jean who with a flourish waved a sealed parchment under the Captain's nose. Tearing off the wax seal, the Captain and d'Arcy read through its contents. Both looked contemptuously at Jean, who revelled in the attention. "Sergeant read this out aloud if you will." Marching smartly up to the aft deck, the sergeant stood confidently before all on board. When he had finished reading the

parchment, a hush fell over the ships company. "So it appears that your nemesis Jean enjoys the protection of the highest authority of the church, the Pope himself, not to mention the bishops and clergymen here." John grimaced. "Here he comes now. Try and keep your cool, I'd like to throw the slimy bastard overboard myself."

Jean sauntered across the deck oblivious to the Templars hostile stares. Drawing level with Steele he nonchalantly thrust a smaller sheet of parchment under his nose. "What the hell is this you prick?" Steele tore the red wax seal from the length of ribbon wrapped around the letter. "Do you know the written word Steele? If you do not, I can always read it out for you." He smirked. "I was not I who lived in a stable." Steele was referring to Jeans lowly upbringing before he joined the church as a novice monk. Orphaned at a young age Jean survived on the goodwill of villagers and monks. "The situation has changed a hundred fold since then my dear friend. You know too much Steele. I don't like that." He waved a finger menacingly. "What's it say Steele?" John shouldered Jean aside. "Well, if it's not John, the miller's son. I had hoped your sun-bleached bones were picked clean by the buzzards in the desert by now. No matter, you may meet with a horrible death this trip." John's fist flashed catching Jean a glancing blow to the jaw. "That was the first and the very last incident of the sort I will tolerate. What do the contents of the letter state Steele?" Jean dabbed at his mouth with a perfumed handkerchief. "Basically it holds me responsible for anything untoward happening to Jean. Does that bishop of yours know we are shipping out to a war zone Jean?" "Yes he does therefore it is in your interest to see that I survive this trip and return safely. I would say it's even more important to Gudrun." He smiled slyly then walked toward a group of sailors on the foredeck.

"The letter states that if anything should happen to Jean, Gudrun will no longer be safe in the convent. She will be taken by force from the convent and put to a slow death." Forcing himself to remain calm Steele crumpled the letter in his fist. "It is signed by the bishop and three cardinals. I terribly concerned about Gudrun's safety." He looked toward the gangplank. The Templars were shedding their armour in preparation for the sea voyage. "Swimming if the ship goes down in this lot is not much of an option. Best take everything off then boys." Steele and John helped each other. Steele then walked to the guardrail. All he had to do was run down the gangplank and disappear into the shadows. He and Gudrun would be far away by this time tomorrow. He toyed with the idea then decided against it. He had taken an oath. He would not abandon his brothers. On his return, he and Gudrun would start a new life with their honour intact and their heads held high.

Finding a place amongst his comrades Steele began to feel the effect of the ale. Rocking slowly back and forth the motions of the ship made Steele feel ill. He lay down on the rough wooden deck, pulling a blanket over his body. "I must have had way too much to drink," He thought to himself listening to a group of veterans conversing. "Feel all right mate?" John punched Steele lightly on the shoulder. "At least I can still understand you. I thought I was going mad. Those men are talking but suddenly I don't understand a word." John listened to the conversation, and then he laughed. "They are speaking the Lingua Franca Steele, the language of the Franks. There are men from many different lands in our ranks. We, therefore, speak a common language, which you had better master. It is not a real language

spoken in the Frankish lands, but more of a mixture of words taken from a variety of languages that probably only a Templar would understand." Two men close to Steele darted for the guardrails. They heaved their stomach contents overboard. "You should have told me how these ships pitched on the water John. I would not have drunk ale had I known." "Wait until we put to sea Steele if you feel bad now you will throw yourself overboard when we start pitching and rolling out there." He pointed to the cold, grey waters of the channel.

"Just look at that bastard Jean, what is he doing chatting with the sailors down in the hull?" They watched sailors gather around Jean. They seemed transfixed. He gesticulated wildly and spoke with such passion that they hung off his every word. "Don't give a damn what he says. I will see him in hell one day." Steele lay on the deck and watched the seagulls circling overhead. Dawn broke and the ships made ready to set sail for France. Templars lay down to rest while they had the opportunity. D'Arcy retired to Captain's cabin where he would be more comfortable while the sailors worked the riggings pondering on the ideas Jean had discussed with them.

"Clear the gangway cast off the ropes!" Bellowing his orders, the Captain turned confidently to the first mate. "Take her out and let me know when we have cleared the point." He was halfway to his cabin when he realised no one had moved. "Did you not hear what I said you lazy dogs? Cast off immediately!" Instead of the usual flurry of activity the crew slouched at their posts or wandered around aimlessly. "I will have you all flogged, get the lead out you bastards!" His threats were met with hostile stares. A barrel-chested sailor took a step forward. "We have tolerated your verbal abuse and physical violence long enough. While we work our fingers to the bone, you do nothing but drink rum in your cabin. We refuse to set sail." Crossing his arms, the sailor stood defiantly staring down the Captain. "Crimson faced with anger the Captain snatched up a boat hook. Advancing toward the sailor his way was barred by members of the crew. "Lift your hand to one of us and you lift it to all." A dozen sailors crowded round the Captain. Looking on the Templars waited for the command to restore order aboard the ship. "One problem using ships not crewed by Templar sailors is you have men press-ganged into service who do not wish to sail the seas." Steele heard a Templar speaking to a comrade. "I don't blame them either. We chose to leave our homes for a more adventurous life, but they were not given a choice."

"Perhaps we could come to an agreement Captain. If you double our salary for the journey and better rations, we set sail immediately." The barrel-chested sailor bellowed at the Captain. "Where do you think you are? I will have your heads. Get to work right now you scum!"

Steele caught sight of Jean leaning nonchalantly on the guardrails. His sly smile spoke volumes. He regaled in the chaos he left in his wake. Wondering what Jean would be like on the journey to the Holy Land Steele shook his head helplessly. "We have been enlightened. While you sit in your cabin for most of the voyage, we risk life and limb sailing your ship." Nods of agreement from the sailors surrounding the Captain who by now found himself pushed up against the guardrails. "You pocket most of the money leaving us a pittance. You live in a large house with gardens and servants while we struggle to put a roof over our family's heads in the slums alongside the port." A heated discussion ensued with the

Templars waiting for an order, hands on the hilts of their swords. Had the order to subdue the crew by force been issued Steele wondered how many of the Templars would have obeyed. Their order stood for the protection of the weak and the rights of those not able to fight for themselves. The Commander stood on the aft deck watching the proceedings. The sailors seemed to be capable of fighting but where would they find another crew at this time? The same thought must have crossed the Captains befuddled mind. "I'm sure we could come to an arrangement. Upon our return, we will discuss terms." He was cut short by an angry clamour. The sailors would be having none of that. "We know the Templars pay in coin Captain. How about that large purse hanging off your belt? I can hear the coins jingling." Shaking the Captain by the shoulders, two sailors pinned him to the mast. "We think two gold coins each crewmember would be fair. You do agree don't you?"

"Templars stand to!" Springing into action, the Templars formed up at various strategic areas of the ship. Split into smaller groups the sailors lost some of their enthusiasm for an argument when confronted by armed knights. "This has gone far enough. You men there unhand the Captain and stand down!" d'Arcy took charge of the situation. "Backing away the sailors muttered under their breaths. " We shall be leaving immediately as pre-arranged. May I suggest one coin each crewman and if we arrive early there will be an added bonus for all." It was more than fair. Knowing Jean had opened a can of worms that was not going to go away d'Arcy sent word to the nearest Templar castle. He requested Templar personnel be trained to operate the transport ships. He did not like the idea of a crew dictating to the Captain. "You have my word." Returning to their stations, the ship was soon underway. Waves swept frigid water over the prow of the ship. Hunkered down where they could the Templars wrapped up against the cold. Steele lay on his back staring up at the dark clouds pregnant with rain. Lightning streaked across the rain swept sky. Howling winds buffeted the sails threatening to rip them from the masts. Steadily the ship ploughed on through the rolling waters. Far in the distance lay lands Steele had only vaguely heard about. The world was opening up to him. Most of what Steele would see of it would consist of long marches, hard fought battles and death.

## **Chapter 11**

Leaving the dark clouds behind the ships sailed on a sea illuminated by the sun's rays. Far in the distance the tall watchtowers shimmered. "That is La Rochelle Steele. It is one of our biggest and most powerful bases." John pointed to the sprawling city hugging the coastline. Approaching the watchtowers guarding the harbour entrance Steele felt a sense of pride on seeing the Templar banners streaming from the flagpoles on top. Templars stood guard on the fortress walls watching the ships coming and going. "Bloody hell John, I have never seen so many boats all in one place. Where are they all from?" Steele felt like a child staring in wonder at the big, wide world for the first time. There were vessels of all shapes and sizes. Warships rolled in the gentle swell beside troop transports.

Seagulls screeched above or perched atop the masts of fat bellied cargo boats waiting to be unloaded. "They hail from many different ports, many different lands. All either belong to the Templars or are private vessels in the pay of the Templars." He pointed to vessels with crewmen the likes Steele had never laid eyes on. Some were dark skinned, others tall blond North men. He watched in amazement as almond eyed men split wooden planks with their hands for amusement, and money. "They are from the lands far to the East. Learn their way of fighting with bare hands if you can. It might come in handy one day." John advised.

The port reeked of drying fish, raw sewage in the water coupled with the cooking fires and smells of myriad sailors. Burley men unloaded bags of different types of produce here while others loaded weapons or wine there. It was a hub of activity never stopping even at night.

"It seems as if there is another hub of activity over there." He looked to where John pointed. Sailors gathered around Jean standing alongside the gangplank. He seemed to be setting the mood for a confrontation gesturing wildly with his arms. His almost black, coal like eyes glowed with an intense fanaticism. Roaring in approval the mob streamed across to a tavern following Jeans lead. "Why don't we simply put a sword through his damn throat?" A Templar spat. "He travels under the protection of the highest holy order. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do for the moment." The Captain shouted orders at his crew, but they eyed him with hostility. "We are leaving your crummy tub for a higher purpose and there is nothing you or any of these Templars can do." Stabbing the Captain in the chest with a bony finger, the barrel chested sailor stared down the ship's Captain. "Our leader, Jean has a letter from the Pope himself absolving us of any crimes, sins and wrong doings past, present and future if we join the Crusade." He turned smiling as the mob roared its approval. "There he stands at the gate to the city awaiting his followers. Are we to disappoint our leader boys?" Spoiling for a fight, the mob crowded around the Captain.

"Templars fall in!" Rushing into action the Templars on board formed a wall of steel, shields held firmly in one hand. Swords pointing menacingly in the other they advanced in a solid formation. "Time for a little exercise I think. Move forward at the double." d'Arcy stood on the upper deck watching the Templars shuffle forward. With nowhere to manoeuvre, the sailors were caught between the sword blades and the wooden railings of the ship. One by one at first then in groups they jumped over the railings. Crashing down on the hard stone jetty they screamed in pain. "Captain I think your little labour problem has been solved." Smiling d'Arcy patted the ship's Captain on the back. "Let those fools go to their deaths. But how do I sail my ship back without a crew?" For a moment, d'Arcy thought about press ganging sailors in the nearby tavern then decided it would not be sporting. The sailors belonged to another ship, one of their own so press ganging would not do here. "Sergeant, offer those men in the tavern double the rate to crew this ship back to England. Take this promissory note to the senior crewmember among them for double pay." Rushing off with a few men the Sergeant returned a short while later, crew in hand. "I am as good as my word Captain. Here are your crewmen. Some are a little drunk, but nothing a man like Sashimi can't handle." As a demonstration Sashimi bowed low before the Captain. He then ordered two sailors to hold a stout wooden plank between them. He screamed as he flew

through the air delivering a head high kick to the plank. It shattered leaving the sailors wide eyed. Bowing once more Sashimi turned to the crew. Rushing to their station, they awaited Sashimi's orders. "All good Captain we thank you and hope you have a pleasant voyage." Leading the Templar Company off of the ship d'Arcy marched them proudly into La Rochelle.

"Jean has set off all on his own has he?" Slamming a keg onto the rickety wooden table John poured Steele a metal tumbler of red wine. "That he has my friend and it bothers me greatly." He gulped down the wine fiddling with the tap for a refill. "If anything should befall Jean, anything at all then they hold me responsible." He drank deeply thinking of Gudrun. Racked by guilt, he wondered if she was waiting for him at this very moment. How would he ever let her know what had happened? "I say let them burn in hell brother. Drink up she will still be there for you. That is if you survive." John laughed then slipped into a melancholy mood thinking of his last tour. "Say farewell to innocence Steele. A hard man at home has no idea what happens out there, he literally shits his pants out there at first. Prepare to change forever." Steele found his friends behaviour a little strange. Only when he returned home did he understand just how different he was from everyone else.

## Chapter 12

"What do you think of the Frankish countryside John? I have never seen so many fields of lavender." The smell of fragrant herbs filled the air. "Yes, it is beautiful Steele but have you noticed anything other than the flowers?" Searching the horizon, Steele shook his head. "No, nothing except the dust stirred up by our horses and a few houses down in the valley." John smiled broadly. Staying awake was proving to be difficult, the rhythmic motion of Steele's horses rocked him to sleep in the afternoon heat. Out of the trees to their left charged a squadron of horses. Steel tipped lances glinted in the sunlight. Steel shod hooves thundered in the dusty air. White banners bearing the Templar cross in red fluttered in the wind. Heavily armoured knights shouting "Beau-Seant" at the top of their voices galloped full speed toward the column.

"Form up, prepare to charge!" With speed and practiced precision the veteran knights swung their horses to the left closing ranks while spurring their horses forward. Some of the more inexperienced members of the column struggled to control their horses. Steele turned sharply colliding with another novice. Together they chased after the veterans already formed into a solid wedge, horses shoulder to shoulder the formation thundered toward the attackers. Confused and scared by the sudden violence erupting out of nowhere Steele drew his sword unsure of what to expect. At the last possible moment, both sides pulled hard on the reins. Horses skidded to a standstill amid a shower of pebbles and dirt. Raised swords were waved jubilantly in the air. "Good of you to join us Steele. What took you so long?" Flipping his visor up John shook his head. Keep your eyes open boy!" Knights circled each other shouting greeting to old friends. "These brother knights



are from the lands far to the North. Way beyond the borders of the land of the Franks. They looked bigger than any of the men Steele had seen thus far. Almost to a man they all had blue eyes and blonde hair. "They are the decedents of the dreaded Vikings Steele. Now they fight alongside us, how times have changed."

Slowly but surely the column grew in size. Pilgrims seeking the Templar's protection waited in almost every town they passed through. Knights from beyond the Danube River joined them as did Templars from various outposts and castles along the way to Sophia. Then down toward Constantinople. Steele cut another notch in the wooden stick he kept in his saddlebag. "Seventy Nine days we have been travelling. All the way we practise daily the art of war." He scanned the horizon. "When do you think we will get to grips with the enemy John?" Rattling his sword in its scabbard Steele underlined his impatience. "A lot sooner than you think my friend. We have been ordered to detach from the main column. A village close to the pilgrim road was attacked last night. We leave immediately, follow me." Steele felt adrenaline rush through his body. Turning his horse's head Steele galloped after John. Riding to the head of the column they were joined by twenty knights. Steele noticed the majority were untested recruits. Five veterans led the horsemen along a dried up river bed. In the distance, a small cloud of dark smoke spiralled into the warm air.

"Steele, stay close to me and this time keep your eyes open. We are going to scout out the village first while the others follow at a distance. If we run into an ambush then gallop straight through it." John spurred his horse onward. Following a length behind, Steele scanned the scattered clumps of brush for any sign of movement. Moving cautiously up the riverbank, they came to a halt behind a clump of bushes. "The village is around the bend Steele." John waited for the wind to turn. "Follow closely now." Cautiously they advanced through the cloud of smoke drifting toward them. "Here we go Steele the village is ahead of us now." Thick acrid smoke stung their eyes. Steele began to cough. Suddenly they cantered through the smoke. Ahead of them lay the remains of a village of modest size. Smouldering timbers and broken down stone chimneys were all that remained. People's homes lay now in ruins. Shattered pottery lay strewn across the sun-bleached track serving as a road. Dark patches stained the sand here and there. "Might only be cattle piss John." It made Steele's stomach turn thinking of what it probably was.

"No sign of life Steele. We ride to the end of the village and wait for the others to catch up with us." For a moment, Steele felt disappointment. Buzzards circled overhead in the shimmering heat. "Watch out to our left John!" Digging his heels into the horse's flanks, Steele turned to face the danger. "What did you see?" John lifted his sword. "There was a sudden movement over there in the field. It looked like a hand waving. Let's go I saw him moving again!" Cantering across the field they surprised a pack of wild dogs tearing at the body of a young man. A large mongrel dug its fangs deep into the arm shaking viciously. Steele stared as the hand waved back and forth, the body moved as if alive as the dogs thrashed about ripping at the flesh. Spurring their horses forward they rode into the pack of wild dogs slashing left and right. Sharp steel sliced through the dogs. Howling they either fled or died under a hail of blows. A mangy beast made a vicious attack on Steele's horse. Darting to the rear, the dog attempted to sink its fangs into the

horse's hind leg. Kicking backward the steel-shod hooves struck the dog with such force it flew through the air yelping in pain. It landed in a cloud of dust writhing in agony, its back broken. "Damn them to hell, let's carry on to the end of the village and then return to bury the body." Cresting a small rise John stopped in shock. Not wishing to believe his eyes Steele turned his head hoping the horror before him was simply an illusion. He heard the clamour of the approaching knights catching up to them at the end of the village. They too stopped dead in their tracks.

Beginning at the bend of a small dirt track and stretching all the way to the river, there stood a row of crucifixes. A villager hung from each of the roughly constructed wooden crosses. Steele managed to suppress his desire to turn away from the torturous scene before him. Nudging his horse forward, he rode slowly past the first cross. He looked into the glazed eyes of the body of a young man. Arms were tethered by a piece of leather to the horizontal crossbeam. His lower legs were bound by a length of rope. Deep gashes on his torso displayed evidence of torture. Steele searched in vain for a sign of life. The Templar Knights passed solemnly before the line of victims. There were no survivors.

"The animals responsible for this atrocity must be brought to justice." D'Arcy murmured clenching his fist. Word had been sent to the commander soon after the knights had composed themselves enough after witnessing the massacre. "Cut them down, give them a decent burial. That is the least we can do for them." A small patrol scoured the nearby forest for signs of survivors. They hoped to find the perpetrators of the massacre at the same time.

"Help me with this one John." Slashing the ropes Steele gently lowered the body of a young girl to the ground. He cradled her in his arms looking down on her blood-streaked face. "The bastards cut the sign of the cross into her cheeks. Do you think the Saracens would do this and not expect us to retaliate in kind when we get to one of their villages?" He wiped the blood encrusted dirt from her face with a damp cloth. "Might be them but somehow I think it could just be one of our own." Pointing to a small shrine on the outskirts of the village John explained the significance of the Pagan symbols. "Those bowls of grain are an offering to their gods. They ask for a bountiful harvest," If crosses have been cut onto their flesh." He nodded over to where Knights dug a mass grave for the dead. "It was a message to others who might stumble upon the bodies. Only thing is we turned up first." Gently Steele lowered the girl's body into the freshly dug grave. From his pouch, he pulled out a small length of white linen. This he placed over her face. By the time, the first spadeful of earth was thrown over the bodies the white linen had turned dark red.

"Mount up and continue the march. We follow the Via Militari built by the Romans as we have been doing since we set out. Tonight we will enter a Templar castle near the coast. Perhaps we will find some answers there." D'Arcy led the column of knights and pilgrims through a mountainous pass. By nightfall, they camped outside the walls of the Templar castle at Heraclea overlooking the deep blue Aegean Sea. Images of the dead girl hanging from a wooden cross haunted Steele's sleep. He awoke with a start. Sweat drenched his sleeping roll. Visions of a mound of bodies clawing their way out of the mass grave stuck with him as he looked out at the campfires down on the beach. "Can't sleep either Steele?" A

young Thracian pushing guard duty sat down beside him. At first he had struggled to comprehend the Linga Franka but through practice and necessity Steele now understood most of what was said. Through gestures and a rudimentary grasp of the language, he communicated with others. "Yes I can't seem to forget the village." He took a long swig from a leather flask filled with red wine. "Friend of mine accompanied d'Arcy when he met the garrison commander this evening. Apparently it was the work of a demented monk. He has been travelling ahead of us emptying towns prisoners of the most hardened criminals. The town was happy to be rid of them and he has the authority of the Pope to recruit whomever he likes. He promises them women and loot if they follow his banner. Up until recently he simply collected an army of thugs and religious zealots along the way. Unfortunately, he has now taken to attacking villages if they do not convert or supply his men with food and women. They say he walks with Satan and that he is untouchable." A shiver ran down Steele's spine. Guilt gripped him in its icy clutches. "If only I had killed him at the start. A lot of innocent lives would have been spared." The Thracian look puzzled. "It's a long story my friend. Maybe one day if we live long enough I will tell you." He drained the flask of wine, waited for the effects of the alcohol to kick in then stumbled to his bedroll. He watched a sea of stars whirling before his eyes. He lay on his back looking toward the heavens. Cursing for having overdone it on the wine, he passed out.

## Chapter 13

The squadron boarded four round bellied cargo ships heading for the island of Cyprus. It was a welcomed relief to be at sea again. Steele regretted not having seen Constantinople. The powers that be decided to ship them out from Heraclea thus saving time. Trouble was brewing in the Holy Land. Templar outposts and castles were reporting a strong enemy presence. Reinforcements were being dispatched from Templar castles all over the Mediterranean and beyond. After an uneventful voyage, the ships docked in Limassol. They were granted a few days in which to recover and acclimatise to themselves to the warmer temperature. Templars from the impressive Kolossi castle joined those already on board the day they set sail for the Holy Land. Two ships were almost lost in a storm off the coast of Syria. Battered but not beaten the cargo ships entered the Templar stronghold of Tyre.

"This place makes La Rochelle look like a village!" Steele had never laid eyes upon the city so large. Dark skinned youths swarmed along the jetty holding up exotic fruits, meats and wares. After the sea voyage, the city seemed an explosion of noise, activity and above all strange fragrances emanating from the market stalls crammed with spices. "How are we supposed to survive in full armour under the blazing sun?" Sweat poured down Steele's face. This was a far cry from the English weather he had grown up with. "Drink as much water as you can, Steele. Pass me your water skin." Without waiting for, a reply John reached down and snatched the leather bladders strung from Steele's horse. "Water, I said Steele.

You are getting too reliant on wine.” He emptied the bladders of their contents. “Now go and fill them with water from the well.” Steele bristled at the remark his friend had made. “I was just like you in the beginning Steele. I know you hurt after the village massacre, but you will be hurting a lot more once you have gained a bit of combat experience. We need men who can put their feelings on hold. Afterwards when you return home you can drink yourself into a stupor every night. But out here you will be ready for immediate action. The lives of your friends depend on you Steele.” Sheepishly Steele jumped from his horse. “As you wish John, but when we are not on active duty stop acting like a nun.” A wry smile creased John’s sun burnt face. “Out here we are never off duty Steele. The enemy is everywhere. That man selling oranges, he may be reporting our whereabouts to the enemy. The child selling you trinkets, he will count the number of knights disembarking and inform the heathen. And do not go off on your own with a girl down some narrow side street. Her brothers are waiting to slit your throat.” Steele felt a thousand pairs of eyes watching him. “All right Mr Paranoid, point taken. Now can we get on with the war?” Pilgrims waited patiently by the side of the road leading to Jerusalem. “Bloody hell John these people have just debarked and they wish to journey to Jerusalem already. Why don’t they see a bit of the town before?” He watched a group of young girls dancing to the rhythmic beat of a drum. “They are not here for that Steele. All they want is to worship at the most Holy of Christian sites. We are leaving, watch how you go now.” Slowly the column set off. Knights led the way for the pilgrims while detachments scouted the flanks. Another group brought up the rear. Shortly after leaving Tyre they the column was harassed by groups of marauding robbers. Time and again they defended the caravan of the faithful from attacks. They began to feel the pressure.

“If we were let free to attack we would send them running in no time at all. But all we do is shepherd the pilgrims from the water hole to town to village along the road. Why can’t we attack?” A Knight with a distinct Germanic accent complained to no one in particular. It was not long before Steele got his first enemy kill. Pursuing a band of marauding tribesmen who had attacked the column several knights gave chase. Steele galloped over a rise in the terrain following the enemy on foot that retreated into a narrow pass surrounded by steep walls. Focusing on the enemy to his front Steele was surprised by a young man launching himself off of a ledge. He slammed into Steele with such force that he knocked Steele off of his horse. Locked in mortal combat, they flailed around on the sand trading punches. A razor sharp dagger bounced off of Steele’s chest armour. He responded with a head but to his opponents face. Blood gushed from the wound. Rolling in the dirt they gouged at each other’s eyes. Kneaded each other in the groin and attempted a head lock. Adrenaline fuelled they fought for survival. Tiring faster than his opponent due to the weight of his armour Steele found himself pinned to the ground. His opponent hovered inches from his face, fingers squeezing his throat. Fighting for his life Steele reached for the small dagger strapped to his leg. In a final desperate attempt, he plunged the dagger into his enemy’s ribs. He felt the dagger cut into the flesh bouncing along the ribcage. This seemed to give his opponent more urgency. Feeling the hands tighten Steele aimed for the man’s kidneys. Repeatedly stabbing in a frenzy Steele felt the man’s death grip loosen. Finally, he gained the upper hand. Flipping over he pinioned the youth to the

ground. Again and again he lunged. Blood spurted over Steele's arms, across the sand and into his face. He watched as the light slowly dimmed and finally left the man's eyes. His death tremors flickered then finally ceased. Rolling himself off of the body Steele knelt on his hands and knees. He vomited in the sand. Shaking, he pulled himself up onto his horse. "Move it Steele! Get into formation." Head reeling Steele spurred his horse to join the Templars preparing to charge. "Beau Seant!" they cried. Crashing headlong into the marauders on foot, the Templars rode them down. Circling they attacked again. Finally, it was over. Steele shook uncontrollably. This was not how it was supposed to be. They had practiced on straw dummies. Clean sword strokes and a lance through the red cloth representing the enemy's heart. He sat there on his horse covered in blood looking down at the lifeless body of a boy his own age. A boy that he had been forced to kill. They turned to re-join the column. Steele wondered if the boy's body would be buried. He wondered if his family would ever receive the news of his death. Perhaps he would be listed as missing in action. They would pray and hope in vain that one day he would walk into their home once more. "Good one Steele. I saw you go down but could not help. I had my own problems to deal with." Nodding Steele acknowledges John's remark. He felt detached from reality. Everything seemed to happen as if in a dream. He took a long drink from the water skin. How he wished it was wine.

By the time the convoy reached Jerusalem Steele had ten confirmed kills. He witnessed the deaths of numerous friends while managing to suppress his feelings of guilt or grief. Once again he stood awestruck before a huge city walls. It was a cosmopolitan city with many different cultures, religions and people. Their squadron escorted pilgrims, returning to Tyre and back to Jerusalem with a new caravan of the faithful three more times. Steele was quickly gaining a reputation as a formidable fighter. He adapted with surprising ease to his new life in the desert fighting marauding bands and the occasional Saracen patrol.

On the return journey, the squadron were to rendezvous with a pilgrim caravan heading back to Tyre where they would board ships bound for the cities of Europe. "Hey John, we have spoken to the local priest who says the caravan left already." Steele fidgeted in the saddle. His armoured breast plate intensified the heat. "Stupid bastards need to place their trust in us before they place it in someone higher up." Pointing to the heavens John then waved the squadron forward. Following the route the pilgrims had taken was not difficult. Beside the myriad footprints in the sand discarded water flasks, discarded excess baggage and the remnants of cooking fires guided the Templars to the caravan.

Striking through the column like a desert storm, highly nimble horsemen slashed at the pilgrims with their razor sharp scimitars. Surprised by the violence erupting all around, the pilgrims dropped to their knees in prayer. A handful attempted in vain to escape the Saracen patrol. Sinking ankle deep in the shifting desert sands they were no match for the swift horsemen.

Blood soaked the desert sand. Wails of despair went unheard in the vastness of the arid land. Or so it would seem. Battle cries resounded from a dozen Templars hurling themselves in a headlong charge at the circling horsemen.

Razor sharp swords lopped off arms and dug deep gouges out of flesh. Skulls cracked under the impact of spike tipped maces. Wooden, steel tipped lances

skewered the Saracen horsemen lifting them clean out of their saddles. Turning the Templars formed up into a solid wall of armour. "Circle around the left of the column. We will be able to shield the pilgrims from the Saracens John." Steele glanced to his left expecting John to be there as he always had. Since the outset, they had fought side by side. Steele's heart pounded. There was no sign of John in the Templar ranks. Scanning the chaotic scene before him, Steele caught a glimmer of sunlight reflecting off of a highly polished breastplate. In disbelief, Steele watched John writhing in pain. He lay pinned under his dead horse attempting to defend himself. John slashed at the horsemen circling like sharks sensing an easy kill. "Charge, drive them away from the column!" He headed directly to where John lay trapped. At the same moment on the opposite side a Saracen horseman turned his horse sharp right. He charged weaving between the heavier Templar warhorses. Riding down two pilgrims who were in his way the Saracen lifted his scimitar ready to deliver the death blow to one of the hated Templar infidels. Steele dug his heels hard into his mounts flanks pushing the already tired horse for every last bit of speed. Slamming into the side of the Saracens horse Steele held on knowing if that he fell off both he and John were dead men. The impact sent the Saracen careening off course. Finally falling to the ground the Saracen horseman tumbled headlong in a cloud of dust to the sun baked earth.

Hanging on as best he could, Steele regained control of his winded horse. Turning sharply, he galloped to where John lay bleeding. He came to a halt amid a shower of dust and pebbles. "Look at you, impersonating a tortoise on its back." John gave a weak smile. "You took your bloody time getting here." He held out his hand. Amidst the battle raging all around Steele tugged and pulled. Seeing their predicament Templars not locked in combat formed a protective circle around them. Finally, Steel managed to free John's leg from the horse's carcass. Mustering every ounce of strength Steele heaved John over his horses back. Blood flowed freely down John's leg.

"Here Steele, jump up onto this pony." A Templar tugged on the reins of a Saracen horse. Without a moment's hesitation Steele leapt into the saddle. "Form up on me!" He bellowed. Forming up once more, Steele noticed the Saracen horsemen regroup then disappear over the sand dunes. "That was a short engagement. They must have been giving new recruits their first taste of combat." He looked over to where John slumped on the horse grimacing in pain. A knight wrapped lengths of dirty cloth taken from the body around John's leg. "Gather up the pilgrims, we head back to base immediately." He led the way through the city gates desperate to have John's wounds treated.

Pushing his way through the crowded streets Steele barged into the sick bay. It was a long foreboding building situated in a monastery compound. Sick and wounded were treated by brothers belonging to a religious order. "Help, we need aid here!" John gritted his teeth fighting the urge to cry out. Steele pulled him from the horse. For a moment, John's vision blurred. He slipped into unconsciousness recovering his senses in the dimly lit interior of the sick bay. "Rest here while I find someone to attend to you John. I'll be back before you know it." He rushed into the long narrow room searching the shadows for a healer. Steele suddenly

became aware of the smell permeating the building. An overpowering stench of rotting flesh, unwashed bodies and diseased bodies hung heavy in the fetid air.

“Wait over there by the casualty ward. We have a few people ahead of you, he will be seen to as soon as we are able.” A low moan escaped John’s sun cracked lips. He bit into his lower lip to stop himself screaming in pain. Blood seeped from the makeshift bandage Steele had applied to the gash in John’s leg. The first strips of cloth placed on the wound had already been discarded due to the heavy blood loss. He dragged John through to a small damp waiting room. In the glimmer of a bees wax candle, a small mural on the wall caught Steele’s eye. He propped John against the rough mud baked wall then moved closer to the painting. “Bloody hell, this looks like that idiot Jean!” He chuckled rubbing his hand over the mural. “That is Jean our saviour, all hail Jean!” Steele backed away in shock. “All hail Jean!” the cry echoed around the casualty station. “What the hell are you all on about, he is a total waste. I know him personally and can tell you he is a scumbag and a coward.” Monks gathered around Steele pressing close chanting Jean’s name. “He is great and he will lead us to eternal salvation.” Steele looked around with dismay. Murals of Jean abounded, each and every wall displayed a portrait bearing Jean’s likeness. “If you say so, just have a look at my friend’s wounds, please.”

“We will but firstly there is a young girl suffering from fever. By the grace of Jean, we will heal her.” Producing a razor sharp knife, the surgeon in charge of the casualties said a prayer. “Hold her down, we begin.” Four bulky monks held the girl while the surgeon carved a cross onto the unfortunate’s forehead. Blood trickled down her head and into her eyes. She struggled as much against the fever as she did against the men carving symbols into her flesh. Her eyes widened in terror. Again the cold steel pierced flesh sending her into a state of shock. Her body shook violently. Restrained by the monks, she cried out while they chanted prayers. Her spasms increased in frequency all the while struggling to escape their clutches. She gave a last heart rendering scream before succumbing to death. Steele watched in disbelief. His hands shook with rage. Holding tightly on to the hilt of his sword Steele attempted to remain calm. After a few brief prayers, the monks lifted the body from the cold stone table. Two of them carried her body out of the room.

“Bring in the soldier, by the grace of Jean we will save him.” A knight with a wound similar to John’s appeared in the doorway supported by two monks. A bucket of stagnant water thrown over the table top washed the majority of the blood off. “He has an open fracture of the lower left leg.” Blood flowed freely onto the table while the monks attached leather straps to the knight’s wrists and ankles. Steele noticed the dirt and grime ingrained in the monk’s fingers. “How often do you wash your hands, in fact, when was the last time any of you had a bath?” Astounded the monks looked at Steele as if he were a mad man. “The Lords and Knights bath four times a year. We of lower stature bath twice a year which is more than sufficient.” Shaking their heads they turned to their grizzly task. This time the knife would not suffice. Hefting a heavy axe the surgeon lifted the deadly weapon above his head. Heads bowed in prayer the monks waited for the axe to descend severing the knight’s leg below the knee. “Hold him steady, stop the thrashing about!” Suddenly one of them thrust a wooden spoon into the knight’s

mouth. His eyes met Steele's, panic mixed with anger as he offered himself to the mercy of the monk healers. Down came the axe swishing through the rancid air. Blood mixed with bone splinters flew through the air striking the surgeon full in the face. Angered by the disrespect of what he perceived to be devilish spirits he hacked again at the inflicted limb. Time and again he slashed away all the while ignoring the knight's cries. Fervent prayers were offered up by his colleges while the surgeon sweated over his grizzly task. Once again Steele watched the patient succumb to spasms then lie dead still. "He has been taken by the Lord to dwell in his house forever. Bring on the next patient." Labouring for breath, the surgeon swigged the wine while he wiped the blood from the axe blade with a rag picket up from the dirt strewn floor. "Tie him down and let us hope for mercy from our Lord and pray for guidance from Jean our saviour. All hail Jean!" They moved toward John. "Don't touch him you butcher's. What do you know of the art of healing? Blood thirsty murderers are all you are." Steele backed away from the monks standing between them and John. "Come any closer and I will spill your guts!" He turned to pull John toward the door when they pounced. Bracing himself against the shower of punches, most of which connected with his armour Steele attempted to draw his sword. "All hail Jean!" screamed the surgeon brandishing the battle axe. He aimed directly at Steele's head. Side stepping Steele reacted instinctively. His arms immediately went up forming a cross which blocked the downward thrust of the axe. Pushing it aside, he delivered a sharp blow to the surgeon's larynx with his elbow. Down went the surgeon gargling on his own blood clutching at his shattered larynx. Slowly he drowned in his own blood while the monks prayed over him, cutting multiple crosses into his forehead. Steele slipped away with John wondering how he would save his friend. There was only one way he decided. He mounted his horse with John struggling to hold on behind.

Steele washed and treated the wounds as he had seen the heathen healers do. Using cat cut he stitched John's wounds then wrapped them with cotton wool and strips of cloth previously boiled. He applied ointments bought at the local market ensuring he washed in hot water before treating John's wounds. For days, John lingered in a state of semi consciousness while Steele changed his dressings. He had managed to acquire a small house near the limits of the city walls. Friends stopped by to enquire on John's recovery. Soon the news spread of a healer among their ranks. "So you bastard, how long do you intend keeping me lying here in this bloody cot? We have Saracens to kill." Steele laughed with relief. Although John was in a weakened state, he would survive. Steele changed the dressing keeping a record of what he had done and the results. He buried himself local medicine learning all he could from the traditional Arab healers. From time to time, d'Arcy sent scribes to monitor John's progress.

Within a few short weeks, John was able to walk with the aid of wooden crutches. It was then Steele received orders to present himself before, d'Arcy at the Arch bishop's palace in Jerusalem. Even though, Steele had polished his armour to a dazzling shine, he still felt as if the assembled hierarchy before him would find fault in his uniform. Standing at parade rest Steele waited while the Bishop chatted amiably with d'Arcy surrounded by a number of important church elders. Finally, they acknowledged him. "It had come to our notice that you prevented a noted healer from tending to a wounded Templar knight before you violently



attacked the said healer. The attack resulted in the healer's death as witnessed by the brethren here present. What do you have to say in your defence Templar?" Steele shuffled his feet then launched at the bishop. "I witnessed your men murder a young girl and then assassinate a knight due to their lack of medical knowledge." Waving his hand, the bishop dismissed Steele. "These are highly respected men of medicine, you insult. It has been said that you frequent the heathen's centre of so called medicine. It is only by the grace of our Lord that an injured person survives. Our remedies and treatment come directly from above. It is not up to you to question neither our treatments nor our teachings. We find you guilty of heresy and murder." Steele felt his blood run cold. "Your surgeon through his lack of hygiene coupled with a nonsensical belief in a perverted coward named Jean contributed directly to the deaths of at least two people before my eyes!" He turned to see a familiar, sinister figure enter the room.

"Enough of this insolence, your sentence will be decided forthwith." Throwing back the hood of his monks habit Jean posed theatrically. "Is it I you speak of Steele?" It had been a long time since Steele had heard that nasal voice. "Do not tell me it is you they venerate you filthy cur. What happened to the villagers near the Black Sea?" Steele burned with anger. "I don't suppose you had anything to do with the crucifixion of the entire population?" For a heartbeat, Steele saw a flicker of shock in the bishop's eyes but then he turned his head. "It is not your station to criticize one of our most devout members. Brother Jean gathered up a veritable army of his own accord. Not only is he a most diligent healer but Jean devotes himself entirely and selflessly to the conversion of the heathen. He is most persuasive when it comes to the spreading of the word of our Lord." Steele shuddered when he saw that same fanatical look in the bishop's eyes. It was as if Jean had them all under some type of spell. His eyes shone with an intensity rarely seen when addressing a crowd. Jean was in his element here. He argued, cajoled and made a very persuasive speech in favour of Steele's sentence being one of death. "May I perhaps suggest to the esteemed members of the brotherhood gathered here today a traditional method of punishment for the Templar named Steele?" He looked almost effeminate dressed in his long, flowing black robe of silk. Flicking back, his greasy hair Jean paused. When he saw, he had everyone's attention he launched into a detailed description of how Steele should pay for his crimes by being buried up to his neck in the sand. "I then suggest pouring honey over his head in order to attract all manner of insects ranging from wasps and scorpions to ants. The flesh would slowly be stripped from Steele's face with some insects eating away at his insides once they have entered his body through the mouth, nose and eye sockets." Glowing with pride Jean faced his audience expectantly. "Well, we shall have to see about that particular punishment for the moment. Steele's fate will be decided shortly." Visibly shaken by Jean's suggestion the bishop pointed directly at Steele.

"Retire to the waiting room outside immediately." Escorted outside by four armed guards Steele awaited his fate. He knew his sentence had already been decided, there was nothing he could do, but dwell on the satisfaction that he had helped John in his hour of need.

Called into the room Steele stood smartly to attention awaiting his sentence. "It has been decided that you are to be sent to a remote outpost situated on the Dead

Sea where you will serve out the time remaining on your contract. It is situated in an area of high enemy activity to the east of Jerusalem. Jericho is the nearest city to the outpost. The death rate is the highest out of all Templar outposts. If you are to die, I would rather you do so in the line of duty than by the hangman's noose or by the hand of this ponce. Jean glared at d'Arcy vowing to make him pay for that remark. "Leave immediately with the Templar named John. Is that understood?" The fact that it was d'Arcy who read the sentence cut Steele to the bone. Somehow though he knew d'Arcy had influenced the sentencing, he still held enough power to keep the priests at bay. He turned smartly to leave. "And Steele, I have sent a convoy ahead already. I trust that you will absolve yourself in what is our most neglected area. The average life expectancy of a Templar Knight is measured in days, not weeks at the outpost. Go now and God be with you." He dismissed Steele with a flick of his wrist.

## Chapter 14

After eight days hot, dusty trekking through the desert Steele arrived at the small Templar outpost alongside the Dead Sea. It was from here Templar patrols harassed the Saracens or were themselves attacked. Steele reported to a young Templar who commanded the garrison. "I hear you have been exiled to us for the duration of your service Steele. Well, your things arrived a few days ago. I have set aside a small room in the fort for your use. Anything you need let me know." Gunther spoke with a Nordic accent. His intelligent blue eyes constantly scanned the hills surrounding the outpost. From his mannerisms, Steele got the impression he was a professional soldier with a fair amount of experience. He was a front line officer Steele could respect. "There are a couple of lads waiting for you. Do what you can Steele although I do not expect miracles." Not quite sure what to expect Steele followed a Templar across the dusty courtyard of the stone walled fort. "Here we are Steele, your room with a cot at the back. My mate was brought in this morning. Please do what you can for him." Opening the wooden door, Steele took in the long room with a curtained off section in the end. Two men lay on straw mattresses moaning in pain. "Your supplies have been unloaded and are at the rear of the room. Pointing to a stack of wooden crates at the far corner of the room the Templar knelt beside one of the wounded. "Here mate, have a drink. The healer is here now so we will soon be chasing skirts in town again." He held a tin cup to his friend's lips. He looked at Steele willing him to do something.

For a moment, Steele stood perplexed. Then it dawned on him the magnitude of the task set out for him by d'Arcy. The treatment of wounds and disease was now his responsibility. He smiled silently thanking d'Arcy for saving his neck once again.

Steele walked to where the Templar lay grimacing with pain. Dried blood stained the dirty cloth drawn tightly over the mattress of rancid straw. Flies buzzed angrily from his roughly bandaged chest wound. "You two over there, I need a number of tasks done before we can begin treatment." He called two men hanging about in

the open door. "I need these men stripped and bathed. "Both men hesitated, never having been asked to bath themselves never mind washing down another man. "Get to it now. Make sure the water has boiled." Thinking they might just pour boiling water over their friends Steele added. "Be sure the water has cooled down a little before removing all the grime." They hurried to the cook house where the men threw logs onto the smouldering embers. Within a few short days, Steele transformed the room into a hygienic sanctuary amid the filth strewn around the outpost. Both Templars recovered from their wounds. In the months which followed Steele worked hard at his new profession increasing the sick and wounded's survival rate beyond the commander's wildest expectations. On one instance, a local villager arrived at the compounds battle scarred gates. Both his children were badly injured when the mud walls of their home collapsed on them. Steele used all his newly acquired skills to treat the children. Sitting by their side day and night, he watched over them once their wounds had been dressed. Both young children were soon playing in the village streets again. Setting out on a patrol a few days later the children's father rode his donkey straight in the path of the oncoming Templars. "Why don't you watch where you are going infidels?" Shouting at the top of his voice, his insults brought smiles to the local villagers who regarded the Templars as invaders. "Don't follow the path along the river Templar. They are waiting for you and your men near the foothills." He whispered pushing through the Templar patrol. Steele saw the urgency in the man's eyes. He had come to warn them of an impending ambush. Taking an alternate route they arrived two days later at the rear of the marauder's camp. Taken by surprise the enemy put up little resistance. Most attempted to flee only to be trampled by the charging Templars or were cut down where they stood. It was about this time that Steele was once again called before d'Arcy.

"Well. I am happy to see you have survived long enough to return home Steele." He greeted Steele with a wry smile. "Had it not been for you Sire I would have been dead a number of times. I am not sure I will return home for the moment Sire." d'Arcy looked surprised. "And why might that be Steele?" This was not the first time d'Arcy had come across Templars unsure of whether to stay or return to Europe. "And what might be your reasons for staying in this hell hole?" Waiting for Steele to reply d'Arcy picked at the highly polished table with a dagger. "I can't bring myself to leave the wounded Sire. As you know the outpost now has the highest levels of hygiene and a recovery rate better than any other. The men bathe at least once a month now Sire!" Looking down at his feet Steele did not wish to appear to be praising himself. "The men need a healer Sire and I feel that it is my duty to remain with my friends." Again he felt self-conscious. d'Arcy's intelligent eyes never left Steele's face. "What about your woman and child Steele, do you not think of her?" Steele felt a sharp pang of guilt. "Every moment I think of them Sire but they are well cared for by the nuns. I will return once my duty here is done." d'Arcy laughed. "That might take forever Steele. I don't think we will be leaving any time soon." He stood up and poured a goblet of orange juice offering on to Steele. "Have you heard anything about Jean?" His eyes displayed mild amusement. "No Sire, but I don't expect him to be returning either. He craves adulation and from what I witnessed at the monastery he would be feeling right at home there." The thought of Jean made him angry.

“Nasty bit of work that bastard, the reason I asked if you had heard anything about Jean is that we have reports stating he and a few of his followers are hard at work very close to your outpost.” Steele was visibly shaken. “How is it we have not seen or heard about this Sire?” He thought that at least one of their patrols would have come across Jean’s group. “They are holed up in a cave somewhere near to the old walled city of Jericho. Apparently Jean is on a holy mission from the Pope. He wishes to unearth the Ark of the Covenant said to have been buried there. I know the founding members of the Templars discovered a number of holy relics when they dug under the Temple Mount but the Ark?” He chuckled. “It is apparently capable not only of mass destruction as witnessed by the defenders of Jericho’s walls when the Israelites destroyed their defences with the Ark. The Pope along with his most influential allies believes it holds the secret of everlasting life. Don’t know what I believe there but I do know that if it falls into the hands of Jean it will only spell disaster. It is close enough for you to take a patrol down there and see what he is up to. I will give you the precise location of the cave and supply a guide we trust. When this mission is accomplished, I suggest you train a few of the men in the art of healing. Perhaps when you know there are men capable of treating the wounded you might venture home with a clear conscience.” Slapping Steele on the back d’Arcy showed him the door. “And Steele, if anything were to happen to that slimy little prick out there I would not worry about it.” He smiled closing the door.

## Chapter 15

“There is the cave entrance John, how did they manage to keep it quiet?” Steele pointed to the entrance of the cave. Rubble lay strewn across a large area while three men busied themselves with the evening meal. They all wore the same rough sack cloth habits Steele had seen the monks wearing at the monastery. “Wonder if we will find any portraits of Jean down there?” He smiled digging John in the ribs with his elbow. They lay flat behind the cover of bushes. From their vantage point on a small ridge close to the cave Steele and John observed the activities down below. From time to time, local men emerged from the entrance carrying straw baskets filled with debris. Throwing the contents onto the ever growing pile of rubble they stopped for a tin mug of tepid water then entered the darkness of the cave once more. “It looks as if they have a pretty permanent set up here.” Steele pointed to a ramshackle collection of wooden huts complete with a primitive kitchen area. “That must be Jean’s hut.” John nodded in the direction of a well-built cabin under the shade of the few trees growing in the area. “There is the presence of evil here Templar. I have kept to my part of the bargain. All I ask is to be allowed to leave now. The man you seek down there is well known to the local people Templar. He is cruel with terrible powers. Do you not think the camp would have been attacked already if the people did not fear him as they do the devils of the sands?” He held out his hand peering anxiously toward the camp. “Go if you feel you must, here is your payment.” Steele threw a couple of gold coins into their

guide's outstretched hand. "May your gods be with you Templar because I will not be here any longer in this place where evil lurks." Sliding down the reverse side of the ridge, the guide disappeared in a cloud of dust. "Well, it seems it's up to you and me to see what Jean's up to Steele." John settled in for an uncomfortable shift standing guard while Steele closed his eyes. Flies buzzed, constantly crawling over their faces. Heat waves shimmered in the late afternoon sky. Down below the men toiled in the blistering heat stopping only for a few sips of water. Smoke spiralled slowly into the air from the cooking fire. Twilight enveloped the desert in its semi darkness. It was a time of day where it was too dark to see shadows and not dark enough to see silhouettes. A flurry of activity erupted down in the camp. From their vantage point, Steele and John watch the commotion with interest. Figures darted around the camp fire while others emerged from the cave to join them. "There must be at least a dozen of them down there. Maybe we should have brought a few more men Steele." Angry shouts travelled on the cool night breeze to where they lay. Dry timber added to the fire cast an eerie glow forming a circle of light illuminating the area where all the commotion was taking place.

Standing on a pile of rubble Jean surveyed his obedient followers assembled before him. Two men dragged a man kicking and screaming to the edge of the circle of light. "Bloody hell John, it's our guide. They must have spotted him leaving and grabbed him." Crawling to the edge of the ridge Steele felt his heart sink. "You know what they are going to do to him don't you Steele?" Down below shadowy figures could be seen assembling a rudimentary cross. "We have to get him out of there. Don't ask me how yet but we can't leave him." Crawling closer they kept to the folds in the terrain making sure they were not silhouetted by the full moon rising above the horizon behind them. Sneaking through a dried up river bed, they circled the camp. Wild dogs howled in the distance. Crackling, the fire showered the area with hot sparks. The dry logs exploded into flame licking hungrily at the base of the wooden cross. "Who sent you here?" Jean seemed more amused than concerned. He flicked his wrist signalling his men to throw more logs onto the fire. Screaming in pain and terror, the guide fought in vain to free himself. Blisters began erupting on his legs and feet. Intense pain coursed through his body. Struggling to draw breath due to the smoke and the pressure exerted on his lungs by the position on the cross he slumped forward. "Take him off the fire now! We have not got the answers yet." Four monks pushed the wooden cross from one side with long poles toppling it forward. Slamming into the ground the guide lost consciousness under the weight of the cross. A bucket of cold water shocked him back to the reality of his ordeal.

"Who sent you, tell me and I promise you a quick death. Remain silent and we will keep this up all night." Jean kicked the guide's feet causing him to scream in pain. "My Lord, my Lord we have found it!" One of Jean's followers burst from the cave jubilantly shouting the news. Jean kicked the helpless guide in the face then strode purposely toward the entrance. He signalled three of his followers to accompany him. Steele recognised the one who seemed to be Jean's right hand man. It was the barrel chested sailor from their voyage across to France from England.

"There are eight of them as far as I can tell. We work our way closer then take out the three around the fire." Crouching forward they advanced on the monks

who watched the guide moaning in pain. “Hopefully the others are too busy inside the cave to worry about us.” Drawing their swords they rushed the three monks. Taken by surprise, the monks did not see death stalking them from the shadows. Blood stained the sand. Their bodies hit the dirt before they had time to raise the alarm. “Cut him free John. I want to see what all the fuss is about. Meet up again where we left the horses.” He dashed toward the cave mouth. Hugging the side Steele could see a torch burning down a long, narrow corridor. He glanced back over his shoulder to see John cutting the guide free. He then carried him on his shoulder into the darkness of the night.

Steele crept through the dimly lit passageway. From the depths of the cave, a strange chanting was audible. He carried on feeling his way through certain sections which weaved through the rock. All at once he came to a ledge which allowed him to observe the proceedings below. Jean stood on a makeshift altar while four of his men chanted around what looked like a gilded chest. They all wore thick gloves. Jean signalled his men to lift the ark. Continuing the chant they circled the altar time and again. “What the hell are they doing?” Steele drew back in fear. He removed his chest armour for fear of the metal making a noise against the rocks when he crawled forward. Bright white light radiated from within the ark. A high pitched drone threatened to pierce his ear drums. Reaching a crescendo the white noise suddenly ceased. A glove slipped from the hand of one of the men. He bent down to retrieve the fallen glove. Placing his hand on the ark for support, he touched it bare handed. Instantaneously the monk shook like a rag doll. He screamed unable to release his hold on the ark. His skin began to burn and blister. The monk shuddered and managed a final desperate cry before falling to the ground. It looked to Steele as if his entire body was engulfed in a sea of flame. Seconds later all that remained of the monk’s body was a pile of glowing ashes.

“Bless your servant with eternal life so that I may carry on your wishes!” Ignoring the smoking body Jean continued with his ritual. Bright lights radiated from within the ark. They began to spiral outward engulfing Jean and the monks. Their faces radiated a frenzied joy only found among fanatics. Not knowing quite what to do Steele reverted to his training. “Attack is the best form of defence.” He shouted. Bolting from his hiding place, Steele drew his sword. By the time, he scrambled down the ledge the light had intensified. All four of the men below were swaying back and forth all the while chanting their incantations. Surrounded by the bright light they lifted their hands toward the heavens awaiting the blessing of eternal life. Sparks shot from the ark spiralling upward. Screaming “Beau Seant” Steele raised his sword and shield sprinting into the area where the ritual was being held. Slashing left and right, he carved a path through human flesh to the base of the altar. “Beau Saint” echoed through the caver. John appeared at Steele’s side brandishing a blood stained sword. “Didn’t think I’d let you have all the fun did you? I left the guide with the first caravan going past. He will send for help if he makes it.” For a moment, they were off guard three of the monks were wounded or dead while the other had been radiated by the ark. Steele smiled at John then screamed a warning. The barrel chested sailor drew a dagger from under his monk’s habit. Plunging the cold blade deeply into John’s back, he withdrew the dagger stabbing again and again. Shocked Steele thrust his sword

into the sailor's belly. Jerking the blade upward, he severed internal organs finally pulling free the blade opening the stomach. Screaming the sailor attempted to push his entrails back into his stomach. Standing over the sailor Steele thrust deeply into his throat. Crimson blood spurted out of the sailor's neck. Bending down Steele cradled John in his arms. Blood trickled from his lips. "Even your power of healing won't save me now mate." John shuddered then screamed for his mother. Steele felt as if a knife had been thrust and twisted in his heart. Filled with rage he lowered John's body to the sand. Turning toward Jean Steele screamed in rage. His sword sang through the air aimed at Jean's neck.

Incandescent lights whirled around the cavern as the high pitched noise grew in intensity. A blinding flash of light coupled with the sound of thunder knocked Steele backward. All he felt was a searing pain coursing through his body. So intense was the pain that he fell to the ground covering his ears with his hands. For what seemed an eternity Steele cowered on the ground holding his shield in front of his body. The lifeless bodies of the monks vibrated then burst into flames. He turned to look at John. All that was left of his friend were charred remains. His vision swum, fighting back an intense desire to vomit Steele crawled toward where Jean lay prone on the ground. Drawing a dagger attached to his shin armour he advanced on Jean. He watched Jean's body hover inches above the ground. Suddenly he was doing the same, caught in the grip of an occult storm. The dagger tumbled from his grasp. Pain coursed through his body until mercifully he lost consciousness.

Slowly Steele came to his senses. Heavy acrid smoke filled the cavern mixing with the stench of burnt bodies. It felt as if he had been run over by a dozen Templar warhorses. Every muscle ached, his limbs felt heavy. Groggily he pushed himself upright. Sitting with his back against the cavern wall Steele caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure stumbling toward him through the smoke. "Damn I must have dropped my dagger." He searched for something he could use as a weapon. In desperation, he removed his heavy steel helmet. Clutching it tightly, he watched the figure drift through the smoke appearing suddenly before him like a ghost. "I see you still live Steele. By the Lords grace, I am now an immortal!" Jean dropped to his knees in prayer an arm's length from where Steele lay. "I hold no ill will toward you my friend. Join me as we raise our voices in celebration." He clutched a large wooden cross to his chest. "Believe in me and I will offer you salvation Steele. Defy me and you shall burn in hell for all eternity." He raised the wooden cross up high. Struggling to focus Steele forced himself to concentrate. Too late Steele noticed Jean pull the bottom length of wood from the rest of the cross revealing a long steel blade. Standing above Steele, he brandished the deadly weapon, smiling insanelly. Cold steel flashed downward. Steele thrust out with his helmet. "Damn, why did I take off my chest plate?" He heard Jean's knee splinter and crack. At the same moment, he felt Jean's knife tear through his stomach. Buried to the hilt Jean struggled to free the blade. In a final act of defiance, Steele smashed his helmet against Jean's skull. He knew all too well that a wound of this severity was a mortal wound. He would bleed out into his stomach. With his remaining strength Steele pulled the dagger from his wound, dark red blood gushed out over his hands and legs. Jean stared at him in panic waiting for the coup de grace. The blade flashed through the air severing Jean's throat. His

screams were drowned by the blood flowing freely down his chest. Both men lay on the sand waiting for the dark angel of death to claim them. Lying on his back propped up against the wall Steele looked over where the ark still glowed in the semi darkness. It was a lot less bright than before, but he seemed drawn to the icy blue coloured light radiating from the open lid. He kicked Jean a final time to make sure he was no longer a threat. Closing his eyes, Steele was overwhelmed by a great sadness. Images of Gudrun drifted before his eyes. She smiled at him holding their new-born infant. Wondering whether it was a boy or a girl Steele decided he would have loved them deeply if he had been given the opportunity. Feeling extremely cold Steele drew himself into a ball clutching his open wound. Drifting off into the world of limbo where time has no meaning Steele welcomed the blackness enveloping him.

Faint voices penetrated the death like slumber Steele had fallen into. Strong hands lifted him gently. He sipped at the cold water in a metal cup placed to his lips. It felt as if he had been sleeping for days. Opening his eyes Steele searched the room for Jean. He was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Templar knights combed through the debris surrounding the ark. Two knights bundled John's earthly remains along with his scorched armour into a sack. Shaking like a leaf Steele looked down at his chest. Dried blood caked the front of his ripped tunic. With trembling hands, he tore open the front of his tunic. Gingerly he felt for the wound, there was no blood, no torn flesh. All he saw was a scar where the dagger had pierced his chest. He began to shake uncontrollably. Firm hand gripped Steele under the arms, lifting him to his feet a Templar supported him on either side making their way out of the cavern. Steele shaded his eyes against the bright sunlight. In a state of shock he mounted his horse. Staring into the distance, he attempted to comprehend his fate. Immortality was something most men dreamed of. He had been the unwilling recipient of the so called gift. Wondering if he had been hallucinating he looked on while Templars loaded the crate containing the Ark of the Covenant onto a pack horse. Ignoring any attempt made at conversation by his friends Steele set out with the column for the dangerous journey back to the outpost.

Advancing slowly across the sand, they spotted a dust cloud rapidly closing in on them. "To arms men, to arms!" The call went down the column. It was not necessary for they had all noticed the fast approaching cavalry. Riding hard, the Templar column attempted to outrun the Saracens. Their outpost was so near yet it may have been a world away. A large Saracen contingent barred their way to the outpost and safety. "Bad news travels fast in the desert. Form up around the Ark. We have no choice but to attempt a breakthrough. Stay close and stay alive long enough to get the ark into the compound." Gunther issued his orders. He had been charged with the protection of the Ark by d'Arcy himself. At first the Templar high command reacted with disbelief on hearing rumours of a search for the Ark of the Covenant conducted by a fanatical monk and his followers. Once their spies confirmed the Vatican along with a number of noble houses in Europe were behind the expedition they acted swiftly. If it proved true the Ark would make a powerful bargaining tool, not to mention their own devotion to the discovery of Holy relics. Gunther sent Steele and John on a short reconnaissance patrol. He had no idea they would find the Ark. He mourned John's death in action. It would



be hard to replace a seasoned warrior out here. As for Steele, well he had seen that look before when men's minds were twisted by the sight of their comrade's deaths. He would soon bury the pain enabling him to carry on fighting. If he did not he was as good as dead. Gunther glanced over his shoulder at Steele. He seemed fixed on a particular person in the Saracen ranks. They were drawn up in formation ahead blocking their advance. Gunther admitted to himself the man wearing a dark monk's habit in the ranks of the enemy did seem strange attire for a Saracen. The dark clad monk sat astride a horse sipping a cold drink slightly to the rear of the formation. Jean and the Saracen patrol leader seemed to be having a very amicable conversation.

"Get ready to break through the Saracen ranks men! You four stick to the Ark, protect it with your lives." Four Templars peeled off taking up position in front of the ark. Shuffling into position, the Templars formed into a line abreast formation. Horses kicked at the ground sensing the tension. Men checked their equipment, dropped their visors then felt the familiar sensation of adrenaline coursing through their veins. Gunther lifted his sword ready to signal the advance. "What the bloody hell is he up to?" He stared in disbelief. A lone rider darted from their ranks heading straight for the centre of the Saracen line at full gallop.

He felt such hatred toward Jean it clouded his judgement. Steele could not wait for the order to attack. Spurring his warhorse onward he galloped into the face of death. Trotting forward to counter the mad Templars charge a few of the Saracens joked among themselves. Quickly placed bets were shouted as to who would kill the sun crazed infidel first. Gathering speed Steele turned sharply at the last possible moment. He careened into the Saracens flank sending their formation into disarray. With his shield strapped to his back Steele wielded a sword in one hand slicing left and right. A double headed battle axe gripped in the other smashed skulls, shattered teeth and lopped off hands. His only objective was to get his hands on Jean before he succumbed to his wounds. His body reeled under the blows from the Saracen weapons. Cold steel blades bit into his flesh an arrow lodged itself in his femur. Steele sliced down chopping the arrow shaft off at the entry point. Caught up in the melee Steele felt his horse lose its footing. Falling between the jousting horses Steele continued to hack at anything within his reach. Bellowing a challenge a huge, broad shouldered Saracen dismounted running straight at Steele. Bringing his scimitar flashing downward at Steele's head, he shouted a victory cry. Swiftly Steele brought up his sword and axe forming a cross blocking the Saracens blade. Pivoting to the side he spun around cutting deeply into the Saracens exposed stomach. Falling to his knees the Saracen's eyes widened in fear. Steele struck him on the helmet splitting it in half. Stuck in the Saracen's skull Steele struggled to free the battle axe. Leaving it embedded in the fallen Saracen Steele swung his sword wildly back and forth. Exhausted he fought his way to the crest of a sand dune desperate to get to grips with Jean. His mind reeled with confusion. How was it he did not die? By all rights, he should be face down in the sand dead or at very least mortally wounded. But death would not take him. His wounds healed nearly as swiftly as he suffered them. Blood soaked his tattered tunic. Crying in frustration tears streamed down his dust caked face. Every man is allowed a moment of madness on the field of battle. Both sides stood down watching the madman rush onward screaming. Superstition outweighed

honour for the leader of the Saracen patrol. Turning his horse, he sped down the opposite side of the sand dune followed by the survivors of his squad. When Jean attempted to ride with them, the Saracens became aggressive wanting nothing more to do with the strange traitor who had the devil himself at his heels. No amount of money or the promise of eternal life would make them turn around and face the infidel. All alone in the desert, Jean let destiny decide his fate. Giving free reign to his horse Jean slumped forward in the saddle wondering where providence would take him.

## Chapter 16

Standing beside the shallow grave Steele bit his lower lip. Four Templar honour guards, immaculately dressed in polished armour bowed their heads. They rested their hands on the hilt of their swords which were pointed toward the arid sand on which they stood. Gunther said a few awkward words in memory of John. Gripping a shovel Steele began to throw spade fills of earth over the white cloth covering John's body. More of the knights joined in working around the guard of honour. Gunther suddenly stiffened looking across the open ground between the compound and the Templar graveyard. Horsemen came into view cantering toward the burial party. Templar banners fluttered on the breeze. Dust streaked faces under steel helmets cast curious glances toward the men burying one of their own. Far too strong in numbers to be a regular patrol the horsemen drew their horses to a halt a respectful distance away from the honour guard. "Continue, I will go and see who this is." Jumping into the saddle Gunther rode the short distance to where the patrol waited. Squires led horses into the walls of the outpost where they would be watered and fed. Seeking what little shade they could find many of the Templars sat under the scrubby trees drinking tepid water from tin flasks or animal skins.

Breaking off from the main body a group of men strode slowly to the burial site. Hammering a small wooden cross into the mound of fresh earth Steele stood in silence for a moment. "John, the miller's son may you rest in peace my old friend. If it were possible, I would meet up with you again one day." He bowed his head then turned to see who approached. "We extend our condolences Steele. We know the two of you went back a long way. We have all lost friends under the blazing desert sun. Their bones whiten somewhere out there in the sands." Pointing toward the horizon d'Arcy paused. Surprised at such an important turnout for a simple soldier Steele remembered the Ark. "Good work on recovering the artefact Steele. I will call for you once we have eaten. There is something important I need you to do. Pick twelve men trustworthy men. Bring them along when you join me in the operations room." He turned followed by his retinue of Knights.

Tattered maps lined the walls of the ops room, most displayed only the basic geographical features, and scale varied as did their accuracy. Sitting at the head of a rough wooden table d'Arcy called Steele into the room. Standing before a number of high ranking officers, Steele felt uncomfortable. "Let's get straight to the point

shall we?" Nodding in agreement the officers stared at Steele, who became even more uncomfortable. "It would seem you and your deceased comrade found a unique biblical artefact. I am talking about the Ark of the Covenant, to be precise." He waited for his words to sink in. There was a murmur of excitement among the officers gathered. "Obviously it's historic, biblical and cultural importance can never be understated. Each man here will be sworn to secrecy. Steele you will accompany two of my finest officers along with twelve Templar knights on a mission of utmost importance." He paused. "It has been decided that the Ark is best kept secret for the moment. There are evil forces at work who seek to use the Ark for their own devious purposes. The Ark will be safer if far removed from the ever changing military situation here in the Holy Land. Those of you chosen will deliver the Ark to an as for now undisclosed location in Europe. All the resources of the Templars will be at your disposal. A special letter along with signed orders will enable you to make your journey in the safest and most prompt way possible." Nodding in agreement the officers looked around wondering who would be the two honoured with the responsibility of leading the mission. "He chose a hard, battle scared officer and another skilled at logistics. "You men have a sacred duty. The Ark will find a safe haven in Europe until such time we fathom its working or keep it hidden for eternity." Swearing an oath to keep the contents of the non-descript wooden crate a secret and to ensure its safety. The chosen few turned to leave the ops room. D'Arcy added before they left. "Be very aware of one particular individual who will be watching your every move. He has spies everywhere. His name is Jean and he has built up a following of fanatic's hell bent on taking possession of the Ark for their own purpose, namely the destruction of all we hold dear. According to our information he holds a grudge against the Templar order and would seek to destroy us. The "brotherhood" as they call themselves is spreading like a plague across the Holy Land. I wish you God speed and good luck men." The Templars began making preparations for their departure.

Escorted by a strong Templar force, the Ark travelled to Acre where it was loaded onto a warship. Once again at sea Steele had the time to reflect on the events he experienced during his tour in the Holy Land. He felt he had changed, not only physically which was very obvious but mentally he felt a million miles removed from the young man he had been on arrival. Under normal circumstances, the harsh realities of combat would have altered his outlook on life. Coupled with the idea that he might just be immortal totally blew his mind.

With favourable winds behind them, the ships sailed through the Mediterranean arriving at the port of La Rochelle without any major incidents. Traveling from one Templar castle to another, the escort arrived in Paris. Taking charge of the wooden crate the Grand Master ordered the Templar escort to disperse. Each was to return to his country of origin where he would be stationed until the next sortie to the Holy Land.

Setting foot on English soil again Steele felt at ease. It was good to be home again, he longed to be reunited with Gudrun. Meeting his child for the first time filled him with excitement. If Jean was indeed watching, by returning home he risked putting his family in danger. Dismissing the idea he galloped to his native village, anticipating a joyful reunion.

## Chapter 17

Riding hard Steele could not contain his excitement approaching the ramshackle house where Gudrun's father lived. Jumping his horse over the broken down lengths of timber which served as a fence he drew the horse in yards from the front door. The door burst open Gudrun's father eyed Steele suspiciously. "Oh, it's you. Don't you think you have done enough damage already? Hard enough around here to feed myself let alone my daughter and her little one as well." He pointed toward the river. "She's down there, in the old cottage. I didn't think you would be back." With that, he closed the door on Steele. "Well, that's not the welcome home I was expecting." He patted his horse. This time he rode slowly wondering if Gudrun felt the same about him or even if someone else was there with her. His heart beat furiously trotting down the narrow footpath to the cottage. Gudrun stood beside the slowly flowing stream. Her hair shone in the morning sunlight. She was every bit as beautiful as he remembered her. By her side, there stood a blonde haired little cherub tugging on her skirt. For a moment, they stared at each other disbelievingly. Steele jumped from his horse onto the soggy green grass. Screaming with excitement Gudrun rushed toward him arms outstretched. Rushing into each other's arms they kissed. "I knew you would come back for us my love." She giggled pointing to a little girl running through the long grass. "This is your daughter Sigrun. She can say a few words already. It has been three long years for us Steele. But now you are home and we can be a family again. Steele lifted and cuddled his daughter for the very first time. She was fair of skin like her mother and had her mother's eyes, but the shock of sandy blonde hair was from him. He had always feared that he would feel awkward holding a baby or toddler, but it seemed to come naturally with his daughter. They meted into each other's arms holding tight.

For the following two weeks, they got reacquainted with each other. Gudrun told Steele of how she had given birth at the convent, moving into her father's house when she thought it would be safe to do so and the everyday life as a mother struggling to make ends meet. He in turn told her of the exotic places he had visited the different customs he had experienced in the lands far away, but he never mentioned the killing and dying. He told her of the camaraderie but not of the cruelty and savagery of war. They loved whenever the little one fell asleep. He hunted game and caught fish in the river. It was an idyllic existence about to be shattered by an old nemesis.

Pushing open the door to the cottage Steele smiled expectantly. Sigrun was over at her grandfather's house not far away. While hunting, he had managed to shoot a young fawn. Tonight they would eat like kings but that could wait. He had a short time alone with Gudrun and there were more pleasurable thoughts on his mind. Looking around the room, he saw no sign of Gudrun, perhaps she was down by the river. His stomach churned at the sight of a cross roughly carved into the wooden table in the centre of the room. There was another carving at the bottom of the cross. It depicted what looked like a river leading to a waterfall.

Embedded in the table stood a dagger with a lock of Gudrun's hair attached. He head reeled at the thought of who might be responsible for this. There was no question, everything pointed toward Jean. Somehow he had survived the desert and now he was here looking for the Ark. "That slimy bastard sure knows how to get to me." He grasped the dagger on his way out of the cottage. Hurrying along the bank of the river Steele rushed onward breathing heavily. His knowledge of the area in which they had grown up in served him well. Pushing himself to the limit of his endurance Steele sprinted on hoping to catch up to Gudrun before Jean could carry out whatever plan he had in mind. Crashing through a thicket Steele caught sight of two figures standing on the edge of the cliffs. Far below the sea pounded relentlessly at the foot of the cliff. Jagged rocks reached out from the churning waters, foam and spray were swept up in the violent onslaught. Standing only inches from the precipice Jean held Gudrun tightly with one arm around her waist. He held a razor sharp knife to her throat with his other hand. "Don't come any closer Steele. Try anything and your beloved Gudrun will die a slow death." She struggled to free herself, but Jean pressed the knife against her slender neck. "Tell me where you have hidden the ark and I will let her die a quick death." The knife flashed in Jean's hand. Even from a distance Steele could see a rivulet of crimson blood trickling down her cheek. "I'm cold and getting impatient Steele. Where is the Ark?" Again the knife flashed. Gudrun screamed in pain. She struggled in vain but Jean held her tight. "What is he talking about?" She screamed in a high pitched terrified voice. "She does not know Steele?" He shook with laughter. It echoed eerily, an almost maniacal cackle. "I have not told her yet. Leave her Jean then we will talk!" He walked closer, the knife held discreetly in his hand. "You take me for a fool!" He moved to the very edge of the cliff. Small stones tumbled and fell disappearing far below into the breakers. "We are immortal Gudrun. You could be too if it were not for Steele. He keeps its secret for himself." He grinned evilly. "I am untouchable Steele and you know it. How's your little girl? I've sent some men around to Granddad's house. She should be joining us here very soon." Gudrun struggled like a demon biting his hands, head butting him in the face." Oblivious to the deep gashes inflicted on her face Gudrun fought like only a mother can to save her child. Rushing over the short distance separating them Steele flew into the fray. "Look me in the eyes Steele!" Jean screamed teetering over the edge of the cliff. For what seemed an eternity they hung motionless, threatening to fall to the rocks below. His hand pulled Gudrun's head back by her hair. "I will hunt down every person you ever love and kill them Steele. Until I find where you have the Ark!" Slowly he drew the cold dagger across Gudrun's throat. Blood gushed forth spraying over Steele's face. Gudrun's eyes wide in terror burned deeply into his soul. Of all the deaths, he was destined to witness none cut him as deeply as Gudrun's. Gripping her in his arms Jean took a step into the void. Down he tumbled disappearing under the turbulent waters. Gudrun's body lay for a moment on a barnacle strewn boulder while a wave subsided. Steele had caught a last glimpse of his beloved before a wave rushed in dragging her down to the depths claiming her for the sea.

Struggling to come to terms with Gudrun's death Steele stared in shock at the raging waters. "Sigrun, I'm coming to get you!" He cried not bearing to think of what might befall his daughter if Jean's men had her in their clutches.

Onward he rushed through brambles that tore at his flesh. For what seemed an eternity Steele ran like a man possessed. Bursting through the unkempt hedge his blood boiled at the sight of three horses nibbling at the tall grass outside of the house. He was sure that they had already begun their evil work. Not waiting to assess the situation he rushed straight in bowling over the thug standing with his back to the door. Two men held Gudrun's father down while they looked across the room for Sigrun. Hiding behind a chair, she stared at the men wide eyed with terror. Steele waded into them. Dagger in one hand and a red hot poker that he had snatched out of the fire in the other he stuck out in all directions. Falling under the onslaught the three men lay dead or dying on the rough stone floor.

"There will be others. We do not have much time left. Gather up what belongings you can and be ready to leave in a few moments." He dragged the bodies outside. "How was he ever going to explain to Sigrun her mother would never be coming home again? Guilt ate away at Steele. He replayed the final moments on the cliff a thousand times over in his head. Each time he thought of a way he might have reacted differently. He racked his brains to figure out a way in which he might have saved her.

"This is another fine mess you have got us into Steele." Gudrun's father bundled up his meagre possessions. "First you leave my daughter with child then you go off to the ends of the earth leaving her to deal with a new born. What she ever saw in you is beyond me." Steele rode ahead slowly leading the wooden cart carrying his daughter and the old man. He could understand the feelings of anger directed at him. The old man had lost his daughter, his home and now journeyed to a Templar castle far to the North. His life had been irrevocably changed. Moving from one Templar base to another they finally arrived at Roslin Castle in Scotland.

Steele saw to it that his father in law and daughter were settled comfortably. As the years past he watched his little daughter turn into a young woman. Vibrant and full of life as her mother was his heart ached at the loss they had all suffered. The bonds grew stronger between them and at last they were a happy and content family. One winter's day they bid farewell to the old man. He finally held Steele's hand on his death bed thanking him for all he had provided for his granddaughter. It was not long after Steele heard the words he had been dreading. "Why do you not grow old as do your friend's Father? The years are not etched on your face. No grey discolours your hair." His heart seemed to be pierced by an icicle when he heard the words. He knew the time had come. Sigrun had many suitors, as a father Steele distrusted them all. One stood out as slightly more suitable than the others. He was a down to earth Templar Sergeant, young and dashing. It was plain for all to see that he doted on Sigrun. When he was asked by the Templar Sergeant for Sigrun's hand in marriage he conceded. Spending as much time with Sigrun as he could Steele waited until she was happily wed with a home of her own and a loving husband. He hugged her for the last time, leaving on a perilous mission. She would receive the terrible news that her father had died bravely in battle facing overwhelming odds.

From time to time Steele returned to Roslin castle to gaze upon his daughter from afar. Each time the pain threatened to rip out his heart. She was so near he could reach out and touch her yet he dared not. Watching his daughter mature into a beautiful woman walking around the marketplace with the grandchildren he

would never be able to meet almost drove him to despair. For the final time he watched their happy faces pass him by. He then turned away, never to return.

## Chapter 18

During the years which followed Steele moved from one Templar unit to another concealing his identity. It was easy to slip away when people began to question his age, or his lack thereof. Once he felt suspicion had been aroused amongst his comrades who began to show signs of old age he moved on. He witnessed the loss of Jerusalem, the fall of Tyre and the eventual cessation of crusades to the Middle East.

Over the years, he accumulated a wealth of military as well as administrative experience. The summer of 1306 found Steele serving as second in command of the Paris repository. Steele walked along the gangplank leading to the Templar galleon. "Attention!" he yelled saluting smartly. Snapping to attention, the honour guard stood in a perfect line facing the disembarking passengers. Taking a step forward Steele presented to the Grand Master of the Templars, Jacque de Moly. "Ah! Steele, it has been too long. I hear you have become quite the administrator here in Paris." He offered his hand out to Steele. Shaking with the Grand Master sent a shiver down Steele's spine. Had someone told him when he first joined so many, many years ago he would be amongst the Templars highest ranking officers he would not have believed them. "It is always good to see you Sire. To what do we owe this honour?" He still stood rigidly to attention. "Let's dispense with all the military formalities my friend. Dismiss the guard then walk with me along the banks of the river. We have much to discuss." Handing over command to a young officer Steele accompanied the Grand Master. "These are troubling times Steele, our enemies are plotting against us as you know. At least the Saracens had the decency to fight us face to face. Remember the siege of Acre?" He laughed clapping Steele on the back. "I thought you had been killed a dozen times. Never seen anyone survive the wounds, I saw you suffer." Steele shrugged then smiled. "The injuries looked more serious than they actually were Jacque. What really brings you here?" Looking toward the heavens, the Grand Master pointed to the gathering clouds on the horizon. "There is a storm coming Steele. I fear for the order and its survival. I need you to begin preparations for an eventual evacuation of the repository and the men." Logistics would not be a problem. The order had more than enough ships at its disposal to see them all to safety. It would be the timing that might prove to be a problem though. "If we act too soon they will know we are on to them, too late and we are finished." He looked to the Grand Master. "Those are exactly my thoughts too Steele. Our spies are well placed so we shall know when they are about to attack. Then again perhaps this is all over exaggerated. In a few months, this will have all blown over." Walking along the water's edge the Grand Master called over a squire. He ran toward the two veterans carrying a jug of red wine and a basket with cheese and bread inside.

“I had a meeting with King Phillip IV a while ago. He wishes us to integrate with the Knights Hospitallers. He plans on calling himself Rex Bellator, the war king.” He broke a loaf of brown bread smiling sarcastically. “The bastard has not even seen a skirmish never mind a war. In that way, he will get off paying us the vast loan he owes. It will also enable him to exert more pressure on the Pope.” Steele poured two cups of wine. “And how was your meeting with the Pope Sire.” He cut the cheese into slices. “He is weak and I fear the King has him under his influence. You know what I find extremely strange?” Draining his wine Steele refilled his cup waiting for the Grand Master to continue. “At both meeting I noticed something very strange indeed. Both the Pope and the King had the same wormy little advisor. He seemed to be running the show. I dare to say both the King of France and the Pope are under his influence.” Steele fumbled dropping his cup. “And what did this advisor look like Sire.” Once again the Grand Master called the squire. He whispered in his ear. Steele watched the squire run off and begin searching through a wooden chest. “As I was saying if anything were to happen I want you to ensure the safety of the Holy Relics in the Repository. All the books all the knowledge we have won through blood and battles should not end up in the hands of those who do not have the honour of fighting for it.” He handed Steele a portrait wrapped in grease cloth. “They insisted on having a likeness of the attending dignitaries painted by multiple artists. The resemblance of myself is not too accurate, he portrayed me with a belly far too large don’t you think?” Steele smiled then froze. He centred in on the advisor prominently pictured between the Pope and the French King. There was no mistaking the greasy hair slicked back in the latest fashion. The beady eyes seemed to pierce the soul of he who looked on the portrait. Jean had resurfaced once again. Only this time Jean had connived himself into a position of extreme power. “Anything wrong Steele?” The Grand Master seemed concerned at Steele’s interest in the portrait. “No Sire, nothing wrong. It is true your belly is pictured way too rotund.” Jacques de Moly smiled again. “Say what you will Steele but I know it is not the image of me that you fixate on but another, perhaps the advisor? You are an enigma Steele.” He drew a dagger with lightning speed slashing at Steele’s face. Instinctively Steele’s arm shot up blocking the thrust. “There is something deeper to the mystery Steele. How is it you have never aged? I remember you as a young officer in Cyprus when we served together at Klossi castle. Since that time, you have not aged. But do not worry Steele your secret is safe, you have a sacred mission. Care for our brothers whether they be fighting men or scribes, cooks or any other part of our rear echelon. We could not have done it without them, remember that. Service in any way to your country or Holy Order by anyone is honourable and should be seen as such even by those at the sharp end.” He stood up signifying the meeting was at the end. “Read these orders when I leave Steele and follow them if anything should happen.” Out of habit Steele snapped to attention. “I will do as you have ordered Grand Master.” He tucked the sealed parchment into his tunic.

## Chapter 19



Sailing up the Seine Steele watched the blackened sails billow in the wind. Soon they would be outside the repository where the Templar knights and rear echelon members were waiting to load wooden crates onto the ships. Jacques de Moly had been right to suspect the Pope and the King of France of conspiring against the Templars. Spies in the employ of the Templars rushed to warn De Moly of a lightning strike against the order by the King of France on Friday the thirteenth of the year thirteen hundred and seven. They had less than twelve hours to evacuate the loyal members of the repository and the treasures before King Phillip IV sent his troops into the castle. By the light of the moon, they tied alongside the jetty. Almost immediately shadowy figures emerged carrying the Holy Relics of the Knights Templars onto the ships. By the midnight, all eighteen ships were fully loaded with their precious cargo. Lines of Templars and their families stood ready to board the ships taking them to safety. Rumours abounded. Some said they were heading to the new world where they would set up a base for future Templar operations while others spoke of Spain and Portugal.

“All aboard and ready to set sail Sire.” The Captain stood before Steele. “Set sail Captain and let’s not attract too much attention.” Slowly the ships sailed down the Seine into the darkness only hours before the King of France sent his troops into the Templar strongholds all over the country. “Heading confirmed as La Rochelle Sire?” Steele watched the silhouette of the repository merge with the darkness of the night. “Yes Captain, La Rochelle and make sure we leave no ship behind.” He smiled imagining the faces of the Kings officers when they found the repository deserted, the Holy Relics along with all other valuables gone. It had crossed his mind to stay behind just for the sheer pleasure of seeing their disappointment and frustration, but he had a duty to perform. If fellow officers in the Templar strongholds had indeed followed his orders then, there would be a sizable fleet anchored at La Rochelle in a few days’ time. He reflected on what this might mean for the order. Pope Clement V went along with the French king as it was convenient financially. They were all to be excommunicated along with any of their sympathisers.

Their fleet of ships had only just entered open water when a lone Templar warship approached, its sails billowing in the wind. Drawing close enough to shout between the two vessels, Steele heard the fateful words. “The Grand Master along with sixty of our brothers has been arrested and charged with heresy. I have been sent to tell you the Grand Master ordered me to deliver a message directly to you Sire. He said not to attempt a rescue but to carry on with the mission you were tasked with.” Steele felt himself burning with rage. After all the sacrifices, blood spilt and innumerable hardships the Templars were now being disbanded on trumped up charges for financial gain in the corridors of power. He felt sick to his stomach thinking about the thousands who had fought and died only to be betrayed.

“Our brothers in Germany and the Northern parts of Europe as well as Scotland have not been affected by the order.” He waited for a sign from Steele. “Sail with us to La Rochelle, there we will put the plan into effect.” Clutching the hilt of his sword Steele walked toward his cabin. His worst fears had been confirmed. Somehow he had to lead the fugitive Templars to safety then secret the Ark in a

location no one would ever discover. Jean was the instigator behind this betrayal. One day Steele would make him suffer, but for now his objective was clear. With added urgency, he threw himself headlong into the task before him.

Sunrise bathed the watch towers of La Rochelle harbour in a golden glow. From the ramparts fluttered the Templar standard in defiance of the Kings decree that all Templar banners and coat of arms be removed on pain of death. In the distance, Steele noticed three of the Kings warships shadowing their convoy with many more circling the area. "Sails on the horizon Sire." Bellowed the lookout perched high above the deck in the tiny crow's nest. "And there are more to the South and the West Sire!" An air of excitement spread throughout the crew. Templars on board their eighteen ships craned their necks searching for the blackened sails closing in on La Rochelle. By early morning, ships began anchoring alongside their convoy. By the late afternoon, the Templar ships congregating at the port of La Rochelle were so numerous the Kings ships retreated avoiding any confrontation with the Templar forces.

Two days later Steele held a meeting with his brother officers in the castle's great hall. "We all know by now of the foul betrayal of our Grand Master and our beloved Templar order by the King of France, Phillip IV and Pope Clement V. You will each receive sealed orders to be opened on board your ships. Each of you has been designated a number of vessels which will accompany you to a safe haven. We have been granted sanctuary by the King of Portugal. The King of Spain wishes to integrate Templar Knights into his forces and Scotland welcomes us with open arms. As for myself I will lead a select few on a quest for the New World where the Holy Relics will be kept in the Templar order. Our descendants will follow our traditions and hold our values high. Go now brothers and never forget Friday the thirteenth. Jacque de Moly you will be avenged!" He shouted the words which had newly become the Templar's battle call. "Jacque de Moly you will be avenged" cried a hundred Templars in response. Steele shook the hand of each man as the Templar officers filed past. Many he had fought alongside, all he respected knowing they would carry on the legacy of the Templars. From the ramparts, Steele watched the Kings soldiers refusing to advance on the Templar stronghold. Whether it was out of fear of the Templars fighting abilities or respect for their former brothers in arms, it gave the Templars enough time to resupply before setting sail for their different destinations. From the upper deck of the warship, Steele watched La Rochelle disappear over the horizon. He struggled to come to terms with the recent events. He vowed to find a safe haven for the Templar treasure and Holy Relics. Once that had been accomplished there were several men in Europe who had a rendezvous with death when he returned.

"Captain I presume the ships have been loaded according to the manifest I handed you?" He stood on the aft deck watching the seventeen ships following in their wake. "All down to the last barrel of rum as you insisted Sire. We managed to store a few extra barrels Sire. One of them we placed in your cabin Sire. I thought it might make the voyage a little more comfortable for you Sire." Steele turned away, a thin smile on his lips. "That is very good Captain. Set course for Greenland. We will shelter from the winter gales there." Shouting the course coordinates to the helmsman, the Captain turned to Steele. "Sound as if we will be taking only a temporary refuge in Greenland Sire." Tucking a bundle of leather

charts under his arm Steele braced against the perpetual movement of the ship. Sea water swept over the deck of the ship. "We will construct a temporary base then at the first signs of spring I shall take a specific number of people westward to the New World. I trust this conversation stays between only you and I Captain?" Nodding vigorously the Captain felt a chill run down his spine. He had never encountered a man who, with a simple look commanded instant obedience. "That man has the devil in his eyes" Thinking out aloud the Captain made the sign of the cross trusting Steele had not heard his words.

Their epic sea voyage took them from La Rochelle to Scotland where they were welcomed by Templar Knights offering them shelter and a home. The arrival of additional ships swelled the Templar ranks to the point where they posed a serious threat to the English army if they chose to side with Robert the Bruce in the quest for Scottish independence.

Choosing men for their unique abilities Steele gathered a force of hardened veterans. To the ranks of the seasoned warriors he added rear echelon men chosen for their skills which ranged from building to mining. All were volunteers setting off for Iceland where they constructed a settlement from which Steele sent out ships to the west determined to find the land their Viking forefathers described in their sagas.

For two years Steele waited patiently, occasionally Templar trading vessels plied the turbulent waters bringing supplies and news from the continent. Confessions extracted under torture enabled Phillip IV to bring about false accusations of heresy against the Templars. The French king was in the process of threatening military action against the Pope if the Templars assets and possessions were not handed over to the Knights Hospitallers. Pope Clement V dissolved the Templar Order while Phillip IV of France profited financially. Hearing the Grand Master, along with several others languished in prison added a sense of urgency to Steele's mission.

"My Lord, may I have a word with you?" Steele looked at the Genoese Captain outlandishly dressed bowing before him. "Yes you may Captain, what do you have on your mind?" He smiled at the title bestowed upon him by the scruffy seafarer. "My name is Christophe and I wish to offer you a business proposition." He straightened up looking Steele directly in the eyes. "We sailed for the Templars often before between the island of Corsica and Genoa. Most of our business was above board but some especially from Corsica we did, how would you say transactions a little less authorised?" Remembering dealings with the Mediterranean seafarers Steele stifled a laugh. They traded in anything and everything. "I found you on this windswept, god forsaken island did I not?" He waved surveying the desolate terrain around them. "I have charts which you might, for a price find interesting Sire. For a little more money, I may even take you to the lands to the west." For a moment, Steele stiffened. "Who said anything about the lands to the west Captain?" Smiling sarcastically, Christophe opened a leather tube containing well-worn charts inscribed on parchment. "Here we are in Iceland Sire. He poked a stubby finger at an island drawn on the northern end of the parchment. "And here are the lands to the west. Where would Sire wish me to take him?" Pausing to study the details sketched on the parchment Steele conceded the Geneses did, in fact, possess maps seemingly accurate. The Runic

writing inscribed along the edges confirmed their Viking origin. But then again he did know the Corsicans. It did however add a touch of realism.

“How did you find us Captain?” He led Christophe toward the mess hall. “As I have said we traded with the Templars or on behalf of you. Now we are all excommunicated by the Pope it is hard to make an honest living.” He smiled. “We have heard about the secret war against the French and the Pope. The undercover campaign declared between Templars and those responsible for your unjust accusations. Let us prove our loyalty now as we did before Sire.” He turned pointing to the windswept bay. “We are ready to serve the Knights Templars once more Sire, for a price of course.” Twelve ships sailed steadily toward the settlement. Templars armed themselves running to defend their friends and families. “There will be no need for that Templars. If you wish, take me as your hostage. I will sail aboard your ship Sire. I will lead you to the land you seek and then after we are paid my companions and I will follow the charts to the land of gold. El Dorado as it is inscribed here. It is far to the south of where you will be so there is no need for distrust. Do I have a deal Sire?” Wondering if Jean was behind the sudden appearance of the Genoese Steele nodded solemnly offering his hand to Christophe. “Good my friend, it is done then. My brother sailed to the Kingdom of Portugal when the Pope ruined our business. He sails now for the King of Portugal, the sails of their ships bear the Templar insignia. We leave with a full moon. My crew will come ashore. Do you have women?” Steele heard dozens of Templars drawing their swords. “Maybe not, but then again the southern lands are said to be inhabited by the most beautiful women on earth. Keep your blonde haired, blue eyed girls Templars. We are going to paradise after we lead you to your chosen destination. We can wait awhile.” Christophe signalled his ships. By nightfall, the crews were drinking mead with the Templars. War stories were exchanged, the Templars behaved as they expected sailor thought soldiers would and the sailors drank as much as they thought the soldiers thought they should, Fights broke out and heads were smashed then they all returned to the serious business of drinking. Steele retired to his cabin with Christophe where they plotted a course for to the new world. Something in the pudgy faced seaman led Steele to believe he could be trusted.

By the light of the full moon the fleet set sail braving stormy seas they sighted land. Exploring along the coast Steele stood in awe at the scenery before him. For a short spell sailors made repairs to the ships while the Templars gathered provisions of fresh water and buffalo meat which they salted. Steele still had twelve of the eighteen ships he had left La Rochelle with. The other six had remained in Iceland at the settlement.

“Well, my friend you are as good as your word. This will see you and your crew on your way.” Placing a leather pouch of gold coins into Christophe’s hand Steele wondered what use he would find journeying down the length of the new world’s coast with a bag of gold especially if they were searching for a fabled land of El Dorado. “And I thank you Sire, what do you think of our new pendant?” Flying from the mast of each Genoese ship fluttered a black flag with a white skull and cross bones emblem. “We designed the flag in honour of the Templars. You have a skull and cross bones as one of your signs do you not.” Nodding his head, Steele smiled. “The black background is in memory of the night you left Paris under

blackened sails Sire.” Christophe turned to board his ship. “Will you return to Europe one day Christophe?” He hesitated for a moment. “Perhaps Steele, if it is only for one thing. That will be to hand these charts to my family. My grandson or great grandson may have use of them.” With that, he bowed. “If you ever set foot in Genoa Steele, ask for the Columbus family. My family will welcome you like a brother.” With a steady wind blowing southward Christophe’s fleet, sailed over the horizon. Waiting a week Steele made sure Christophe was not in the area. It was not that he mistrusted Christophe but simply put it was more prudent. Satisfied the Genoese Captain had indeed set sail for the south Steele backtracked to an island on the charts. While Christophe slept off a hangover Steele had copied the maps then carefully placed them back in the leather tube. Dawn found the Templar ships in a natural harbour off the south shore of Nova Scotia. Tall trees covered the low lying island. Small in size it was inconspicuous amongst the three hundred and sixty odd islands in Mahone bay. Anchoring on the south eastern side of the island the Templars set up camp patrolling the entire island on foot ensuring it was uninhabited. Once Steele was satisfied they were alone he ordered the men to begin construction on a deep pit in which he planned to bury the Holy Relics but above all he wished to conceal the location of the Ark.

Wishing to hide the treasure in a manner impossible for the uninitiated to find Steele began construction by digging down as far as possible. Walking along the shore, he placed white markers at regular intervals where the Templars began pushing back the sea. Damming the water in the bay he created an area dry enough to enable his men to hack away layer after layer of soil. Reaching bedrock they continued down exceeding one hundred feet digging a pit with tunnels leading to a treasure room. Once reaching a depth where the water was no longer able to be bailed out Steele had the craftsmen construct a chamber. It was in this chamber he placed the vast majority of the Templar relics. Tunnelling their way through mud and rock proved a perilous undertaking. Two men lost their lives in the cavernous depths of the tunnel. One through a cave in, while the other succumbed to noxious fumes. Their bodies were interned with the relics, forever guarding their precious artefacts. Covering the relics still in their crates with a layer of logs the men filled in ten feet of soil. They repeated the process building a wooden platform interlaid with coconut fibres. Day after day they toiled covering the treasure. Traps and obstacles were placed at regular intervals as they grew closer to the surface. Steele placed stone tablets written in an ancient script many Templars learnt from the ancient writings found in the Holy Land. He knew that the writing describing how to deactivate the traps would be lost when the current Templar generation passed on. Eventually, the day arrived when Steele symbolically shovelled the last spadeful of earth over the pit. Their mission had been accomplished. Now it was time to recuperate, gather provisions for the voyage back to Iceland and a time for revenge. Steele addressed the Templars standing before him he wished to make it clear that the order as they knew it no longer existed. “It has been an honour serving with you. You are hereby relieved of the sacred oath you once swore. Each of you are free to choose your own path, you are masters of your own destiny.” He paused watching the men he had led on the daring mission, the men who had risked their lives digging a pit through mud and rock. They were the last Templars to touch the sacred relics which held such an

important place in the Templar order. "As for me I am returning to Iceland then on to Scotland where I will consult with the Templar leaders on what shall become of the order in that country. Those wishing to accompany me to Scotland are free to come along. I have heard talk of heading south along the coast of the new world in search of a warmer climate. After Iceland and Greenland I cannot say I blame you." A few of the men laughed. Most stood solemnly wondering which option they would choose.

## Chapter 20

Four ships headed south west following the rout taken by the Genoese. Steele wondered if they had not made the wisest choice. Europe was ablaze with wars and political intrigue, what chance did his men stand of finding a stable place to live. But then again that was the life they had chosen. Far better to live a life filled with excitement than working a plough regretting never having had the courage to follow their destiny. Each man swore an oath to never reveal the location of the treasure. Steele had added a few traps which the men were not aware of just in case there were one or two among them tempted to return to Oak Island.

Returning to Scotland Steele found the Templar castles a hive of activity. According to reports Robert, the Bruce laid siege to Stirling castle. Certain Templar commanders accompanied Bruce as advisors which led to the English encirclement at Stirling castle. King Edward II led his army across the border in an attempt to relieve the castle only to find the road barred by the Scots. During the two day battle which took place the Scots defeated the English army at the Battle of Bannock Burn. A charge at a critical moment by a large body of heavy cavalry broke through the English lines. Steele felt the exhilaration of the charge, pushing through the English defences the formation closed in on Edward II. Realising the battle was lost Edward fled with his personal bodyguard. Panic stricken the rest of his army fled the field of battle attempting to reach the safety of the English border some ninety miles to the south. Edward made good his escape reaching Dunbar castle from where he sailed back to England. As for his army they suffered heavy casualties harried by the Scots all the way. Less than one third of Edward II force made it back to safety.

From Scotland, Steele made his way through Europe to Switzerland where the Templar bankers in France sought refuge. Along with their financial knowledge the Templars brought their much sought after military experience. Cantons in the Alps declared their independence from Austria, who naturally sent in troops to quell the rebellion. Well trained peasants armed with pikes, fought with a discipline and ferocity that shocked the Austrian cavalry. Once again at the perfect moment a charge by seasoned knights scattered the Austrian forces. With the help of the Templars, Switzerland gained its independence and became the world's foremost financial institution.

"Now is the time for vengeance, Jacque de Moly you will be avenged!" Shattered by the news that the Grand Master along with other Templars held prisoner in

Paris had been executed on the banks of the Ile de la cite. After retracting their confession obtained under torture where they confessed to worshipping an idol amongst other false charges their sentence was changed from life in prison to burning at the stake.

There was only one way in which Steele could get his hands on Jean. He had to draw him out. Despite the spies working for the Templars and bribes Steele, lavishly spread around to anyone with the slightest information which would enable him to track Jean down were in vain. Acting on a hunch Steele slipped back into France riding alone to the outskirts of Rennes le Chateaux. It was a small village in the Languedoc region. Cathar's fought the Pope's army for years giving rise to the theory the Holy Grail remained hidden in the area. Steele watched the activities in the walled town. It seemed far removed from the pious community he had visited years ago with the Templar hierarchy. A dark cloud of evil seemed to hang over the town. Even the ancient stone houses looked run down, neglected as did the townsfolk. From his perch among the rocks, Steele patiently waited observing darkly clad warriors lazing at their posts or harassing the locals. Deciding he had seen enough Steele lay down in a cave for the night. Tomorrow he would intensify the secret war declared by the Templars against the Pope and the Royal family of France.

Two brutish guards searching villagers entering the castle walls jeered at a young girl complaining at the way in which she was roughly handled. Their dirty hands travelled all over her body under the pretext of looking for weapons. She swore at them turning to run. They took a step toward her, hands clenched in fists then stopped dead. Slowly riding up the cobblestone steps was a lone Templar knight in full battle gear. His white horse pawed at the ground sensing an ensuing fight. It chomped at the bit eager to charge. Riding tall and proud, the knight held his shield close to his armoured body. A lance held in his right hand bore the Templar standard which fluttered in the breeze tied to its steel tip. He bore the white tunic of the Templar order over his highly polished armour. Through his open visor, they felt the cold chill of death staring at them. Fumbling for their weapons they drew rusty swords that had long since tasted blood. Steele rode steadily up the path until he drew level with the guards. As one, they abandoned their post running for the safety of the keep. "Stand to! We are under attack!" Yelling as they ran their screams alerted the dark clad warriors sleeping or eating their morning bowl of porridge washed down with red wine or ale. Rushing to arms, they hurried to their battle stations scattering villagers and livestock. Entering the courtyard Steele waited while the guards attempted to form themselves into a shield wall. Nervously they peered over their wooden shields waiting for a squadron of Templar knights to explode into the courtyard shattering bones and inflicting horrendous wounds with lance and sword. "He is alone, what are you waiting for. Kill him!" From the top of the ramparts, an officer screamed orders to his men. Hesitantly the shield wall advanced on Steele. Emboldened by the news he fought alone they closed in for the kill grinning sheepishly, eager to regain their reputation as hard men.

"Beau-Seant!" Spurring his eager warhorse Steele crashed through the shield wall scattering men left and right. Two went down under his horse's hooves while a third clutched at the lance embedded in his chest. Drawing his sword, Steele

turned his horse sharply catching the shield wall on their flank. Four more men went down under the attack. Again he struck sending men fleeing in panic or dropping to the floor clutching severe wounds. But it was not without its price. Steele's horse bled from a dozen wounds while he suffered from sword thrusts to his legs. Charging for a last time Steele reached the open gateway leading down the path to safety. Dismounting he patted his faithful horse on the head then struck its rump with the flat of his blade. Rearing up the horse bolted down the pathway leaving its rider facing a determined foe.

Rushing at the wall of men advancing toward him Steele hacked for all he was worth at the enemy. As the circle of warriors grew tighter around him, Steele fought to the last eventually going down under a rain of blows. "Hold, do not kill him. I am sure our leader would like to question this insolent Templar. Throw him into the dungeon, I will question him first." Stripped of his weapons and armour Steele was roughly dragged down stone steps to the dark depths of the castle dungeon.

"I see you have awakened Templar. Our leader, the great Jean, has ordered us to eliminate with extreme prodigious any Templar who might fall into our hands. Unfortunately until now you have all managed to evade the Brotherhood. We have something to celebrate today, our first captive Templar. Admittedly you fought well today but I sense there was something more behind your suicidal attack than merely searching death." The Captain of the guards signalled to three of his henchmen. Bound hand and foot Steele suffered under a flurry of blows and kicks from their iron shod boots. Barely conscious he felt the ropes around his wrists cut through. Before he could react the three men slammed him into a heavy oak door. Two of the thugs held his arm outstretched while a third hammered a rusty nail through his wrist. Steele screamed in pain feeling the jagged iron bolt pierce his flesh. "Tell me what it is you search at Rennes la Chateaux Templar. Is it our beautiful women?" Laughing, he pointed to a young girl cowering in the corner of the dungeon. "Pretty little thing is she not?" With the tip of his sword, he lifted her head upright. "She would not please me, see where it got her?" He laughed lewdly. "Soon enough she will see the error of her ways. What is your name Templar?" He nodded once again. Another nail shattered the bones in his other wrist leaving Steele hanging a foot from the filthy dungeon floor.

"Are you the one we search?" He struck Steele full in the mouth with the pommel of his sword. "I do not think so, our leaders nemesis would never have been foolish enough to walk willingly into our headquarters. Tell me Templar, do you wish to die like the son of God you followed?" Eagerly the thugs waited for the death blow.

"It will happen do not worry Templar but for now I need amusement." Pushing aside the thugs he grasped the door pulling it wide open. "Get out of my sight Templar!" He slammed the door viciously shut. Steele felt his body carried forward under the momentum. Suddenly the door shut halting its forward momentum. His body carried on, the nails tearing at his flesh and shattered bones. Pain coursed through his entire being. "Bloody hell, I missed it all." The Captain of the guard shouted. "You there slam the door again while I wait out here. When I shut the door, I forgot he would be on the other side when it closed." One of the thugs



laughed nervously. A swift blow to the jaw with the Captains iron clad fist cut him short.

“Wait, before we slam the door closed again. Nail his feet to the door as well, just so he does not fall off and injure himself.” Raucous laughter filled the confines of the dungeon. For a moment, a stifled cry escaped the lips of the young girl huddled in the straw strewn corner. “Ah, my pretty, is this all a bit too much for you?” Pressing his face close to hers, she smelt the stench of stale wine on his breath. “Watch and learn, you have my word you shall be spared. I would like you to spread the news of how we treat those opposed to the brotherhood.” Grasping a handful of hair he pulled her head back. “What other injuries were inflicted on the son of God?” She began to sob. “He had a crown of thorns placed on his head.” He nodded toward one of his henchmen. “Go fetch me a crown of thorns.” Running down the narrow passageway, the thug wondered where the hell he would find a crown of thorns at this time. He ran to the blacksmith who was known to craft thin strands of iron into wire. He returned with what looked like a crown of barbed wire. “Good, I did not think you would have been so ingenious. Maybe I was wrong about you. Go now and fetch me a spear.”

“And you fetch me a flagon of wine. Wait a moment bring me two, he looks like a tough bastard.” He glanced over to the young girl. “And also something for miss pretty over there, as a parting gift.” He walked over to where Steele hung as if he were on a cross. “I now crown you king of fools for having ventured into my domain Templar.” Grasping the barbed wire crown in his armoured gauntlets, the Captain brought the crown down hard on Steele’s head. Blood flowed down Steele’s face dripping onto the dirt strewn floor. “All hail the king!” Mockingly they bowed before Steele then they slammed the door shut again. His vision blurred almost losing consciousness. They pulled the door open again wondering if was still in the land of the living. “Here are your flagons of wine Captain. I also brought something for the girl there.” He pointed to the young girl huddled in the corner, eyes wide in terror. “Let me see what it is.” Snatching the bundle out of the man’s hand, the Captain inspected the length of linen. “What is this, the length of cloth?” He shook his head in bewilderment throwing the bundle of cloth at the girl. “I thought she might wish to make a dress or something Captain.” He stepped to the side out of the Captains reach. “You think too much Bertrand. Where is the spear I asked you for, surely one of you dumb asses has one?” They looked around the dungeon as if one might magically appear out of thin air. “Well equipped are you not? Go get me one now!” He kicked one of his men pushing him out of the room. Swallowing thirsty gulps of wine from the flagon he offered a drink to the young girl. She shook her head gripping the length of linen tightly as if it would somehow protect her.

“Once more should do it, I don’t think he will last much longer.” Gripping the door, he flung it closed. There was a dull thud then silence. “Told you so, open the door and let’s get out of here.” Opening the door they were faced with an unexpected sight. A spear protruded from Steele’s abdomen. “It’s not my fault. I came running around the corner with the spear when suddenly the door was slammed in my face. I could not stop in time and pierced the Templar’s side with the tip.” Taking a few steps away from the Captain, Bertrand looked in horror at the long wooden shaft of the spear protruding from a deadly wound. “The tip of the

spear you say! Bertrand, half the bloody spear is stuck in his guts.” Suddenly the Captain burst into fits of laughter. “Take him down then throw the cadaver into the dungeon. Our little girl seems lonely and her desirability is as dead as the Templar’s body.” Unable to pull the nails out of the door they wedged their battle axes between Steele’s wrists and levered until the limbs broke free of the metal spikes. Letting his body fall forward the momentum ripped his feet from the nails. Tossed in front of the young girl Steele lay in a bloody heap. To anyone he looked dead but his heart continued to function. Slowly the wounds began to heal. Appalled at the treatment meted out to the Templar the young girl, fighting back the feelings of queasiness reached out to him. Slamming the door shut a final time the guards threw dice for his armour and weapons they had foolishly left in a heap on the floor of the dungeon.

## Chapter 21

She waited for a few moments, trying to compose herself before setting about the grizzly task of moving the body to the other end of the cell. Huddled in the corner with her legs drawn up and her arms wrapped around her shoulders the young girl tentatively reached out. He seemed so at peace after all he had suffered. Laying him outstretched on the hard stone floor, she looked around the room. There was nothing to cover him with then her eyes fell on the length of white linen. Starting at his head, she worked her way down covering Steele’s body with the cloth. Satisfied she sat with her back against the dungeon wall watching the blood slowly seep through the fibres of the linen. An image appeared of a man’s face then the wounds on his arms and legs began to darken the white cloth. Recoiling in shock the image imprinted on the linen reminded her of the bible stories she had heard. She had covered the body of a Templar but now she looked at Jesus after he had been taken down from the crucifix. She made the sign of the cross asking for protection as heavy footsteps rang out down the corridor on the other side of the door. “You there get ready to open the door!” Shouting orders the Captain shoved his men in line anxious to present a good impression on their most important visitor. Terrified screams penetrated the heavy wooden door. Smiling at the girls anguished cries the Captain imagined her huddled in the corner watching the blood drain from the Templars body. He would see for himself soon enough, if only Jean their leader hurried. With a flourish a dark cloaked figure entered the courtyard below. “Look sharp you bunch of idiots. Here comes our great leader!” Standing smartly at what he considered attention he waited for the man who promised eternal life.

“Yes, thank you Captain. Now open the door if you please.” Jean held a scented handkerchief over his mouth and nose. He never could get used to the stench of the common soldiers. Bowing respectfully the Captain nodded to one of his men. The soldier smiled idiotically until the Captains iron shod boot crashed against his shin. He then hurriedly unlocked the door shoving it open with his shoulder. Hesitating for a moment he opened his mouth to scream. Steele’s sword flashed in

a downward arc lopping off the soldier's head which rolled across the stone floor coming to rest at Jean's feet. "What the hell is this sorcery?" Rushing through the open doorway the Captain suddenly froze. Steele stood before him. Once again Steele wore his beloved Templar uniform with full battle armour. "Don't take it personally Templar, I was following orders. No hard feeling between soldiers hey?" He dropped his sword holding up his hands. Steele's cold gaze froze the Captain's blood. "You are no soldier do not dishonour a noble profession scum." Steele attacked severing the Captain's hands with one well-placed thrust. Crouching low Steele struck again, this time hacking at the Captain's legs. Dropping to the filthy floor the Captain stared down at his mangled shins. Somehow he still managed to remain conscious. "Now you die slowly scum." The Captain felt cold steel piercing his ribs. Steele thrust the sword deep enough to wound, not to kill immediately. Bursting through the doorway Steele cut through the Captain's men. One attempted to put up a fight but was swiftly sent to meet his ancestors. The others turned fleeing the Templar, screaming in terror. Swiftly the panic spread through the castle as men dropped their weapons and fled from the Templar immortal.

Steele grabbed a handful of Jean's hair. He slammed his face down hard against the paving stones. Blood gushed from Jean's face. He attempted to wriggle free but Steele held him in a vice like grip. "This is for my wife Gudrun you bastard!" He slowly plunged his steel dagger into Jean's heart twisting while Jean screamed in pain. "This is for my daughter Sigrun." He smashed Jean in the face repeatedly with the pommel of the dagger. Managing to squirm loose for a second Jean turned over facing the bloodied floor. Steele slipped the dagger into the base of Jean's skull twisting the blade between the neck vertebrae pushing upward. He scrambled Jean's brains turning him momentarily into a quivering wreck. "And this is for my grandchildren I never met and the Templar lives lost because of you!" His dagger flashed between Jean's legs time and time again until he was brought out of his savage fury by the screams of the young girl. Blood dripped down Steele's face, Jean's blood which he wiped away with his hand. "Do not fear I will not harm you, no-one will." He paused for a moment looking down on Jean. Already the wounds were healing. "It is time for you to leave. My men will escort you to safety. Let the people here know that you are now under Templar protection." She screamed at the sight of horsemen galloping into the courtyard below. Steele watched with pride the Knights carrying Templar banners enter the courtyard in perfect order. Three Templars rushed into the room binding Jean hand and foot with stout metal wire. "My men are ready to take the young lady home as you requested Sire." Steele nodded turning to the girl. "Leave now and keep this quiet." She looked at Steele in awe. Taking the length of linen cloth with Steele's bloody imprint she hurried away accompanied by a Templar escort. Take this scum away. He kicked Jean in the crotch. Clear the building and surrounding areas of any of his men then head for the coast.

## Chapter 22

Accompanied by his most trusted warriors Steele loaded the metal coffin onto the warship. Seagulls screeched circling above in the dark clouds pregnant with rain. A storm was brewing on the horizon as they set sail for the corner of the map where ancient mariners sketched fanciful figures of mermaids and sea dragons. For two long weeks they sailed a south westerly course until Steele decided they had travelled far enough from Europe to be in the middle of the ocean. "Hoist the cargo on deck!" sailors hurried off to attach stout ropes to the metal coffin. Slowly the iron pen inched its way above the cargo hold. Jean screamed all the way up. Sometimes it was a cry of rage, at times a whimpering, almost pathetic whining.

"Look your last upon the vast expanse of ocean and the far off heavens Jean. For the rest of time all you will see is the dark depths of the pitch black ocean. I know you are able to feel extremes of hot and cold. Forever you shall feel the cold, wet embrace of the sea. It will be a fitting resting place for someone with a heart as cold and black as the icy depths." Jean gripped the metal bars tugging at them in desperation. "I had the cage built by master craftsmen Jean. Know you go to your watery grave enclosed in a metal coffin built by Templar ironsmiths. They have however mercifully left a small aperture where your face will be if standing upright. I cannot promise you the coffin will settle in a position whereby you will be able to look upon your new world. If it lands with the window facing the ocean floor then I am afraid the view will be rather limited." Steele signalled two Templars operating the block and tackle. They swung the coffin over the gunwale. It swung to and fro in the stormy winds buffeted by raging waves soaking Jean to the skin. He shivered wide eyed in terror. Suddenly the implications of spending eternity sealed in a metal coffin at the bottom of the ocean hit home hard. He struggled to free himself for all he was worth, pleading or threatening his words fell on deaf ears. Through the bars of his coffin Jean caught sight of Templars watching his final moments. They all had the same emotionless expression in their eyes. He took a last look at the dark sky torn apart by fiery streaks of lightning. Steele brought his outstretched arm down sharply. Both Templars at the block and tackle let the ropes run free. For a heartbeat the coffin seemed to hang motionless in mid-air. Suddenly it dropped landing in the trough of an oncoming wave. Steele watched it float for a moment as the seawater rushed angrily in through the aperture. Jeans hands were visible tugging at the bars, and then he was gone. Slowly the coffin plunged downward into the frigid depths below. "Jacque de Moly, you are avenged!" A solemn hush descended on the ship. Templars thought of their friends and comrades lost in battle. "Helmsman set a course for home!" Standing on the aft deck Steele looked back at the spot where Jean slid under the waves. "Home Sire, where would that be now?" It was a good question, a few of the European states still welcomed the Templars but the order was for now, fighting a secret war. It would be a war of revenge against the families and individuals responsible for the unjust accusations and seizure of Templar lands. It would be an ongoing war for generations to come.

## Chapter 23

## **Dien Bien Phu**

“And did your feeble Templar coffin hold me?” Jean le Rouge spat out the words with a vehemence that astounded Colonel Long Quan and Captain Ivanovich. “No it did not, nothing can hold the immortal Jean the Great.” He sliced at Steele’s bound wrist, the bayonet bit deeply into his flesh. “You dropped me into the depths of a watery hell but I eventually broke free. It felt like an eternity in a watery grave, my body shut down into something akin to a comatose form. I still regained complete control of my mental functions and I planned my revenge, how I plotted and planed down there Steele!” He jumped in front of the two brotherhood members. They backed away cautiously. “One fine day the metal eventually submitted to the corrosive power of the sea water. I was free at last spiralling up from the darkest depths watching the sun’s rays grow ever brighter as I floated to the surface.”

Jean stopped for a moment staring into space as if reliving his escape. “Then suddenly I breathed the pure air I had not tasted for over a century.” He smiled frenziedly. “Do you know where I eventually ended up?” He paused, waiting for an answer. When there was none he continued. “A passing Spanish fleet plucked me out of the ocean on their way to South America. It did not take long for me to work my way into a position of power amongst the Conquistadors in their conquest of the Inca. And we all know how that ended don’t we?”

“From there I travelled back to Europe with more wealth than a king. Money buys power. I spent time as the Pope once!” He laughed hysterically nudging his two brotherhood members who smiled nervously watching Jean swing the bayonet left and right. “The Catholics venerated Shroud of Turin, does it look familiar Steele?” He hacked away at Steele’s tethered arms once again. “That was you was it not you bastard. Remember the castle at Rennes le Chateau, the young girl who covered your stinking body with a length of white linen?” He raised his hands to the heavens. “Yes, the image of Jesus as he was taken down from the cross by his followers is in actual fact nothing but the blood smeared corpse of a bloody Templar!” He had worked himself into a rage, foaming almost at the mouth as he screamed. “I kept it as a reminder that one day I would totally destroy your beloved Templars forever and then eventually avenge all the wrongs you have done me.”

“You chose to spend eternity fighting wars for lost causes, sacrificing power and wealth for some noble cause or another. We crossed paths many times before today my friends.” Jean waved the bayonet in front of Long Quan who began sweating. “We fought each other in almost every battle the Legion took part in. I made sure I attempted the destruction of the Foreign Legion as I had the Templars. You have always managed to snatch victory from the ashes of almost inevitable defeat every time. You Legion have annoyed me as much as the Templars Steele but this time I feel it will be different. The Viet Minh are moving mountains Steele, literally and this battle here at Dien Bien Phu will have world changing consequences. You mark my words Steele, and I will be there watching you squirm and die. They will die Steele.” He pointed toward the French positions. “You will carry forever the guilt of knowing you could have avoided the deaths of

thousands if you show me where you hid the Ark of the Covenant. It was mine, I found it first!" He threw a tantrum like a child. "Tell me Steele and I will call off the Viet Minh. Keep it to yourself and I will torture you day and night physically while you watch us take your positions one by one. No quarter shall be given Steele."

"What do you do when you are the proverbial man who has everything?" He looked around waiting for a reply which was not forthcoming. "I had wealth beyond measure, power women." Steele lifted his head. "And men you faggot!" Jean spun around slicing Steele's wrist once again. Bamboo splinters flew into the darkness of the hut. "It was fashionable at the time Steele. As I said I had everything but it was not enough. I started buying kings, presidents and rulers of countries. It was a simple task setting them at each other's throats, first for profit. My companies owned munition factories and medical supplies. I began recruiting followers who I deemed worthy of eternal life." Sarcastically Steele nodded at the two brotherhood members. "Like these two gullible fools here?" Long Quan and Ivanovich exchanged glances. "They are two of the most promising followers Steele. They will have their just reward when we have taken Dien Bien Phu." Steele laughed in Jean's face. "Did you tell them you made that same promise to Hitler and a few weeks later promised Stalin the same eternal glory in exchange for the blood of millions? It is always the innocent that suffer the most. Don't let him feed his ego with the blood of your people. Are you with him or do you stand for common decency? Choose now and stand up for what you truly feel is right." For a moment Long Quan and Ivanovich hesitated before theatrically standing side by side with Jean. "I see you have chosen. You made the wrong decision boys."

Tugging down with all his strength Steele managed to snap the bamboo which had been weakened by glancing blows from the bayonet and knife. Lunging forward he embedded the splintered bamboo deep into Ivanovich. Screaming in pain Ivanovich stared wide eyed at the length of bamboo protruding from his neck. Blood spurted bright red slowly robbing him of his life force. Steele withdrew the bamboo striking out again with the speed of a cobra. Long Quan opened his mouth to plead for mercy. Shattering teeth on the way into his mouth and down his throat Steele slammed the bamboo into his opponent. Jean le Rouge managed to push the quivering body of Long Quan between him and Steele. Doing so he avoided the first thrust with the bloody bamboo weapon Steele wielded with such deadly precision. The second caught him in the chest cracking a rib and puncturing a lung. Hobbling from the hut Jean fled into the darkness hoping the remaining cords binding Steele would hold him long enough to escape his vengeance.

Reaching out Steele managed to get a grip on a dagger left on the rickety wooden table. He slashed at the cords binding his legs and arm. Scrounging around the hut, he recovered his weapons and battle jacket. He felt weak but given the experience he had gone through he thought he had come out better than expected. Crouching in the darkness outside the hut, he waited for a moment getting his bearings. Not far off Polanski screamed again. "Never leave a man behind! Not even a traitorous bastard like Polanski. But then again I can understand what drove him to do what he did." Steele slipped quietly through the bushes toward the screams. By the light of a small campfire, he caught sight of the young woman running a sharp knife over Polanski's chest. Even in the feeble

light of the fire Steele could see the blood running down Polanski's stomach. He crawled forward watching for any sign of movement. A lone gunman stood watching, a bottle of beer in his hand. Suddenly he turned walking to a puddle close by. Reaching down into the cool water, he picked up another beer. As he took the first long sip from the bottle Steele grabbed him from behind. He struggled to break free from the arm crushing his neck, drowning on the beer trapped in his throat. Moments later he lay dead on the jungle floor. Walking directly to where the girl watched Polanski squirm in pain Steele smiled when she did not turn around thinking it was the beer drinker returning. He struck her on the back of the head with the butt of his rifle. She dropped like a stone, unconscious.

"Polanski, it's me Steele. Let's get the hell out of here." Steele whispered. Polanski's eyes widened with fright. He fully expected the hardened non-com to carry on with the torture session. Astonished he watched Steele pull out a field dressing from his pouch. "Not much we can do with that but when we get back to the boys, we will have more medical supplies. Let's go you bloody bastard." Steele lifted Polanski over his shoulder carrying him through the jungle night toward the bunker where the rest of his squad waited. It had been a long night, it promised to be an even longer battle judging by the way Jean had spoken about the Viet Minh moving mountains in order to get at the French garrison. Steele wondered what the near future would hold scanning the foreboding hills overlooking the French positions at Dien Bien Phu.

Sliding over the trench parapet, Steele stared down the barrel of Bastien-Thiry's M1 carbine. "Welcome back Sergeant. I was getting worried about you. What in God's name happened out there?" He stared at Steele waiting for an answer. "Adolf and Voyeur bring Polanski in. He needs medical attention." Steele brushed past Bastien-Thiry. Reaching over the parapet Voyeur grabbed hold of Polanski's arm. "Help me Adolf I don't want to drop him. Bloody hell, look at what the bastards have done to him." Using what medical supplies they had on hand they attempted to staunch the flow of blood from Polanski's wounds. By daybreak he was in a stable condition. "There is nothing much happening around here men. Let's get the gear in position for the drop and see if we can have Polanski evacuated." Steele looked at Polanski pitying him in a way. His family were dead for sure, that was one thing he had learned about the ways of the Communist system. They watched the welcomed sight of parachute blossoming in the morning sky. 1 B.E.P landed in Dien Bien Phu, they no longer felt alone. Polanski flew out on the first medical evacuation flight. He would return to France after his ordeal. One dark day in a hospital in Marseille he slit his wrists on hearing the fate of his family.

## **Chapter 24**

**5 March 1954**

“Sergeant assemble the men, we have a reconnaissance mission ordered by General de Castries himself.” Bastien-Thiry could not help looking smug. He had spoken in person to the General. De Castries even shook his hand when he wished him luck. He wondered how the men did not seem to share the enthusiasm he felt at meeting a General. “Gather round now men, very well let me commence the briefing.” Steele lit a cigarette which started a chain reaction. Each member of the team lit up in turn. “Are you all comfortable then?” Bastien-Thiry began to feel a little annoyed at their indifference. 1 B.E.P has been given the task of reconnoitring the hill to the South West of the entrenched camp. “As you are all well aware each time our forces have been on patrol for the last few months we encounter more and more resistance. Our commanding officers are now convinced the Viet Minh have brought up a sizeable force. This is what they had planned on. The Viet Minh will be drawn into attacking our positions and we will eliminate them on the wire.” He pointed theatrically to the rolls of barbed wire strung out in front of the position. “It seems an artillery piece has been quite a nuisance these past few days. We are here at Huguette.” He pointed to the position marked in red on his map. “We are to be the point element of the two companies who are to reconnoitre the area. Once we discover the location of the artillery piece it will be destroyed. Are there any questions?” He waited expecting questions as in Saint Cyre, alas, there were no questions asked. No questions directed at him, but a few were asked of Sgt Steele. “Hey Sarge, how many Viet Minh are expected to be in the positions?” Adolf polished his M.G 42 out of habit. “What is the name of the bloody mountains they call hills Sarge?” Looking over the map placed on a sandbag Kiwi took in all the details of the terrain surrounding them. “It is hill 781, not that the name or number make any difference to us. Get up that hill and take out the arty. That is all we are concerned about. The Viet Minh artillery is taking pot shots from its vantage point at the airfield. We all know what it means if they take out the ‘planes.” Another shell screamed overhead erupting in a cloud of grey smoke. “That was bloody close, a little more to the right and they would have hit the bunkers around the command post.” Steele looked to the south west. “Mon Lieutenant the Viet’s will have lines of defence between us and the arty pieces further to their rear. Does H.Q have any idea where their positions are?” Shrugging his shoulders, Bastien-Thiry stood up signalling Steele and the rest of the team to move out.

Setting out from the camp fifteen minutes before the two companies of 1 B.E.P Steele watched his men moving carefully through the bush. Advancing in a small group their only hope of survival was to remain undetected. Kiwi carried the radio on which he was to call in artillery fire from the French guns situated in the French centre which would pulverise the Viet guns. Working their way slowly toward the foot of hill 781 under the blazing sun Steele looked up to see Morane spotter planes hovering above ready to call in airstrikes against the Viet positions. “That will alert the Viets up on the hill.” Bastien-Thiry nodded in agreement burning a blood sucking leech off of his calf. Clouds of white butterflies fluttered in the humid air. The smell of vegetation rotting under the hot sun permeated the entire area.

Steele walked point stealthily moving through the bush without disturbing the foliage which might draw the unwanted attention of enemy snipers. He felt his



nerves tingle, the familiar feeling of adrenaline about to course through his body at the first sounds or sight of contact. At times it was difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. They began the ascent of hill 781 cautiously advancing ahead of the main body of Legion Paras. A quarter of the way up the hill Bastien-Thiry raised his hand, fist clenched. The signal was passed down the line with each man dropping to one knee, eyes straining to pierce the thick veil of foliage ahead or to the flanks. He pointed toward a fallen tree trunk covered with freshly cut branches camouflaging a bunker entrance. Steele gave him thumbs up. Noiselessly the team slipped past the firing aperture. Voices could be heard chattering excitedly from the fortified position. Again a shell streaked toward the runway. "Could be they are spotters for the arty Mon Lieutenant." Steele whispered to Bastien-Thiry. "I want a prisoner Steele. We have to get information about the enemy strength." Nodding Steele motioned Voyeur over. "Find out who is in the bunker Voyeur. Don't take any chances though." Smiling briefly Voyeur handed his scoped M1 carbine to Kiwi then unslung a Mat-49. Slithering forward he crawled a few meters to the bunker entrance. From their vantage point on the flank Steele covered Voyeur on his approach. For a few seconds he disappeared then held up his hand with four fingers extended. "A la bayonet men!" Steele drew his bayonet then slipped over to where Voyeur waited a long razor sharp dagger in hand. He drew a square in the sand with four stones placed where the Viets were positioned in the bunker. Steele designated each man an enemy soldier to take out. Crouched at the entrance they waited for Steele's signal. He raised his hand then looking to ensure each man was ready he brought it down sharply rushing into the dimly lit bunker. Heading for the Viet sitting at the far corner of the bunker Steele noticed the PPSH-41 on his legs. Wide eyed in terror the Viet grabbed for the sub machine gun in his lap. Diving headlong Steele collided with the Viet head butting him with his helmet. Blood spurted from the Viets nose and mouth. Pushing down hard on his bayonet Steele aimed for the man's heart. He felt the blade tear through uniform and flesh grating between the man's ribs coming to rest in the vital organ. For a few seconds the Viet thrashed about wildly. Steele held him down turning the blade before pulling it out and thrusting it into the Viets throat. Warm blood flowed over Steele's hand. Finally the body went limp, the light in the man's eyes faded. Around him Steele saw men locked in mortal hand to hand combat. Adolf dispatched his Viet with the sharpened edge of his entrenching tool. A little trick he had learnt on the Eastern Front fighting the Red Army he joked. Voyeur finished off the third Viet while Bastien-Thiry pummelled the fourth with his fists. "I wanted a prisoner, now I have one." He seemed very satisfied with himself. "Take a look down there Sergeant." Voyeur pointed through the firing aperture. Down below Steele watched the two companies advancing up the hill. If there were many more bunkers like this they were in deep trouble.

"Okay men, well done. Tie up the Viet and we will come back for him on the way down." No sooner had the Viet been tightly trussed up with parachute cord when all hell broke loose on hill 781. Artillery shells screamed in exploding far too close for comfort. Down below Steele watched the Fourth Company advancing rapidly up the hill under cover of the bombardment. The 155mm shells began falling further up the hill, the arty walking the bombardment forward. "Let's go men. We have to locate the enemy arty for the gunners." Scrambling from the bunker Steele

led the team uphill. About halfway up hill 781 they received orders on the radio to wait for the rest of the company. Setting up in all round defence they waited anxiously conscious of how outnumbered they were by the Viets. The lead elements of the company were almost at their position when the entire ridge above erupted. A hail of automatic weapon fire accompanied by mortars and artillery rained down on the advancing Paras. Hand grenades thrown from above exploded with deadly effect. Firing as they advanced the Legion Paras burst into the first line of camouflaged bunkers. Savage hand to hand fighting took place. A wounded Lieutenant urged his men onwards ignoring his injuries.

“Take out that bunker!” Crawling up the almost vertical slope, Steele dropped a white phosphorous grenade into the firing slit. For a few seconds before the grenade exploded the heavy machine gun in the bunker continued to wreak havoc on the Legionnaires below despite the harassing fire from Steele’s team. With a dull thud and a blinding flash, the grenade exploded spewing forth burning phosphorus. It burned through the flesh of the Viet gunners. Screams of pain were briefly heard above the noise of battle. For what seemed an eternity they fought the well-entrenched enemy. Spotter planes swooped over the field of battle but could not locate the enemy artillery or mortars which rained death on their comrades below. “Sergeant we have been ordered to fall back. Captain Cabiro has been badly wounded in the legs.” Dodging through a hail of bullets to deliver his message Kiwi emptied a clip in the general direction of the enemy as payback. “Withdraw to the bunker and pick up the Viet prisoner. Cover each other and don’t bunch up.” Steele lay down a heavy volume of covering fire using a captured PPSH-41. Bullets cracked past splintering the branches of trees as they worked their way to the bunker. Their Viet was still there although he had attempted to wriggle his way to the entrance. “Let’s go you bastard.” Hoisting the prisoner over his shoulder Steele made his way down the hill where they re-joined the Fourth Company. Wounded Legionnaires received medical assistance while the fallen were covered in ponchos.

Exhausted they returned to their position on Huguette. Their bunker seemed a haven of peace after the fighting experienced earlier. Bastien-Thiry marched his prisoner over to the command post while Steele and his team cleaned weapons, ate and slept. A couple of hours later Bastien-Thiry walked into the bunker looking decidedly worried. “Did the prisoner talk Mon Lieutenant?” Handing Bastien-Thiry a cigarette Steele sat down next to him. “We lost four men today Steele.” A sad expression crossed his face. “Yes I heard Mon Lieutenant, and another twenty eight were wounded. It is a heavy price to pay.” An artillery shell exploded in the perimeter shaking the overhead cover of the bunker. A fine dust trickled through the wooden and sandbagged roof onto the dirt floor. “Our prisoner did not stop talking. Our chaps had to eventually knock some sense into him when he became abusive.” He smiled dragging on a cigarette.

“It worries me that the Viets have managed to drag artillery pieces up the hills overlooking our positions. It worries me even more that our counter fire was ineffective and that the air force can’t spot them.” Expecting to hear Bastien-Thiry tell him the situation was not as dire as he thought Steele was surprised to hear the officer agree. “According to intelligence reports General Vo Nguyen Giap has assembled an army of peasants who at this very moment are moving supplies,

heavy artillery, food you name it they are carrying it on their backs up the slopes on the other side of the mountains. Our prisoner spoke of arty positions dug into caves or even positions excavated out of the rock face.” He stubbed out his cigarette on the floor. “Welcome to the land of the red ants Mon Lieutenant. If those shells falling are ranging shots for a larger concentration of artillery pieces we are in for a rough ride. Get some sleep while you can Mon Lieutenant, I have a feeling things are going to get a bit rough soon.” Placing a Colt 45 on his chest Steele lay back and shut his eyes.

## Chapter 25

### 13 March

Steele felt uneasy sitting on the roof of the bunker looking up at the foreboding hills. It would soon be twilight. A new moon rose in the darkening sky. “This is a great time for the Viet sappers to probe our lines Voyeur.” Sipping a canteen mug of hot coffee Voyeur watched Legionnaires attaching tins from their ration packs on the strands of barbed wire to their front. “Two days ago when we patrolled toward hill 555 only three kilometres from the command post did they expect us to meet such heavy resistance?” Shrugging his shoulders Steele wondered exactly how much they knew about Giap’s forces. “I don’t think anyone is aware of the Viet build up. We wanted them to come to us but now they are here and in strength.” The usual artillery shell fired from the Viet positions slammed into the runway. “It looks like their aim is getting pretty good.” Steele checked the 50 Browning set to fire at the open field in front of their position which was strewn with barbed wire entanglements. “Even with the support of the Chaffee tanks we did not break through the Viet positions. Their mortars have every position here in range. What happens if there are more arty pieces than we think Sergeant?” A wry smile creased Steele’s face. “Well, we will have to see when the moment arrives. I have a weird feeling about tonight. What time is it now?” Voyeur looked at his watch. “The time is 17h00 Sergeant, Adolf is making some kind of stew from rations he won off the Engineers in a poker game. Do you want me to fetch you some?” Turning to reply Steele’s words were drowned out in an avalanche of artillery shells exploding across the entire position. With pin point accuracy, the Viet shells straddled the runway. Pilots rushed to their aircraft in an attempt to fly their planes out of the fortified camp. A Dakota transport plane taxied down the interlocking metal plate runway gaining speed. A shell from a 105 exploded close enough to pierce the Dakota’s fuel tanks with red hot shrapnel. Bursting into flames, the stricken aircraft careened into a shell hole. Legionnaires rushed through the deadly shell bursts in an attempt to rescue the pilots trapped in the burning cockpit. Driven back by the intensity of the flames the Legionnaires were forced to watch the pilots smashing at the Plexiglas with their fists in a futile effort to escape the inevitable fiery death that awaited them. “Get under cover, stay in the bunker or the trenches! When the barrage lifts, be ready to repel the infantry

attacks!" Rushing to man the 50 Browning Steele wondered if Jean was somewhere in the vicinity. He immediately dismissed the idea knowing Jean would be holed up somewhere nice and safe while he manipulated others to do his dirty work. Well camouflaged Viet artillery pounded the badly protected French batteries with accurate and devastating fire. The Viet Minh 351 Division concentrated their fire on Beatrice held by the 13 Demi Brigade de la Legion Etrangere. Under a barrage of shells, the trenches and bunkers were pulverised. A direct hit on the command bunker by a 105 shell killed the commanding officer and his staff. Wave after wave of Viets attacked the position while the Legionnaires fought against odds of ten to one. A little before midnight despite heroic efforts Beatrice fell into the hands of the Viets. Only a small number of Legionnaires managed to escape into the valley or the Nam-yum River, which was choked with the bodies of dead Viets. During the night, the Viet gun flashes were visible to the French artillery. But as the Viets had dug their guns into the hill side it was all but impossible to silence their guns.

The break of day revealed a nightmarish sight of bodies strewn all over the hill. Hundreds of dead and dying Viet Minh lay caught in the barbed wire entanglement. The bodies of the Legionnaires sprawled where they fell in the trenches or buried alive in their bunkers after receiving a direct hit from artillery shells. The Viet Minh called a brief truce enabling the French to recover their wounded. The sights and stench of death had a lasting effect on the French troops recovering dead and wounded while the Viets began believing they might just win.

## **Chapter 26**

### **14 March**

"Gabrielle is in dire need of reinforcements or a relief column. They were hit during the night as well but managed to hold their positions." Pointing toward the hill North of Huguette Steele sat down on an ammunition box. "We have volunteered to scout ahead of the main body. We should be receiving additional troops any minute now." As if on cue Dakota transport aircraft appeared overhead. Flying low paratroopers jumped into a sky filled with fire and flack. "Jesus where did the Viets get anti-aircraft guns from?" He looked over at the surrounding hills in shock. Soviet M-1939 37mm anti-aircraft guns blazed away at the transport aircraft and the paras drifting down on the central position. Dropped at 600 feet to avoid enemy fire the paras formed up awaiting orders. "Who are those guys?" Kiwi nodded over to where Vietnamese paratroopers gathered around their French officers. Bastien-Thiry gave them a brief once over. "It must be the 5 B.P.V.N. De Castries ordered reinforcements last night." They looked exhausted after dropping into a strange area in the midst of an attack. "Are they any good Sergeant? Steele shrugged his shoulders. "We will have to see how they do tomorrow morning." The pathfinders looked at each other in surprise. "Yes boys, we are going over to Gabrielle tomorrow morning with the 5 B.P.V.N. Let's hope they fight as well as

their countrymen up on those damn hills.” Artillery shells exploded directly on the runway rendering it unusable for the moment while tracer rounds and flak attempted to claw the French aircraft from the sky.

“Mon Lieutenant we have been hearing rumours about Lt Colonel Piroth. Is it true he committed suicide with a grenade this morning?” Crouched alongside Bastien-Thiry, Steele watched the enemy shells obliterate a French artillery position. “He was in charge of the counter fire if the enemy brought up the big guns. His plan failed miserably, all day he wondered around in a daze apologising for his failure.” A shell exploded close by showering them with dirt. “His bunker received a direct hit, he was killed outright.” Steele looked Bastien-Thiry directly in the eyes. “Well that is the official version anyway Steele. Let’s stick to it. The news might have a bad effect on the morale of our chaps if they knew the truth.” Staying close to the side of trench Steele waded through ankle deep water to the bunker where his men cleaned their weapons or prepared for the inevitable attack on Huguette.

As night fell Steele and his pathfinder took up their positions firing flares when the tin cans on the wire rattled then spraying the area with machine gun fire. “Sounds like Gabrielle is taking a beating Sarge.” Voyeur scanned the area to their front. “Giap is hitting them hard but the Algerian Tirailleurs are tough bastards. Most of their N.C.O’s fought in Italy during the war. They will be a hard nut to crack Voyeur.” Tomorrow morning we will see if there is anyone alive up there.” Bugle calls and war cries drifted down the valley from the direction of Gabrielle despite the intense artillery fire erupting all over the French positions.

## **Chapter 27**

### **15 March**

“Sergeant, get the men ready please. We move out before daybreak. It seems the Algerians managed to hold off the Viets for the time being despite their commanding officer and all his staff being killed early on in the fight by a direct hit on their bunker.” Steele shook his head. “It seems to be happening all the time. As soon as the Viets start their attacks they target the command bunker eliminating the entire command structure at the outset of the battle. Remind me to change position when we get back Mon Lieutenant. The command bunker is too close for comfort here.” Wondering if Steele was serious Bastien-Thiry scanned the hillside to the North with his binoculars. All he saw in the dark night was the flash of continual explosions bracketing the summit of Gabrielle.

“Let’s go men, Kiwi and Adolf take point followed by myself and Bastien-Thiry.” Bastien-Thiry was about to protest being called by his name and not by his rank saw the look in Steele’s eyes and decided to remain quiet. Voyeur you get to watch our backs. Are there any questions?” There were none so Steele waved his hand signalling the advance. “March to the sound of the guns.” Bastien-Thiry quoted something said by a French officer at the Battle of Waterloo. “And we all know how

that battle turned out for the French.” Kiwi cracked a joke which sent chuckles of laughter down the team. Bastien-Thiry shook his head deciding intellect was wasted on these Philistines. Followed closely by two companies of 1 B.E.P Steele and his team walked steadily onwards toward the sounds of battle to the North. Leaving the relative security of Huguette they were joined by a few M24 tanks and the 5 B.P.V.N. Almost immediately the column came under sporadic shellfire. “Get a move on you can’t stay here!” Turning to see what the commotion was about Steele saw the Vietnamese paratroopers slow down their advance. For the most part they dropped to the ground refusing to advance until their officers drew their side arms and threatened them. Even so they moved forward a few feet then dropped to cover again. “It is going to take forever like this. Do something to get them on the move Lieutenant!” Brushing past an officer of the 5 B.P.V.N Steele handed him an ammunition pouch filled with grenades. “This is how you do it Lieutenant.” Steele pulled the pin from a grenade making sure the Vietnamese paras were watching. Casually he tossed the grenade behind them. In an instant they were on their feet running toward Gabrielle. “Most unorthodox Steele but effective I will admit. Now come let’s worry about our own team.” Bastien-Thiry pointed straight at Gabrielle. Once again the relief column set off making decent progress. Arriving minutes ahead of the column Steele called a halt before they attempted to wade across the river at Ban-Khe-Phat. “If the Viets are going to hit the column this is the perfect spot. Kiwi I want you to warn our two companies to be prepared for an ambush.” Kneeling down in a shell hole Kiwi radioed Steele’s message to the company commanders of the Legion Para companies. “Keep a sharp look out boys, I am running across.” Setting up behind cover the team prepared to open fire if anything went wrong. Steele waited a moment or two before dashing across the river bed. Wading knee deep through the murky water he fully expected to feel bullets tearing into his flesh at any second. The water slowed him down, glancing left and right as he pushed onward he spotted a dozen perfect ambush positions along the far bank. The distant treeline seemed so near yet so far. Gratefully he scrambled up the bank on the far side taking cover in a clump of bushes. Amidst the noise of battle coming from Gabrielle it was difficult to hear any enemy movement in the bush ahead. Uncomfortable with the decision but unable to do anything else Steele waved his team over. One by one they sprinted through the river joining Steele on the far side. “Okay, well done guys but I just know the Viets have something up their sleeve. Here come the rest of our men and the tanks.” Far to the left of the Legion paras the 5 R.P.V.N advanced haphazardly. The first elements of 1 B.E.P waded through the shallow water as a deadly storm of high explosives rained down upon them. Viet Minh hidden in the undergrowth and lunar landscape of shell craters on the slope of Gabrielle opened fire with everything they had. Legionnaire paras went down under a hail of bullets and shrapnel. “Get out of here! Were in the kill zone, our only way out is to fight through the ambush.” Dashing forward Steele and his team did fire and movement toward the enemy positions. The first line of enemy trenches was now visible. Rushing up to join Steele and the team dozens of Legion paras advanced firing as they stormed the enemy entrenched on the lower slope of Gabrielle. Overhead fire from the supporting tanks enabled the Legion to gain ground. “We have to break through their arty is getting our range now!” Mortars and artillery shells

pulverised the area leading to the lower slope. "En avant la Legion!" Without a backward glance Bastien-Thiry jumped to his feet brandishing a Mat-49. As one the Legion paras rose to their feet pushing forward shooting, taking cover, reloading and moving ever upward toward the surviving Algerian Tirailleurs.

Chasing after Bastien-Thiry the pathfinders spread out left and right. Steele had just caught up with Bastien-Thiry when a shell exploded close to Adolf. One second Steele had him in his peripheral vision then the next he disappeared in a cloud of dust and flying shell splinters.

"Adolf, the dirty reds killed Adolf!" Scrambling over to the smoking shell crater Voyeur scratched in the dirt unable to comprehend the fact that his friend had been vaporised by a shell. "The bastards, those bloody commie bastards. Look at what they have done." Voyeur suddenly stopped scrapping in the dirt hearing Adolf voice coming from another shell hole a few meters away. "Adolf you idiot, what are you playing at?" He scuttled over to join him. "The blast must have sent me flying into the hole but a huge piece of shrapnel destroyed my M.G.42." He held up the machine gun for Voyeur to inspect. A chunk of still hot shell splinter lay firmly embedded halfway through the feed tray and trigger mechanism. "It's had it do you think it is easy to find spare parts out here in this shit hole?" Voyeur fell back laughing with relief. "Leave it here. I saw a Chatellerault down there. Hang on and I'll get it for you." Voyeur scurried down the hill a few meters to where he had seen an abandoned magazine fed machine gun. Scooping up the weapon along with bandoliers of ammunition, he returned in time to see Adolf burying his beloved M.G 42. "Okay, enough of this nonsense Voyeur, Adolf let's go!" Once again Bastien-Thiry forged ahead blazing away at anything that moved. Steele spotted a bunker occupied by the Viets. He shouted a warning to the others then positioned Adolf, Kiwi and Voyeur as fire support team. They unleashed a heavy volume of fire on the bunker while Steele worked his way to the flank. He was in position and about to throw a grenade into the bunker when Bastien-Thiry dropped down next to him. "Ready?" They nodded to each other, dropped a grenade each through the bunker entrance then waited for the explosions. Two muffled blasts sounded simultaneous from within the bunker. Dust and smoke spewed out of the entrance as Steele rushed in followed by Bastien-Thiry. "Going left!" Steele shouted spraying the left side of the bunker with hot lead. "Beau-Seant, die you bastards!" For a moment, Steele thought he had heard wrong. There it was again Bastien-Thiry screamed the Templar war cry. Confused Steele checked that all the Viets were dead then leant against the bullet riddled timber of the bunker wall. "I take it you are a real history buff Mon Lieutenant. Beau-Seant was the war cry of the Knights Templars." Bastien-Thiry remained silent for a few moments. "Do you think I joined you by mistake the first day on the D.Z Steele?" He noticed a look of distrust on Steele's face. "Templar blood still runs deep in the veins of a few families Steele. Legend has it that a Templar Knight discovered the Ark of the Covenant and the secret of immortality. Unfortunately, so did a monk who unlike the Templar wished to use its power for evil. But then again I am sure a hard veteran like you would not believe in such nonsense." A hint of a smile creased his lips. "We will talk about this later if we live long enough Mon Lieutenant." Having broken through the Viet lines, the Legion paras reached the first line of barbed wire entanglements. Stopping dead in their tracks they came

face to face with the grizzly sight of hundreds of Viet bodies hanging on the wire. A direct result of their human wave attacks combined with the defender's firepower.

Believing the position to be all but lost De Castries ordered the evacuation of Gabrielle. Withdrawing under fire barely, a hundred Tirailleurs managed to link up with the Legion paras fighting furiously to hold off the Viet Minh. Unsupported by the 5 B.P.V.N, the Legion paras bore the brunt of the combat. Making their way back to Huguette Steele reflected on the outcome of the mission. "We lost eight men out there today Mon Lieutenant. Another thirty eight wounded plus a few missing in action. Now that Gabrielle has fallen I expect Anne-Marie will be next." They sat around the bunker drinking hot mugs of coffee with a liberal amount of Cognac added. Unknown to them Corporal Parsat listed as M.I.A had suffered a severe head wound. Discovered by the Viets he had been placed close to the other wounded awaiting an uncertain fate. Without treatment or water he crept away from the others crawling through the bush. His epic journey through the Viet lines lasted two days, covering four kilometres. Legionnaires from 2 R.E.I recovered the exhausted Parsat near their positions where he was eventually treated for his wounds and evacuated to Hanoi.

"Reports of intercepted Viet radio communications place their casualties at around 1 500 dead and thousands more wounded. They have paid a heavy price for the conquest of the two positions on the Northern side of the valley." Pointing to the crude map sketched in the dirt of the trench floor Bastien-Thiry briefed the men of Steele's pathfinder team. What about the airdrops and supplies Sergeant? We seem to be running a bit low on things." Steele replied to Voyeurs question noticing how his men still relied on him even when there was an officer present. "Only the Southern D.Z is open, the Northern D.Z where we landed originally is as you obviously know under enemy control" Clearing his throat Bastien-Thiry added "For the moment yes, but I am sure a relief force is underway as we speak." The Legionnaires stared at him in disbelief. "We know for a fact the Viets have at least two divisions along the road between us and the nearest French base. There is no way the relief column is getting through." Shaking his head Adolf looked at Bastien-Thiry, there was nothing he liked more than to argue with an officer. "At night casualty evacuations are still taking place, why they managed to fly 250 wounded back to Hanoi last night." Bastien-Thiry countered. "All good and well Mon Lieutenant but Anne-Marie is held by the Thai's. How long do you think they will hold out against the Viets?" Sitting there in silence for a few moments they contemplated how devastating the results would be to the rest of the positions in the valley if Anne-Marie were to fall into Viet hands. The team listened to the sounds of Viet Minh propaganda shouted over bull horns by Viet Commissars at the Thai's on Anne-Marie.

## **Chapter 28**

**22 March**



A fine tropical mist covered the shell torn valley. Tanks warmed their engines while the Paras of 1 B.E.P formed up at their jump off positions. Under cover of dark, as they had for the past few nights the Viet sappers together with an army of peasant labourers dug their trenches toward the French positions on Isabelle. Once again 1 B.E.P was called on to push back the Viets entrenched in well prepared positions with automatic weapons and individual fox holes.

“Right men, we advance down the road toward Isabelle. As we did yesterday, our team will scout ahead relaying the enemy positions back to the company commanders.” Steele looked at his men. They were suffering from battle fatigue, hunger and above all a feeling of abandonment by the High Command. “The Thai’s defending Anne-Marie all bugged out the other night leaving the position open for the Viets to casually occupy. The Air Force now has a very small D.Z available on which to drop supplies.” Steele waited for an outgoing salvo of artillery shells passing overhead. “As you have seen, most of the supplies end up falling into enemy hands. When we are out there today, recover what you can especially ammo.” Bastien-Thiry nodded then called the team over to a forward trench. “We set off in a few minutes. Keep your eyes open and give no quarter. The Viets are slowly strangling Isabelle with their damned trench systems. We will be doing this every day if we do not hit them really hard this morning. Good luck Legionnaires.” With that, he stubbed out his cigarette with the heel of his boot then vaulted over the parapet. “Bloody hell where does he think he is Sergeant, better get after him.” Following close on Bastien-Thiry’s heels Steele and his team pushed forward toward the Viet positions. “It seems he is becoming a bit more like a front line officer every day. Might make a Legionnaire of him yet, hey Sergeant?” Adolf laughed at his own joke. Behind the Pathfinder team advanced the combat companies of 1.B.E.P. supported by the tanks.

They had not gone far when all hell broke loose. With exceptional ferocity, the Legion Paras made a frontal attack on the entrenched Viet positions. Slowly but surely they pushed the Viets back clearing the road to the Southern and most isolated outpost. Enemy dead littered the field of battle, too numerous to count. But as usual Legionnaires made the ultimate sacrifice fighting for their friends. Nine Legion Paras were killed while a number wounded.

“Among the Viet prisoners Steele noticed a Viet, who did not fit the usual stereotype Bo-Dois image of the Viet peasant. He exuded a confidence and manner of bearing different to the other prisoners. Even his uniform and boots were a cut above the rest. Instinctively Steele felt this man was worth interrogating. He approached Bastien-Thiry. “Mon Lieutenant I have seen you looking at that Viet with interest as well. What if he were to stay behind with us for a while, after the rest of the Battalion returns to the Command Post?” Pointing his Mat-49 at the Viets stomach Bastien-Thiry pushed him backward into a shell hole filled with dead bodies and foul smelling water. “We have to stay behind to relay the co-ordinates of an enemy counter attack to the arty if there is one. We might as well put the time to good use.” Steele watched the combat companies file past loaded down with supplies they had recovered and Viet weapons.

When the last of the Legionnaires had walked past Steele pulled the Viet out of the shell hole. He trembled squatting on the ground with his hands clasped above his head. “You are an educated man are you not? Why would you be digging

trenches or manning a machine gun in some stinking trench? Tell us what we need to know an easy way or I promise you the hard way will be much more painful." Lighting a cigarette Steele waited for a short while knowing the Viet would not talk without a little persuasion. "I will tell you nothing Imperialist murderer!" Spitting the words out the Viet attempted to rush past Steele. A well-aimed shot brought the Viet to a halt tumbling on the ground clutching a bullet wound to the leg. Grabbing the Viet by the back of his well-cut black pyjama shirt Steele tugged it over the Viets's head. For a second Steele hesitated when he saw the sign of the Brotherhood, which had been cut into the Viets's shoulder. The wound had long since healed leaving a scar. He thought he saw Bastien-Thiry look twice at the scarification on the man's shoulder. Roughly Steele bundled the Viet into a shell hole while the rest of the team scanned the area to their front for signs of the enemy. This man was key to finding Jean and the brotherhood. Steele's instincts told him Jean was not far off, prepared to extract the information at any price he pulled out his combat knife. The Viet stood defiant for a moment then dropped to the ground clutching his injured leg. As Steele was about to jump into the shell hole, Bastien-Thiry shouted a warning. Dropping to one knee, Steele scanned his front. Two shots rang out, Steele turned to see Bastien-Thiry holding S captured A.K 47 in his hands. Spent cartridge cases lay at the officer's feet. Lying face down in the shell hole the well groomed Viet bled profusely from two bullet wounds. "What the hell are you doing man?" He turned on the officer well aware that the chance of locating Jean was now almost impossible. There were hundreds of thousands of the enemy swarming all over the area. It was no time to play hide and seek with that evil bastard Jean. "He was going for the rifle over there." A mud encrusted rifle lay to the dead man's left. "He was reaching for the water bottle next to it perhaps?" Bitterly disappointed Steele pushed past the officer. "If you want my opinion Bastien-Thiry silenced him on purpose." Walking back to the Huguette Voyeur spoke loud enough for Steele to hear. "I thought so to mate." Kiwi shouted over to Voyeur. Steele signalled to the men, they quietened down. "Something strange happened when I was in the trench next to Bastien-Thiry last night Sergeant. He said that he was going out to the other side of the wire to see our positions from the Viets point of view." Voyeur lit a cigarette, he offered one to Steele. "I know sometimes we do that as well, to check for the most likely spot for an attack. Well, he went out for a long time. He was much longer than I would have anticipated. You know what I find strange?" Shrugging his shoulders Steele wondered what Voyeur was getting at. "Well, I heard voices, Viet voices. They spoke in French, but there are no mistaking their accents. They were close to the wire. I crawled over in time to see two of the bastards slithering into one of their trenches. Guess who crawled in the opposite direction back to our lines?" Later that evening Steele waited in Voyeurs position. "I was expecting someone else to be manning the machine gun Sergeant. Carry on then I am going to make a swift reconnaissance outside the trench. It is a question of searching out our weak spots and then fortifying them when I return." Unsure what the officer was up to Steele waved him forward. "Be careful Mon Lieutenant, I will be going off to check on the other positions. The new guy will be replacing me here in five minutes. He may be a bit trigger happy so be sure to warn him when you come in. I will let him know you are out there." Waiting for Bastien-Thiry to crawl

under the barbed wire Steele called Voyeur over to man the machine gun. "I am going after him Voyeur. Keep an eye on things here. If he is friendly with the Viets, I will arrange a little "accident" for him."

Voyeur moved a barricade of wire from a portion of the trench that had received a direct hit from a heavy mortar causing the sides to collapse. Tapping him on the shoulder Steele crouched low heading in the direction Bastien-Thiry had taken. Tracer rounds wiped through the dark night. Shells exploded sending up showers of earth, hot metal shards flew in all directions. The concussion from the blasts battered his body threatening to rupture his internal organs. He wondered if Bastien-Thiry was even still alive. Crawling through the first lines of barbed wire Steele could not ignore the putrid stench of death. Hundreds of Viet bodies lay in different stages of decomposition on the wire or half buried by explosions in the mud. Wounded Viets moaned softly or screamed in pain. Working his way through the carnage Steele crawled on hands and knees carefully avoiding being silhouetted by the flares popping in the sky along the French positions. Sliding into a shell hole, Steele crawled to the lip of the crater. Suddenly without warning the churned up earth under his hand gave way. He nearly vomited when he realised that his hand had penetrated the fine covering of mud above the body of a Viet. Steele found himself up to his forearm in the decomposing stomach of the body. Stomach gasses escaped filling Steele's lungs with the smell of death. Recoiling in disgust, he wiped his hands on the remnants of the Viets shirt then rinsed off the gore in a puddle. Large rats feasted on the bodies gnawing their way through flesh, lapping up the warm crimson blood which soaked the earth. Pulling himself together, Steele set off once more. By the light of an illumination flare, he saw three figures darting from a shell hole into an abandoned Viet bunker. Two wore the black pyjamas of the Viets while the other clearly wore camouflage fatigues and a paratrooper helmet. Bolting for the bunker seconds before a salvo of mortar shells exploded close to where they had been the trio dived through the entrance while Steele crept forward taking up position near the firing slit.

It was hard to hear what was being said in the bunker. Constant shell fire coupled with the cracking of machine gun fire drowned out the occupant's conversation. Drawing closer Steele risked a peak around the corner. He saw the three huddled together talking animatedly. He heard a shell scream in, there was no other option but to take cover in the only available place. He rushed through the entrance expecting to surprise Bastien-Thiry. "We were expecting you Steele. I knew you would follow me here. These two gentlemen have valuable information." He pointed to the two Viets. "You do know fraternising with the enemy is an offence don't you?" Not sure what to expect Steele pointed his Mat-49 at Bastien-Thiry. "I mentioned before that in some families Templar blood runs deep Steele. I was brought up with the same values and traditions as the Templars, you see my ancestors served in their ranks." For a moment, Steele could not believe what he was hearing. "When the Templars were disbanded my ancestors went into hiding fighting as hired swordsmen. They had taken a vow to uphold the Templar creed and pass it down from father to son. If we get out of here, I will teach my son what my father and grandfather taught me." He paused for a second staring at the barrel of Steele's sub machine gun pointed at his stomach. "Do you remember my father Steele? At Narvik, he served beside you when the Legion attacked the

German forces. In the dessert at the Legions epic battle of Bir Hakeim where you held off Rommel's famed Afrika Corps for more than two weeks one of my family members was there Steele." He noticed Steele's expression change. He seemed to remember the men Bastien-Thiry spoke of.

"So what does that prove other than a few coincidences? You abandoned your post, you chat with the enemy in their positions, seems a bit traitorous to me." Steele swivelled his Mat-49 in the direction of the two Viets who immediately held up their hands. "Don't do anything rash Steele. They are not what they seem. We know of the "Brotherhood" Steele, we also have been brought up to look out for and protect the immortal Templar. It has been an honour fighting beside you Sire." Bastien-Thiry knelt down on one knee in front of Steele. The two Viets dropped to their knees bowing their heads. Stunned by the sudden turn of events Steele did not quite know what to make of Bastien-Thiry. He sat him down on a sandbag while the Viets kept watch. After some brief questioning Steele decided what Bastien-Thiry claimed was true. He remembered one or two of Bastien-Thiry's ancestors. Either he was genuine or had read too many history books. What happened next convinced him that just maybe Bastien-Thiry was a decedent of the Templars. "We have located the evil ones lair not far from here. I was hoping we could take the good fight to him. You are after all immortal are you not? A few bullets will not harm you." Laughing at the remark, Steele shook his head. "The bullets may not kill but they hurt like hell Mon Lieutenant. What did you have in mind?" Taking out a crumpled map from his pouch Bastien-Thiry briefly outlined his plan. Making a few adjustments Steele agreed. They set off when the artillery fire slackened.

Crawling through the shell craters littered with the debris of battle they worked their way toward an anti-aircraft position dug into the hillside. "There are too many of the damned Viets crawling around. We have to think of a better way of reaching the target area." Noticing how squads of Viet Minh worked their way over the battlefield either advancing toward the French positions or searching for their dead and wounded comrades Steele had an idea. "Grab one of your Viet friends Mon Lieutenant, sling him over your shoulder and get him to pretend to be wounded." He grabbed the other Viet then set off carrying his injured comrade. He had ditched his helmet and pulled a black Viet pyjama top over his camouflage para smock. Wearing a straw conical hat for good measure gave him the appearance of a Viet in the dark, in spite of his height. They had a few close calls but managed to reach their objective. Steele took stock of the situation. About a dozen Viets stood guard outside of the heavily reinforced bunker. Carved out of the rock it offered protection from artillery fire and aircraft firing down on the position. The Viets were well armed. A machine gun in a sandbagged trench guarded the entrance.

"Sergeant, don't shoot. It's me Voyeur." Spinning round Steele swore under his breath. Cautiously Voyeur poked his head out of a shell hole a few feet from Steele. "What the hell are you doing here Voyeur don't tell me you followed us out here as well?" Two more heads popped up. "We thought you needed some help Sergeant. We could not let Voyeur go out all on his own." Kiwi dropped down next to Steel, Adolf took up position on the other side of him. "It kind of evens the odds Sergeant. What is so important that you are risking your lives out here?" Bastien-

Thiry smiled. "Funny thing is that staying back at Huguette is just as risky Adolf. Let Sergeant Steele brief you then get ready to attack." He pointed at the machine gun nest in front of them.

"There is a high priority enemy target in the bunker. We go in, eliminate with extreme prejudice anyone inside then get back to Huguette as fast as possible. Are there any questions?" No one responded so Steele outlined a basic attack plan on the bunker.

Grenades rained down on the machine gun nest followed by a hail of automatic fire. Steele led the charge into the bunker firing two short bursts into the bodies of the Viets who had been manning the machine gun. More grenades flung into the bunker exploded followed immediately by Steele and the rest of his team. Spreading out the paras caught the Viets by surprise cutting them down where they sat eating bowls of rice or bayoneting the ones rudely awoken by the attack. Rushing toward the rear of the bunker Steele kicked open a wooden door. It flew off the rope hinges splintering against the wall of the small stone enclosure. Staring wide eyed at his attacker Jean held a Russian made hand gun pointed at Steele's direction. Before he could pull the trigger Steele pounced beating Jean with the stock of his Mat-49, kicking Jean in the groin Steele brought his combat boot down brutally on Jean's face. "Look out Sergeant he has a knife!" Rushing to Steele's aid Kiwi tackled Jean pinning him to the ground. "What the hell is this? He is not a Viet." Astonished to see a European face amongst the Viets Kiwi turned his head to see what Steele had to say about their captive. In an instant Jean head-butted Kiwi in the face drawing blood from his nose. Jean's hand broke free from Kiwi's grip moving snake like he drew a boot knife. Blood gushed from Kiwi's throat as Jean slashed back and forth. Adolf kicked Jean's hand sending the knife flying through the air. Voyeur placed three bullets at close range into Jean's face. Blood and pieces of skull splattered the cave walls. "The bastard killed Kiwi! What the hell just happened?" Reeling in shock Adolf bent down attempting to apply first aid to his dying friend. "Hang in there Kiwi I will get you back to the hospital!" Steele and Bastien-Thiry pulled Adolf away. "He is gone Adolf. There is nothing we can do to help him." Pulling Steele to one side Bastien-Thiry whispered "You know this is not the end of that evil bastard Steele. Let's cut him up into pieces and burn them." Viet voices were heard shouting near the entrance. "No time for that Mon Lieutenant, we have to get the rest of the men out of here. I will cover you. But first gather the ammunition and explosives at the back of the bunker. Place them near the entrance. We will entomb Jean. Maybe he will never be found." Shrugging resignedly Bastien-Thiry shouted orders. Turning to see what Bastien-Thiry was doing as he crouched down next to Jean Steele watched him carve a parachute into Jean's flesh. "I'm leaving him something to remember us by." The two Viets exited the bunker attempting to reassure the Viets attracted by the firefight there was nothing to worry about. They eventually convinced their countrymen it was merely a French shell landing on a pile of munitions outside.

"We never leave our dead or wounded Mon Lieutenant. I am taking Kiwi back with us." Adolf slung the body of his dead friend over his shoulder. The team set off for their lines narrowly avoiding enemy patrols or the long lines of peasants digging trenches toward the French positions. A heavy explosion echoed across the field of battle coming from the direction of Jean's bunker. Steele turned in time to

see the face of the hill crumple dislodging a small mountain of stones and rock burying the bunker entrance. Halfway there the two Viets dropped back, returning to their lines. Arriving in front of their lines Steele crouched down with the others in a shell hole. "Wait for a moment Sergeant. I have to signal the boys in the trench." Voyeur shot a green then a red flare into the sky. "Okay, let's hope they saw the flares. I will go first Sergeant." Darting out of the shell hole Voyeur crawled toward the Legion positions. By the light of shell bursts the team saw Voyeur slide into the bunker ahead, helping hands pulled him to safety. "Great, all good Adolf and you go next." Steele pointed to Bastien-Thiry. They set off at the same moment a Viet attack launched itself at the Legion trenches. Mortar fire rained down, tracer rounds cracked across the area digging up the earth around them. Crawling they dragged the body between them eventually reaching the barbed wire entanglements. Voyeur along with several other Legion paras braved the enemy fire to help them to safety. Firing on the advancing enemy Steele emptied his magazines directly into the human wave attack. Heavy machine gun fire cracked overhead tearing great gaps in the enemy ranks but still they advanced. They would attack reaching the halfway mark then those that had survived would go to ground waiting for the following wave. The survivors of the following wave would then be joined by those already waiting halfway amongst the dead and dying. Urged on by the political commissars they would wash against the defences of the French attempting to submerge them in a sea of blood. Instinctively Steele swung round almost pulling the trigger when he heard movement behind him. "Don't fire Sergeant, it's me!" Bastien-Thiry opened fire at the oncoming Viets. He dived down next to Steele. "It's nice of you to join me Mon Lieutenant." Laughing at the officer Steele slapped him on the back. "When we get back to Hanoi promise me you will let me know your full story Steele. It has been an honour for me." Steele nodded "That is a promise Mon Lieutenant now let's get back to our lines. It is getting a little too hot out here." They could hear the Legionnaires urging them on shouting encouragement. They were within sight of safety when a shell exploded overhead showering both men with hot metal shrapnel. Steele felt his world spin then fade to black. He recovered consciousness inside the bunker. "We thought you had been blown to shit Sergeant, both of you." Smiling down on him Voyeur handed Steele a cigarette and a tin mug of coffee laced with cognac. "Did Bastien-Thiry make it Voyeur?"

"Yes he did make it but he is wounded. Not too badly though mostly scrapes and bruises. I dropped Kiwi's body down at the medical bunker. All the bastards did was drop a filthy poncho over him." He shook his head sadly. Taking a sip of his tin mug which contained a little more Cognac than the mug he handed Steele. Voyeur sat down on an ammunition crate. "I buried him behind us over there." He pointed to a freshly dug grave. An M-1 carbine fixed barrel downward topped with a battered helmet marked Kiwi's final resting place. "They are picking us off one by one Sergeant. How long do you think we can hold out? Did you see how many men they had, combatants and labourers? We are outnumbered by at least ten to one." He loaded a magazine for his scoped M1 Garland then placed a few hand grenades on the sand bags next to the heavy machine gun. "We will hold them at all costs Voyeur. This is not the first time we have fought against a numerically superior enemy. I am sure the High Command must have some plan or another to relieve

us. I'll take watch, you get some sleep." Voyeur lay down on the trench floor, placed his head on a sandbag for a pillow and closed his eyes. Minutes later he was sound asleep despite the intermittent shellfire. Looking out across the shell pocked valley Steele wondered just how long they could hold on.

## Chapter 29

### 30 March

"Well that was quite a fight, hey Sergeant?" Exhausted Voyeur dropped to the bottom of the trench. "Sure was Voyeur. We totally annihilated the Viet's Fifty Sixth Regiment. It feels good to counter attack for a change. If only we had more support. Did you hear about that crazy Air-Force pilot the other night?" He looked out at the body strewn ground ahead. "Well this pilot, Captain Bourgereau was his name landed his Dakota during the night on the airstrip. They were under fire all the time from Viet mortars and artillery. He taxied up to the Medical bunker and the medics loaded nineteen wounded aboard. The Viets continued to drop everything they had on and around the runway. Don't ask me how but he managed to take off and made it back safely. How's that for balls?" Grinning in admiration Voyeur sat down beside Steele. "I heard there was another Dakota that did not make it." He opened a tin of beans. Digging at the cold food with a spoon he continued. "They landed okay but the engine was hit. They were not able to take off obviously until repairs were made. A shell destroyed the Dakota. It was a casualty Evacuation aircraft as well." Deciding the beans were uneatable he threw the tin over the trench parapet. "There was a nurse aboard. I think her name is Genevieve." Steele nodded. "Genevieve de Galard. The wounded are calling her "The Angel of Dien Bien Phu" she has been treating the wounded constantly despite the shells and Viet attacks.

"Where is Bastien-Thiry? I have not seen him since we withdrew from the enemy positions." Steele felt a little concerned. He was turning into a good frontline officer. And if it were true about his bloodlines Steele felt he owed it to Bastien-Thiry to see if he had indeed made it back safely. "Last I saw of him he was manning a machine gun, firing down the Viet trench to cover the men's withdrawal. He shouted at us to get going, so we did." A worried expression crossed Voyeurs face. "I will go and ask the other officers if they have seen him. It was a bit confusing toward the end with all the shells dropping around." He walked down the trench conscious of the rising water level. At some places the Legionnaires were fighting waist deep in freezing, putrid water. He returned to their bunker a short while later. Voyeur was taking well aimed shots at enemy sappers digging near the wire. Steele heard a scream then watched a Viet stagger back clutching his shattered jaw. "Why did you not finish him off with another shot Voyeur?" Turning around Voyeur smiled. "It will take at least two Viets to get him to their medics. For a short time they will not be right here in front of us. If we were to wound about three hundred thousand of the bastards the entire Viet army

would be taking their mates back to the aid stations.” Steele laughed. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration man. By the way Bastien-Thiry was last seen at this position.” He pointed to his map. “The officers have given us permission to go out and look for him. It will be the two of us and Adolf only, there is no-one else to spare. Are you up to it?” Nodding in agreement he shouldered his carbine, slung a Mat-49 across his chest then sat down next to Steele deciding on the best route of approach.

Moving from cover to cover they reached the last known position of Bastien-Thiry. Peering over the lip of the trench Steele saw only dead Viets. A large number were directly in front of an abandoned machine gun, its barrel pointed up at the dark clouds covered overhead. The number of dead Viets was staggering, their counterattack had succeeded but it was too little too late. In the distance Steele could hear the unmistakable sounds of the enemy advancing toward them. He dropped into the trench walking over the bloody bodies littered all around. Instinctively he turned ready to fire when he caught a glimpse of movement to his left. Something made him hold his fire. A pile of three dead Viets began slowly moving, he saw it was someone under the enemy bodies pushing his way out from underneath. Voyeur dropped down beside Steele where he scanned the hilltop for the first signs of the approaching Viets. “Well don’t just stand there Steele, one could help a chap you know.” Laughing out loud with relief but also remembering hearing those words when he first met the young and inexperienced officer on the D.Z Steele grasped Bastien-Thiry’s hand. He pulled hard yanking him free from the ice cold clutches of the dead. “You lot are a sight for sore eyes. I was about to be overrun by the Viets so I hid under some of the bodies. They ran right past then carried on running for fear of another counterattack, which never came I might add.” He attempted to neaten his combat jacket but considering the amount of blood and dirt he decided to forget it. “We had to go back to our old positions Mon Lieutenant. We had to get special permission to come out here looking for you. We had better get going. Voyeur is signalling that the Viets are on their way. Can you run?” Looking a bit despondent Bastien-Thiry hobbled a few paces then lent against the side of the trench. “I got a bit of shrapnel from a grenade in the old legs Sergeant. You and your men go on ahead. I will follow as best I can.” Voyeur hurriedly joined them. “They are coming, hundreds of the bastards. If we don’t make a run for it now we are finished.” He looked down at Bastien-Thiry’s bloodied legs. “Damn it, here we go again.” Hoisting the wounded officer over his shoulder he scrambled over the trench parapet running as fast as he could.

When he was exhausted Adolf took over carrying Bastien-Thiry who to his credit moaned only once from the pain despite the constant jolting. Automatic rounds cracked overhead, bullets gouged up the dirt beside them but they made it to an abandoned enemy trench leading to the French positions close by. Mortar rounds began whizzing over their heads fired by the Legionnaires in support of their rescue attempt. The enemy fire slackened for a few moments but then increased in intensity when they noticed the four men were about to reach the safety of their own lines.

“Our guys managed to stop the enemy digging this part of the trench any closer to our positions which at this very moment is not a good thing for us.” Before them there was about one hundred meters of open ground to cover. Shell holes and



debris littered the ground but afforded scant cover. Machine gun fire cracked overhead fired by both sides. "When I give the word you start running Voyeur, and don't stop for anything. Is that understood?" He nodded emptying a magazine at the figures on the hilltop. Adolf fired on the advancing Viets. A salvo of mortar shells exploded on the enemy trenches. "Go Voyeur, and don't stop!" Slapping Voyeur on the shoulder Steele pushed him and Adolf forward. Running from cover to cover for what seemed an eternity they made the Legion positions diving head first through a gap in the wire and into the trench.

They turned to watch Steele running toward them, Bastien-Thiry over his shoulder, bullets kicking up the dust all around. Adolf was sure Steele had been hit, his legs folded underneath him but a moment later he was up and running again. As if in slow motion the safety of the trench loomed ever closer. Panting and out of breath Steele struggled under the weight of Bastien-Thiry. They toppled into holes, slipped down muddy shell craters even became momentarily entangled in barbed wire but after what seemed an eternity Steele collapsed into the Legion trench. "Damn fine job that man." Steele looked up to see their company commander Lieutenant Luciani staring down at him. "We have been formed into a mobile reserve gentleman. Grab your kit and follow me. Tonight we will be over on Eliane, an enemy attack is imminent. The rest of 1 B.E.P is holding the position Claudine 6, now called Junon." A medic treated Bastien-Thiry's wounds suggesting the Lieutenant retire to the make shift hospital. Refusing Bastien-Thiry hobbled over to Eliane helped by two Legionnaires. Glancing at Steele's bullet riddled combat jacket the medic shook his head in disbelief. "How the hell did you survive so many near misses Sergeant?" Steele just shrugged then set off to join the rest of the company taking up positions on Eliane 2.

The Legion paras made do as best they could by digging their foxholes deeper despite the incessant falling rain. Landmines were placed in front of the wire entanglements. Co-ordinates were relayed to the artillery. They wrapped torn ponchos around their soaked bodies attempting to snatch a bit of shut eye before the attack. "Steele peered out of the bunkers firing slit down the hill where the Viets would be attacking from. For the moment all he saw were dead bodies and debris. "Sergeant, here have some rice, there is not much else. They have cancelled supply drops and air cover for the moment due to the weather and the Viets damned anti-aircraft guns." Filling a tin mug with rice Steele handed it over to Bastien-Thiry sitting on a mound of sandbags. Hampered by his wounds Bastien-Thiry knew he would not be able to move swiftly during the battle. He had arranged the sandbags behind the machine gun where he was able to pour down deadly and accurate fire on the attackers. "I have been talking to Lieutenant Luciani and the news is not too good. At this very moment the Viets are tightening the noose around Dien Bien Phu. They have concentrated all of their forces in the immediate area. That's bad judgement on their part." Voyeur turned to look at Bastien-Thiry surprised at the last statement. "They have not done too badly so far if I may say so Mon Lieutenant. Why would their judgement be bad now?" Smiling Bastien-Thiry replied. "By concentrating their forces around Dien Bien Phu it makes it easier for us to annihilate them." There was stunned silence for a moment then they all burst out laughing realising the irony of their situation. "What time is it now Mon Lieutenant, I will take over from you." Looking at his

watch Bastien-Thiry opened his mouth to say it was 18h00. His voice was drowned out by the thunder of the Viet guns unleashing hell on the strongpoints of Dominique, Eliane and Huguette.

Pushing forward under the cover of the rolling barrage the Viets reached the French positions under the cover of darkness. "Mon Lieutenant, both Dominique and Eliane are in deep shit!" An eighteen year old radio operator screamed down the trench. "We are both being hit by Division sized Viet forces. The Algerians on Dominique are saying they are unable to hold their positions." Flares illuminated the night sky torn apart by explosions and machine gun fire. Shadowy figures of the first enemy fighters appeared out of the night silhouetted by the incandescent light of flares. "Wait until they get a bit closer!" Holding up his arm Steele watched the first wave reach the wire. Pushed by the massed infantry behind they bunched up offering a better target. Steele brought his arm down sharply. "Open fire!" As one the Legion paras let rip with all they had. Enemy bodies piled up on the wire but still they pressed forward. Artillery shells managed to blow great gaps in the wire or Viet sappers worked feverishly clearing a path for the oncoming infantry. The clamber of battle was deafening. Exploding shells ripped through flesh and bone. Bunkers and sections of trenches caved in suffocating their occupants. Casualties mounted at an alarming rate.

"Dominique has fallen!" The radio operator kept up a running commentary of the situation around them. "The Viets are streaming through the position heading straight for the central French positions." He crouched down pushing the headset hard against his ears. Grenades burst near the bunker entrance showering Steele and the others with dirt. They found it difficult to breath in the cordite filled bunker. Their eyes smarted while their eardrums rang continuously threatening to implode. "You wonderful bloody bastards!" Jumping up as if he were listening to a soccer match the radio operator waved his hands in the air. "The Senegalese artillerymen manning the 105mm Howitzer battery about to be overrun lowered the barrels of their artillery pieces." Crouching down again he listened intently. "They are doing it, they are holding firm. The French officer ordered them to fire when the Viets were almost on top of them. It sounds like they shredded two entire Regiments of the Viets!"

Elsewhere the Viets pressed home their attack with a vengeance. They overran Eliane 1 and most of Eliane 2 where Steele and the Legion paras fought for their lives, holding back the Viets. Elements of the 13 D.B.L.E rushed to the aid of their comrades in the positions which were at that moment the most seriously threatened. Some of the positions changed hands up to six times during the battle.

With the eventual coming of the dawn the first faint rays of sunlight bathed a nightmarish scene of death and mutilation with its rays. Piled high the heaps of Viet corpses covered the field of battle. "It looks as if we are still holding on in some parts Sergeant." Turning to the radio operator Steele nodded in acknowledgement. "Yes I heard thanks. But we lost some very strategic positions. How are we for ammo?" Working the radio while loading magazines for the men manning the firing positions, the radio operator crumpled an empty packet of cigarettes. "I must find more cigarettes." He muttered to no-one in particular. He leant out of the bunker slit grabbing a dead Viet by the arm. Pulling the body close

to the firing slit he searched through the dead man's pockets for cigarettes. "Damn Viets, no cigarettes either. Bullets are more hazardous to the health than smokes." He laughed lifting his head above the parapet. He fell back sprawling across Bastien-Thiry's legs a neat hole in his forehead. "Poor bloke, seems like what he said is true." He closed the boy's eyes then rolled the body off of his legs. "Voyeur, please lie the body down near the entrance. Give me the radio I will operate it when there is a lull in the fighting. There was no break in the fighting. For just over one hundred hours the Legionnaires of 1 B.E.P and the 13 D.B.L.E together with the Moroccans and Paratroopers of the 6 B.P.C held back the furious Viet assaults.

## Chapter 30

### 10 April

Three Grumman F8F-2 Bearcats streaked past the Legion paras slowly crawling toward the Viet held part of Eliane. Before them stood the battle scarred hill of Eliane1 scattered with the decomposing bodies of French and Vietnamese. Roaring overhead the fighter planes opened fire with their machine guns raking the Viets caught out in the open. Small black objects detached themselves from the planes dropping down on the enemy below. Those too slow to react were blown apart by the aircrafts bombs, the remaining Viets raced for cover. Artillery fire pounded the hill. A few tanks clattered alongside the paras who now quickened the pace of their advance. "Steele rushed up the hill followed closely by Voyeur struggling under the weight of a M2 flamethrower. Bastien-Thiry hobbled valiantly onward ignoring the throbbing pain in his legs. All around Legionnaires and paras pushed forward determined to retake Eliane1. Accurate fire rained down from the Viets occupying the trenches dug into the hill top. Storming forward the Legionnaires sprang into action throwing grenades into the Viet occupied bunkers, firing all the while as they ran up hill. Waiting for the grenade he had thrown to explode Steele hugged the earth. A shower of dust and shrapnel blew into the humid air. Launching forward Steele jumped into the trench catching a wounded Viet running down the entrance to a deep bunker. He fired a quick burst which sent the Viet tumbling headlong. "Voyeur, get up here!" He fired a few shots down the dark tunnel like entrance. "All ready to fire them up Sergeant." He pulled the trigger sending a lethal jet of liquid flame into the bunker. Spine chilling screams carried up the stairs. Two figures attempted to reach the exit despite the flames engulfing their entire bodies. Steele dispatched them with a burst of his Mat-49. Onward they fought clearing bunkers, fighting along the trenches as their ancestors had in the Great War. Surrounded by the clatter of machine guns, the whoosh of the feared flamethrowers spurting horrific death shellfire and screams of the dead and dying Steele led a section of Legion paras up the hill. The men eagerly followed the fearless warrior dishing out death, carving a path through the ranks of the Viets.

Arriving at the crest of the hill they fired like demons at the retreating Viets avenging their fallen friends. Once again Elianel was in French hands. Setting up their defences the Legionnaires began searching for any Viets still lurking in the underground bunkers.

“You have done more than your duty today Mon Lieutenant. Let the medic have a look at your wounds, I think they have started bleeding again.” Two dark patches of blood stained the Lieutenants combat fatigues. “In a while Steele, lets clear this bunker first. Voyeur, get ready.” He pushed past Steele holding his Mat-49 ready. “Let me go first.” Steele pulled the Lieutenant back. A grenade thrown from inside landed at their feet. “Get down!” Steele screamed throwing himself on the grenade. Two seconds later it exploded lifting his body off the ground. Metal shards flew through the air narrowly missing Bastien-Thiry and Voyeur. Not waiting for a second grenade Voyeur shoved the barrel of the flame thrower in the bunker entrance and squeezed the trigger. The nauseating smell of burning flesh wafted through the air. Bastien-Thiry threw a grenade into the bunker then pulled Steele to one side. “Steele, are you alright?” He screamed in a high pitched voice. Blood flowed freely down Steele’s lacerated stomach and chest. A piece of his lungs was visible through the hole in his ribs. Wiping the blood from Steele’s face Bastien-Thiry attempted to staunch the flow of blood. “How brave was that? He gave his life to save his friends. I don’t think he has any chance of surviving though, poor bastard.” Dropping into the trench a battle hardened paratrooper officer followed by his radio operator knelt down next to them. “Put him in the bunker, he will be alright in a few minutes Mon Capitaine. I promise you he will walk out of there in a few hours.” Dragging Steele toward the bunker Bastien-Thiry looked like a man demented. “Medic, get over here!” Roughly bandaging a wounded Legionnaire’s shoulder the medic wiped the blood from his hands. Grabbing his rifle he jumped into the trench. Taking a quick look at Steele he shook his head. “He is still breathing but he has had it.” Pushing the medic away Bastien-Thiry tugged at Steele’s arms attempting to pull him into the bunker. “Give the Lieutenant some morphine I think he is in a state of shock. Gather up the walking wounded and take them both to the hospital. Perhaps they can stabilise the Sergeant. We owe it to him after what he did.”

Constant harassing fire from the Viet artillery made the journey to the hospital long and hazardous. At one point they changed direction finally ending up near the airstrip which was by now cratered with shell holes. Steele had a moment of clarity looking up into the face of “The Angel of Dien Bien Phu.” She wiped the dried blood from his face. She requested an orderly to place Steele close to the underground bunker used as a hospital. There he lay with a dozen other badly wounded men under the drizzling rain. “I am sorry but the bunkers around here are overflowing with wounded. Perhaps soon you will be brought indoors.” She touched his cheek and then moved on to the next patient.

Unconsciousness gripped him once more while his body worked on healing the massive tissue damage and blood loss. During the night he heard as if in a dream the sounds of a plane’s engine above the sounds of constant battle. Strong hands grasped his arms and legs. Roughly bundled into the last medical evacuation Dakota to make the landing and take-off at Dien Bien Phu Steele felt himself being dragged up the isle along with other wounded soldiers crying out in pain. Hazy

recollections of explosions close by riddling the body of the aircraft with shrapnel mixed with the sudden relief felt by all aboard when the Dakota clawed its way into the night sky followed by anti-aircraft fire. He awoke the following day in a military hospital in Hanoi.

“Where are my things, equipment and weapons?” He turned to the nurse attending to a wounded man in the next bed. “Don’t you worry about anything, you are safe now. We will look after you. The doctors will see you shortly.” She smiled at Steele. “Your personal effects are in the drawer beside your bed. Pushing himself up on one elbow he opened the white metal cabinet. Sliding his hand around until he found his wallet and green beret. “Where did you put my clothes nurse?” She looked at him condescendingly. “When you boys are brought in your clothes are either so smell and dirty or torn to bits. We throw them in the rubbish or they are burnt immediately. Don’t want the rest of the patients infected by lice do we?”

He lay down to think. He needed to get back to the team or what was left of it. “The feel and smell of a clean bed with sheets was pleasant. He imagined the hardships endured this very moment by the defenders of Dien Bien Phu. “Hey, what do I have to do to get a para uniform around here?” He whispered to a Vietnamese orderly doing the rounds changing bed pans. “For a small price anything is possible. What size boots?” Steele smiled. Thirty minutes later the orderly returned with a kitbag complete with uniform, boots, webbing and rank badges. Shaking hands Steele pushed a wad of notes into the orderly’s hand. “It is nice doing business with you Sergeant. My cousin is waiting at the back door, he is a taxi driver. For a price he will take you where you wish to go.”

Dressing swiftly before the nurse returned Steele followed the orderly out the back of the hospital. The sounds and sights of civilian life seemed unreal after the hell of Dien Bien Phu. Driving slowly along the tree lined boulevards Steele sat in the back of the taxi looking at the shops with their designer clothes. Restaurants offered exotic menu’s serving five star foods, while his men on Eliane ate cold meals out of tins. A well dressed woman walked with her daughter on the pavement. Did they have any idea of the suffering going on a few hundred miles away? How would their lives be affected if Dien Bien Phu fell? Possibly the woman’s husband or lover were fighting for some blood drenched hill right at this very moment. Images of deaths he had witnessed flashed before his eyes. He took a swig of Bourbon straight from the bottle. He offered it to the taxi driver who politely smiled then shook his head. “I heard from a friend who heard from another there is a parachute drop being planned for tonight. He did not say exactly where they were dropping the paras but we all know where they are headed don’t we?”

Fighter planes roared overhead climbing high into the sky turning westward. Steele stood outside of the military airport weighing his options. He toyed with the idea of walking onto the base, perhaps someone might be able to help him board a plane heading for the combat zone. He immediately dismissed the idea as ludicrous. Sitting down at a sidewalk café he waited for the right opportunity. He did not have to wait long. He was halfway through his second beer when a convoy of trucks pulled up to the gate. The soldiers in the back looked very serious. Fully kitted out for a combat operation, armed and looking a bit nervous they were stopped at the gate by Military Police. Flipping through the drivers order sheet

they waived the convoy through. Steele noticed the mottled collection of Regimental badges and different colour berets the troops wore. There were members of the armoured units, paratroopers, engineers along with other specialists. He was sure they were headed for Dien Bien Phu. Downing the beer he strolled around the entrance of the base. The Military Police standing guard eyed him suspiciously. He decided that they would never let him simply walk in. Turning the corner he hopped the wall. Landing on the other side Steele walked briskly toward the hangars on the far side using the office buildings as cover. He bundled his green beret into his pocket and placed his helmet on his head. "Hey you over there, stop where you are!" Spinning round he saw two M.P's, their Mat-49's pointed in his direction. "Put your hands above your head. You are not authorised to be here." He stared at the enemy of any combat soldier. Uniforms immaculate, boots shone to a high gloss, the red armband with the letters M.P in white. Used to being obeyed they waited impatiently for Steele to come to them. When he simply stood his ground they became very indignant. "If we have to come over there you are in for the beating of your life." He smiled slightly which unnerved them a little. "I have no time for this, I must return to Dien Bien Phu. The transport planes are waiting at the hangars. I am part of the volunteer group jumping in tonight." They looked at each other. "Show us your papers, and where is your kit?" Steele walked slowly toward them taking off his jump helmet. "My papers are in the helmet lining, didn't want to misplace them." The M.P's smirked watching Steele closing in. "Typical paratrooper, he would lose his head if it were not attached to his body." They laughed looking down their noses at Steele. "Careful you don't lose your head scumbag." Steele brought his helmet crashing down on the first M.P's face with sickening force. Blood spurted from the man's mouth and nose. His friend stood wide eye in disbelief for a second before Steele's helmet struck him across the jaw shattering his teeth. Both men lay on the ground moaning in pain. Using their belts Steele bound their arms behind their backs. Tying their boot laces together for good measure he pushed them into an empty crate after removing their Mat-49's, cigarettes and wallets. "I would love to be there when they explain how they lost their weapons, hope the bastards are court marshalled and shot." He slung one of the Mat-49's, the other he slung on an office doorknob. He then walked briskly, in the manner of a Legion sous-officier toward the hangar. A brief glimpse of the interior was all Steele needed. Typical army hurry up and wait was in full swing. Troops lounged around the hangar or smoked cigarettes outside. Mounds of parachutes stood ready to distribute. Aircrew made last minute adjustments to the line of Dakota's waiting in the shimmering heat on the tarmac. There were troops from a number of different units making it easier for Steele to slip into the group. He stood beside non-commissioned officers sipping coffee while the troops sat on the concrete waiting. He noticed a large portion of the volunteers were made up of Vietnamese soldiers.

An officer brought the group to attention. He briefly outlined the operation then gave an even shorter lesson on how to do a parachute jump. Many of the volunteers had never parachuted before yet even at this epic moment where victory seemed uncertain they willingly made their first jump into a combat area. Some volunteered out of a sense of duty, others for the honour of France yet there were those who simply wanted help their brothers in arms or to kill Viets.

Eventually the order was given to get ready. Filing past in a long line the men were thrown a parachute by a dispatcher. Next they were instructed how to put it on and tighten the straps. They then sat in line on the runway while the Dakota's warmed up their engines. Steele experienced that familiar feeling of mounting tension as the air was filled with the roar of the plane's engines. The smell of aircraft fuel lingered, men hastily smoked a last cigarette.

Signalling to Steele's stick a dispatcher lead them to a waiting Dakota. Waddling up the short metal ladder placed at the open door they laboured under the weight of their parachutes and equipment. Folding down the long benches attached to the interior fuselage they sat down wedged like sardines. A short while later as the sun began to dip below the horizon they took off.

It was a bumpy ride with more than a few getting airsick, either through air turbulence or nerves. In the dim light of the plane's fuselage Steele watched the men pretending to sleep or fidgeting nervously with their equipment. Suddenly with the appearance of the jump master walking toward the open door the atmosphere became intense.

He held on to the side of the door and craned his neck outside. For a moment Steele thought he saw a flicker of fear in the man's eyes. Turning toward the anxious faces sitting on the benches either side of the fuselage he was very professional. He gave the signal for the men to stand up and fold away the benches. Struggling to their feet they bumped into each other continuously in the narrow confines of the plane. Another signal and they hooked their static line onto a metal cable running the length of the plane. Steele was number eighteen in the stick of twenty one. A fresh faced tank gunner was to be the first out of the plane. Pushing close they held onto their static lines tumbling left and right in the turbulence. The dispatchers pushed their way through the stick inspecting static lines and parachutes. A small red light above the door blinked. Strain showed on their faces in the dim glow of the aircraft lights. Suddenly the lights were switched off. All eyes were glued to the red light above the door. Steele felt the weight of the parachute and equipment hurting his back and shoulders. He looked back through the open cockpit door, the two pilots held their controls tightly keeping in formation with the other aircraft. Flying very low they skimmed the trees, climbing suddenly they cleared hills surrounding a valley. Through the cockpit Steele watched in horror the lines of red and green tracers over Dien Bien Phu climbing toward the aircraft. Anti-aircraft shells exploded in the night sky. Down below the waiting Viets turned their attention to the sky.

Dropping to a height of six hundred feet the Dakota's flew directly into the gates of hell. "Green light on go, go, go!" The dispatcher screamed, slapping the man standing in the door on the shoulder. He gripped the door frame ready to jump when a shell splinter tore through his stomach. Losing his balance the wounded tank gunner dropped into the night sky, his screams lost in the noise of battle. Flak riddled the fuselage wounding some of the men. Great holes appeared in the wings as the heavy machine guns attempted to claw the planes from the sky. Eager to escape the death trap the plane had become the men launched into the turbulent slipstream. Rocked by a sudden explosion the Dakota shuddered. A blast of cold air rushed through the fuselage. Steele turned to see a large chunk of the cockpit windshield missing. The pilot grimaced in pain, his face a bloody

mask. Beside him his co-pilot slumped forward lifeless in his seat. Another shell burst in front of the aircraft hitting the port side engine. It trailed smoke then burst into flames. He kept up with the stick rushing through the door. Turning around a final time he saw the pilot struggling to hold on until the last man jumped. Steele suddenly felt the slipstream buffeting his body. He slid for a moment on the slipstream before his parachute opened pulling the harness tight. Under normal conditions the silence experienced while slowly drifting to earth after the noise in the plane is a soothing relief. Here there was no relief. The sounds of bullets cracking past and shells exploding were louder than the noise in the aircraft. Suspended under the parachute he had just enough time to see the Dakota they had jumped out of plough into the ground. A paratrooper drifted earthward slightly to Steele's left. He shook like a puppet hanging on a string pierced by enemy machine gun bullets. An eerie glow illuminated the drop zone. The drop zone was getting increasingly small each day as the Viets tightened the noose. Land too soon or too late and you would drop right on the enemy waiting eagerly with fixed bayonets. Barbed wire, landmines and the debris littering the ground added to the casualties. The ground rushed up to meet Steele. He rolled when his feet hit the dirt. Struggling to release his harness he watched helpless as two Viets bayoneted a man whose parachute had been caught in the remains of a tree. Another landed directly on the wire. The wind caught his parachute dragging him through the barbed wire lacerating his body.

Releasing the harness Steele lay on the ground trying to get his bearings. He heard a howl in a ditch close by. Crawling forward he waited for an illumination flare to light up the area. It popped overhead seconds later. Steele saw a paratrooper in shock crawling over a mound of bodies. The unfortunate had landed in a body pit. He screamed incoherently pushing away the bodies with his feet. Steele crawled over to him while bullets whipped up the dirt around the paratroopers seeking shelter or a friendly bunker. Grabbing the rigging lines Steele tugged on the man's parachute. He succeeded in pulling him out of the open grave. "I am in hell, I am dead." Was all he could say, over and over again. Pulling off the man's harness Steele shook him roughly. "Focus soldier, you are fine. You landed in a grave that is all." Shells began exploding a little too close for comfort. Together they dived into a portion of trench not knowing if it were in French or Viet hands. Turning the corner he heard the familiar foreign accents of the Legion. "Don't shoot. It's me Sergeant Steele, we are coming in!" Dropping into the bunker at the end of the trench he came face to face with the barrels of three M1 carbines. Gaunt faces stared at Steele. The Legionnaires looked malnourished and weary. "Anyone know where the pathfinder section of 1.B.E.P is right now?" They shook their heads. "You have landed on Junon Sergeant, maybe they are here or still up on Eliane with Lieutenant Luciani." Frustrated Steele nodded his thanks, left the shocked paratrooper with the Legionnaires and headed for Eliane 2.

"Mon Lieutenant. Sergeant Steele reporting for duty sir." Bastien-Thiry looked up from the radio he manned nearly falling backward. "I knew you would be okay Steele, nothing can harm you." Steele shook his head smiling. "I don't know about that, the bloody grenade hurt like hell!" Reloading his magazines and helping himself to a few grenades Steele took stock of the position. A bunker covered with a parachute canopy with trenches running off along the hill. It all seemed so



familiar. It was good to be back. "Voyeur I see you haven't lost your touch." Voyeur added another kill to his already impressive tally. "Sergeant, what are you doing back here?" He shook his hand warmly. I saw your lungs your ribs, you were a bloody mess Sergeant. How did you do it, there is no explanation other than you are indestructible." He laughed jokingly. "It must have been a body just under the grenade when it went off. I was covered in someone else's mess." It seemed a plausible explanation. It all happened so fast, maybe what you say is true. "Voyeur saw movement near the wire, another target. He smiled at Steele then turned back to the Viet foolishly peaking above the trench on the far side to have a look at the French. A shot rang out, the Viet fell down. Death walked the valley.

## Chapter 31

### 6 May

The battered survivors still defending Dien Bien Phu held on for the relief force or a miracle neither was forthcoming. "This will never do, you there cover these men!" Bastien-Thiry watched two men carry out his orders. Wounded lay out in the rain without any form of shelter. Full to capacity the bunkers held the badly injured while those deemed not too serious sprawled in the mud. "There has been a call for volunteers Mon Lieutenant every man able to fire a weapon has been asked to man the perimeter." A slow procession of wounded walked solemnly past Steele taking up positions beside their comrades. Some had bandages covering their limbs, others helped by their friends sat behind machine guns. It was to be a desperate last stand. "Those bloody Viets are going to tunnel their way underneath us all the way down to the central position, mark my words." Waiting for the next attack Voyeur sat down next to Steele in the waterlogged trench. "I doubt it Voyeur, I think they have something else in mind. We have all heard them tunnelling for a while now but there is not much we can do about it. I hope the mud caves in on the bastards." Giap had now brought up the dreaded Katyusha rocket launchers. Nicknamed Stalin organs during the war the weapon fired multiple rockets with devastating psychological as well as destructive effect on the opposing troops. Huguette and the area around the landing strip had fallen earlier. Small groups still held out in the central positions and on Eliane 2.

"Look at those crazy bastards down there." A group of Legionnaires marched toward the Viet Minh positions singing one of the Legions famed marching songs. "Contre les Viet." rang out above the sounds of battle. A few Legionnaires wore the white Kepi recognised world-wide to let the Viets know they were up against the Legion. They pressed home the attack with a ferocity that took the Viets by surprise. Outnumbered ten to one the Legionnaires sent the Viets packing.

"Get into your positions men, night is falling. The Viets will be here soon." Steele walked down the trench under constant bombardment. As darkness fell whistles shrieked all along the Viet lines surrounding Eliane 2. Masses of Viet infantry poured out of their trenches, screaming as they ran fired on by the French

defenders. "Steele ran along the trench encouraging the men, rushing to take the place of a man as he fell until another replacement ran up and took over. The Viets were almost on their wire, the enemy charge slowed to negotiate the entanglements. From behind the French artillery opened fire at almost point blank range. Salvo after salvo ripped through the packed ranks of the Viet Minh. Firing for all they were worth the Legionnaires watched the Viets shredded by artillery fire, automatic weapons and in some cases by the bayonet. Losing an entire regiment the Viets backed away momentarily. Relief washed over the outpost. "Well, that was close. It seems we will survive a little longer." Bastien-Thiry clapped Steele on the back.

Their entire world exploded in a mass of flame and fire. "What the hell is going on?" Steele felt the ground beneath his feet heaving, rocking back and forth. Bunkers collapsed, trenches crumbled in on the occupants. Men were blown to smithereens when in the heat of battle Giap ordered one and a half tons of T.N.T buried underneath Eliane 2 to be detonated. One moment the camp was a functioning defensive position. The moment after half of Eliane 2 was just a huge smouldering crater leaving a gap through which the Viets poured down onto the central positions.

Staggering through the dust Steele gathered up a small group of Legion paras. Setting up their defences amongst the wreckage he called out for any survivors. "The bastards can't get rid of me that easily." Voyeur slipped over the lip of the trench. He smiled at Steele. "Seen Bastien-Thiry anywhere Voyeur?" He simply shrugged, then pointed to a figure heaving a heavy machine gun into position. "Over there Sergeant, I think he has gathered a few survivors too."

Throughout the night small pockets of Legionnaires held the Viets back. "Mon Lieutenant the Viets have pushed through to the river. We have lost all our positions on this side of the Nam Yum River. I would suggest gathering what ammo and supplies we can and try and join our forces on the other side of the river." Bastien-Thiry listened to Steele's advice. "I know Steele. I heard the officers or men manning the radios on each of our positions here sign out as the Viets overran them one by one. It was emotional to say the least." One by one the pockets resisting the Viets fell silent. A few attempts to overrun Steele's Legionnaires were met with a hail of fire. Skirting around them the Viets headed for the prize on the far side of the river, the central Dien Bien Phu positions still putting up a vicious fight. "Adolf, have you placed the charges?" Nodding Adolf held a plunger with wires attached running to blocks of explosives set beside the bunker entrance. "A moi La Legion!" Steele shouted waiting for a response. Two men straggled over to their position. "Into the bunker boys, we are closing up shop." With a last look across the battle scared position Steele dropped into the bunker moments before Viet Minh troops swarmed over Elaine. "Good to go Adolf, hit it." Pushing down hard on the plunger Adolf detonated the charges set outside the bunker. Sandbags and dirt flew into the air with tremendous force covering the entrance. Entombed in the dark bunker the Legionnaires held their breath covered in dust. The entrance had been sealed. Above the victorious Viets had no idea just below their feet a group of desperate men lay in the dark letting the storm wash over them. On 8 May Dien Bien Phu fell into the hands of the Viet Minh. An attempted break out

to the South was met with heavy resistance. Only a small number of men managed to evade the Viet Minh eventually joining up with friendly forces.

For the majority of the prisoners their descent into hell was only beginning. The Viet Minh took over ten thousand prisoners. They were marched nearly four hundred kilometres over rugged terrain. Subjected to deprivation, disease and abuse only a little over three thousand survivors were repatriated four months later. Legionnaires originating from countries occupied by the Soviet Union were sent to Russia for "special treatment." None were ever heard of or seen again. Brain washing and political re-education were forced on the prisoners with a French Communist by the name of Georges Boudarel torturing his fellow countrymen with more vigour than the Viets in the notorious Camp 113. Recognised years later by his victims in France where he was teaching at a university he was charged for his crimes. Unfortunately he died before he was brought to justice.

## Chapter 32

The angel of death hovered over the shattered French positions at Dien Bien Phu. In the dead of night Steele dug his way out of the tomb. Bodies lay scattered waiting for the Viets to throw them into mass graves. The stench of death drifted into the bunker. Bastien-Thiry popped his head out of the hole Steele had dug. Widening the gap enough to wriggle through the Legionnaires crept through the dead of night across the battle scarred positions. It was hard going, especially on the nerves. Large contingents of Viets swept the battlefield searching still for their wounded. Camped at the main positions of French resistance they gathered the spoils of war. "We head east for a while. No sense in crossing through the battle site. The place will be crawling with Viets. After a few miles we then turn south. Once out of the immediate area I suggest we turn westward. I have heard rumours that partisans along the Laotian are looking out for survivors. That is the only way I think we will make it." Steele looked at the gaunt faces of the desperate men he attempted to lead to safety. "It will be one hell of a march Sergeant but there is no other option. Surrender is not an option. Are you all in agreement?" Bastien-Thiry counted the men. Steele, Adolf and Voyeur were the sole survivors of the Pathfinder section. Three Legion Paras and a French Paratrooper made up the rest of the group. "Are any of you badly injured?" They all shook their heads but Bastien-Thiry noticed the majority of the men wore dirty field dressings. He was conscious of the wounds he had received. Praying his legs would hold out he sat down next to Steele.

"Right men, we move only after dark. I will scout ahead with Voyeur. The rest of you keep your eyes peeled for any parachute containers with supplies lying around." Keeping low the group inched its way over the pocked marked battlefield stopping continuously whenever a Viet patrol was spotted. Before sunrise they dug into abandoned trenches covering their hideout until the dark of night. Stealthily they emerged at night slithering across the muddy fields sometimes on their

stomachs avoiding the Viets. Once out of the immediate area surrounding Dien Bien Phu they pressed on through thick bush cutting their own path. Avoiding villages where the ever present dogs might alert the enemy to their presents they desperately sought nourishment in the bush. "How far will the snake go Voyeur?" It seemed like a feast the day Voyeur killed a large reptile with his entrenching tool. "We will have at least one foot of snake for each person. Might go well with the grubs Adolf dug out from the tree bark." He smiled wryly. Their uniforms began rotting. Most of the men had long since thrown the remnants of their boots into the dense jungle undergrowth. Barefoot, ragged and on the point of exhaustion they approached the border with Laos. Occasionally they heard the welcomed sound of aircraft engines, possibly scouring the treetops for survivors. Never once did they see the aircraft nor were they spotted by the aviators. Pushed almost to the limits of physical and psychological endurance the Legionnaires marched. Weapons were kept clean and oiled, in better condition than the men who cradled them in their arms.

"We are making progress Mon Lieutenant but I am afraid we have company." Pointing to a narrow overgrown path Steele waited. "There it is again, did you see it?" Squinting through his binoculars Bastien-Thiry caught sight of movement on the path. "How many do you think Steele?" They lay still watching the treeline. "I count at least twenty Viets Steele. What do propose?" He looked back at the treeline with a feeling of anxiety and disappointment. "Let's get everyone together Mon Lieutenant." He motioned the haggard men over to where he lay concealed in the bush. "We have come so far, Laos is only a few miles away. So near yet so far." He shook his head sadly. "I'll stay Sergeant. I will cover you for as long as possible." He motioned to Adolf. "Leave your M.G with me Adolf. Now then, everyone follow the Sergeant across the border. It has been a privilege fighting alongside you men." Taking charge of the situation Steele slapped Bastien-Thiry on the back. "We appreciate the thought Mon Lieutenant but not here and not now. Follow me I noticed a better place for a "Camerone" a little further down the path." Moving as fast as their exhausted bodies allowed they tumbled after Steele, the tension increasing with each step. Steele led the men down the path and across a rice paddy. They dropped down when they reached a clump of bushes at the far end of the rice paddy. Behind them was another open field then approximately two hundred yards away the river between Laos and Indochina.

Sure of themselves the Viets shouted out to each other as they advanced. Halfway across an open rice paddy the lead elements raced to snatch up a para smock left by the fleeing enemy desperate to escape their vengeful clutches. Smiling broadly the teenage Viet Minh reaching the smock ahead of his comrades ripped it off of the lone bush in the centre of the rice paddy. He was still smiling when the grenade attached at head height exploded. Shrapnel shattered his face tearing off his hand. Searing metal shards ripped into the bodies of two others. "Three down, about thirty to go!" Adolf smiled watching the enemy break out of the tree line. "Voyeur get to work, start at the back." Nodding to Steele Voyeur took aim. Four Viet Minh dropped to the muddy ground, a bullet through the chest or head of each one of them. "One magazine each of you, make your shots count." The group opened fire as one unleashing a volley of deathly accurate fire on the enemy. "This is starting to bring back bad memories Sergeant. Once again we are

almost surrounded by the Viets, a river behind us. Makes me think about the day I lost my friends and gained the nickname of Voyeur.” He shuddered looking around at his comrades. “No-one is shooting anyone in the head to avoid capture Voyeur. You will all get out of here alive. Laos is just across the river.” The sound of battle had attracted a column of Laotian partisans. They trotted down the path on the opposite side of the river waving at the Legionnaires to cross the border.

“They have gone to ground for the moment Mon Lieutenant. Take the men across the bridge. I will hold them for a moment or two.” A narrow rope bridge spanned the river between the two countries. Bastien-Thiry opened his mouth to protest. “You know why I stay Mon Lieutenant. I will see you in Biarritz one day. The first Kronembourg is on you.” Shaking his head Bastien-Thiry protested. “We leave no man behind Sergeant. I will not allow it.”

“You take the men and get the hell out of here now.” The look in Steele’s told Bastien-Thiry he insisted. Smiling sadly Bastien-Thiry reached out his hand. “It has been a true honour to have fought alongside you Templar, Beau Seant my friend.” He shook Steele’s hand warmly. “The honour is mine Mon Lieutenant, Beau Seant.” He watched his men crouching low approach dropping ammunition at his side. “See you in hell Sarge.” Voyeur pushed a lit cigarette between Steele’s lips. “Get some, or should I say get some more of the bastards Sergeant.” Turning he helped a Legionnaire to his feet. “Not far to go now brother. Only a few hundred yards to the other side.” Supporting the wounded man they stumbled wearily toward safety.

Adolf stood up rigidly snapping to attention. “The halls of Valhalla await Sergeant. Reserve a cute little blond goddess for me when you get there.” Bullets cracked past his head. Turning to glance disdainfully at the Viets, Adolf shook Steele’s hand then ran to set up his M.G at the bridge ready to cover Steele’s escape.

“Get going, I will hold them off for as long as I can!” He shot a final backward glance at the Legionnaires as they headed for safety. Shots rang out from the Laotians across the river. Not being able to resist the temptation they fired on the Viets across the border. Knowing their prey would soon be out of their clutches the Viets surged forward. Firing from cover Steele systematically emptied magazine after magazine at the Viets. He followed through watching the Viets drop through his sights. Grenades exploded close by, too close for comfort. Rushing forward he charged headlong into two Viets bayonetting one in the chest. Pivoting he struck the other with his fist in the throat. Dropping behind the body of the Viet he had bayoneted Steele fired on the line of advancing Viets. They screamed in defiance firing as they ran. Closing in on Steele they began to outflank him. His breath came short and shallow. Adrenaline rushed through his body wired on the rush he experienced during combat. Pinned down he waited for the final rush he knew was sure to come. A whistle pierced the tumult of battle. Shouting at the top of their lungs a group of Viets sprang up rushing straight at Steele. He dropped two of them then drew his Colt 45 waiting for the communist tide to wash over him. “Vive la Legion!” He screamed standing up. Rushing to meet the oncoming foe he fired a shot at the Viet closest to him. For a moment he hesitated not knowing what was happening. One after the other the attacking Viets tumbled to the ground amid a hail of bullets. Turning he saw his men across the river pouring a concentrated

volume of fire on the enemy. Mortars exploded around the Viets taking cover in the bushes near the rice paddy. Steele took a last look at the men he had fought alongside during the epic battle. Dust and smoke obscured the field of battle. Using it as cover Steele slipped into the treeline. Alone once again he manoeuvred past the Viets escaping into the deep jungle. There were other survivors either alone or in desperate groups attempting to reach the protection of the Laotian border. It was his duty to find them and lead them to safety. Never leave behind your wounded or dead.

Deep in the underground tomb Jean clawed at the dank earth with his fingernails. The rats had gorged on the bodies sealed in the cavernous bunker. When Steele set off the explosives he was knocked unconscious. Slowly he regained his senses. Feeling around in total darkness it took him a day to find matches and paper to burn amongst the rubble. A vision of hell suddenly appeared before him when he lit the match. Mangled bodies covered in a sea of bloated rats gnawing at flesh. Slowly but surely he began moving the earth handful by painful handful. After what seemed an eternity his hand broke through the blanket of soil, fresh air flooded the tunnel he had clawed from the earth. Excited voices drifted down the constricted tunnel. Helping hands pulled him free of the earth into the burning sunshine. Shielding his eyes against the glare he managed to distinguish the barrels of A.K 47's hovering close to his head. He gasped in pain when a boot slammed into his ribs. Rifle butts thudded over his body. A high pitched shriek shattered the air. Suddenly and unexpectedly the beating stopped. He felt gentle hands washing the mud and blood from his face, stroking his greasy matted hair. He opened his eyes. A young girl cradled him in her arms. She wore the badge of a political commissar. "Get back you ignorant beasts. I know this man. He is one of us. He fights for your freedom." Staggering to his feet Jean looked at his saviour. Tran Phuong smiled. Her eyes were as cold as ice. "My dear Tran Phuong you have no idea how pleased I am to see you again. It looks to me as if you have seen more than your share of war." She bowed politely. "Look at what is left of my village." She pointed toward a shell strewn moonscape where the village had once been. "My family and friends are dead. I have only vengeance in my heart." Jean took a long swig of water. She told him of their victory. "Firstly where are the men who beat me just now?" Tran Phuong barked an order. Four young Viets were pushed before her. "Have them crawl down the tunnel you pulled me from. I fear there might still be survivors down there." She hesitated then gave the order. Wide eyed the four young men stripped of their weapons slither one after the other down the narrow tunnel. "Jean sifted through their webbing packs. Picking out four grenades he walked deliberately over to the tunnel entrance. "They should have thought a little before kicking me when I was down." Pulling the pins Jean dropped the grenades down the entrance one by one. Desperate screams reached the surface as the tunnel entrance collapsed burying the four young men alive. "We have much work to do Tran Phuong. Where have the French prisoners been taken?" Tran Phuong smiled up at Jean. "Allow me to guide you along the route taken by the prisoners. We shall deal with any stragglers on the way to the re-education camps." Jean smiled. "Let us hope our friend Steele is amongst the prisoners. We have a lot to discuss him and I."

Stragglng down the rugged jungle path a small group of prisoners hobbled as best they could. Sick, malnourished and for the most part wounded, the prisoners struggled to put one weary foot in front of the other. Brutally assaulted by the Viets rifle butts or wooden clubs they staggered ever onward. Unseen by the Viet guards a shadowy figure crept up behind the rear most Viet in the column. Smashed to the ground he stared in horror at the cold blue eyes showing no hint of mercy. An iron like hand covered his mouth. Steele slashed the Viets jugular vein with his razor sharp bayonet. While the Viets life blood seeped into the ground Steele held him in a vice like grip. The column stopped for the night. Prisoners huddled in the open under the tropical rain prayed for deliverance. In the black of night Steele crept up on the dozing, overconfident guards. The prisoners prayers were about to be answered.

[NOTE: The „very unexperienced“ text has been left as found.]

