


# THE CRYSTAL VOID

The cover art depicts a dark, cavernous setting. At the top center, a large, glowing blue crystal is set within an ornate, dark frame. To the left of the crystal, a man in a dark, heavy coat stands holding a trident. To the right, a woman in a light-colored, sleeveless dress stands with her hands clasped. In the foreground, a man with long white hair and a dark coat holds a glowing orange orb. Behind him, a man in a dark, ornate uniform is engaged in combat with a large, dark, ape-like creature. Other similar creatures are visible in the background, some appearing to be in motion or attacking.

**THE SERAPH  
CHRONICLES:**  
BOOK TWO

John Houlihan



**John Houlihan** has been a writer, journalist and broadcaster for over twenty years, working in news, sport and especially videogames.

He has been employed by The Times, Sunday Times and Cricinfo and is the former Editor-in-Chief of Computer and Video Games.com

He has published a novel [Tom or The Peepers' and Voyeurs' Handbook](#) and has recently written The Trellborg Monstrosities and the further adventures of the mysterious Mister Seraph in The Crystal Void and Tomb of the Aeons. The Trellborg Monstrosities has also been converted into a game scenario for [Call of Cthulhu](#) and [Savage Worlds](#) which is published by Modiphius

Forthcoming work includes the first full Seraph novel, Before The Flood, as well as an original sci-fi novel A Late Flowering Deity and a as-yet-to-be-revealed sports book. He has also edited a collection of short stories called Dark Tales from the Secret War, due to be published by Modiphius in 2015.

Away from the written word he has an unnatural fondness for cricket, football, snowboarding, cycling, music, playing guitar and all forms of sci-fi, fantasy and horror. He has an unnatural dread about writing about himself in the third person and currently lives in his home town of Watford in the UK, because, well frankly, someone has to.

For latest news and information see <http://www.John-Houlihan.net> or follow @johnh259 on Twitter

Cover Illustration by **Borja Pindado** is a freelance illustrator living in Madrid. You can see his portfolio at [borjapindado.com](http://borjapindado.com).

Cover design and typography by **Mark Mitchell**. You can see the Gray Falcon's portfolio at [www.behance.net/markmjimitchell](http://www.behance.net/markmjimitchell)

Modiphius version design and layout by Mike Poole who is a designer and illustrator based in London. See his portfolio at [mikepoole.daportfolio.com](http://mikepoole.daportfolio.com)

### **Also by John Houlihan**

*Tom or the Peepers' and Voyeurs' Handbook*

### **The Seraph Chronicles**

*The Trellborg Monstrosities*

*The Crystal Void*

*Tomb of the Aeons*

*The Seraph Chronicles Volume One: Tales of the White Witchman*

### **Coming soon:**

*Before the Flood (Seraph Book 4)*

*Dark Tales from the Secret War*



The Crystal Void is copyright © 2013 JOHN HOULIHAN

Published by Modiphius Entertainment

All rights reserved.

Written by JOHN HOULIHAN

This edition April 2015

All rights reserved, no reproduction in any form or media without written permission please (it'll usually be forthcoming for polite requests via the website). Remember copyright and digital theft robs artists of a chance to earn their livelihood, support them by being proud to buy! Especially if you want to read any sequels.

This is a work of fiction, any resemblance to anyone living or dead is entirely coincidental.

John Houlihan asserts the moral right to be recognised as the author of the work according to the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The Modiphius logo is copyright © 2012-2015 Modiphius Entertainment Ltd.

Published by Modiphius Entertainment Ltd. 35 Turneville Road, London. W14 9PS

info@modiphius.com

Any unauthorised use of copyrighted material is illegal.

Any trademarked names are used in a historical or fictional manner; no infringement is intended. This is a work of fiction. Any similarity with actual people and events, past or present, is purely coincidental and unintentional except for those people and events described in historical context.

Find out more about Achtung! Cthulhu and other Modiphius Entertainment games at

www.modiphius.com & www.facebook.com/modiphius

### ***Thanks***

*With a tip of the Busby to ACD and a certain Brigadier*

~ 4 ~

# *The Crystal Void*

By

John Houlihan



*The first Mon Dieu! Cthulhu adventure*

~ 5 ~





# Chapter 1

## A cognac for the Lieutenant Colonel

“Oh, ver’ well if you insist *monsieur*, I will have a cognac to accompany this modest *vin rouge*. A large one? *Mais oui*, you are most kind, I ‘ave always said you British were the most generous of friends, as well as the most gallant of enemies. That is better, the spirit warms *l’esprit non?* These weary old bones welcome some succour from the chill of winter and the ravages of time.

So, I raise my glass to you *monsieur* but I will also raise it to him, the first *empereur*, my beloved master, our little Corsican corporal who led us on *le grande* adventure all those years ago on the paths of glory and honour. He made Europe tremble before him and they both loved and feared us too, his *Grande Armée*, before your *Fer Duc* stopped him on that terrible day I will not name.

They say little Louis-Napoléon, who seized the throne last year has something of his uncle’s genius about him. I hope he has, for these have been sad days for *la belle France*. We must hope for better times again.

Another? Well you are too kind *monsieur* and an old soldier thanks you, though his doctor perhaps would not. Ach what do these *toubib*’s know? What is *la vie* if not for the living? I would sooner die in my cups than in my sleep, since now a death on the field of glory is no longer possible.

Lieutenant Colonel Gaston d’Bois (retired), at your service *monsieur*, though alas I am now of service to so few, though if the widow relents a little, perhaps we shall see if there is still a fire in the hearth and

time for one last charge, *non?*! Hah! This cognac does me good and takes me back to those old days when I was a *beau sabreur* - and not a fair face or a pair of lips from Madrid to Lisbon was safe from the twirling moustaches or the flashing blade of d’Bois.

Ah, so it is him you wish to know of? Ah, well there lies a tale and now, a shadow seems to pass across the fire and even forty odd winters later it is enough to make these old bones shudder. You see the *cheveux* upon my head? Well, that was the time when it began to turn; from a deep chestnut, to the purest *blanc*.

And yet another? Hm, we may as well ‘ave the bottle with your permission? *Bonne*, Pierre! Bring another glass for the kind *monsieur*. You will wish to fortify yourself *mon ami* for this is as *sinistre* a tale as ever was told and before I have finished, your hair may well be turned as white as my own. You have been warned, yet still you wish me to proceed? *Bonne*, but *prudence monsieur* and I trust this cognac will loosen my poor remembrance of your fair tongue, which I consider second only to the beauteous *Francais* itself.

It began in the autumn of 1810. That rascal Wellington ...pardon *monsieur*, old habits die hard. Any ‘ow, le *Fer Duc* had finally given battle to our own dear child of victory Masséna and we had traded ‘ow you say fisticuffs at Còa. Pff, I remember our brave *Chasseurs de la Siègè* died in their droves as they pushed Black Bob’s rascals across the river and once we ‘ad him on the run, we began our long struggle through the mountains of Portugal to try and bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

*Oui*, for in those days we still thought we could conquer the ‘ole of the peninsula and even though he had given us a bloody nose at Bussaco, le Duc was forced to retreat into the *coeur de Portugal* and dear Masséna pursued him with all ‘aste. I will not lie to you, it was an ‘ard road *monsieur*, as hard as a Jesuit’s heart. *Les Portugais* - the Portuguese - had stripped the land bare as a skeleton’s bleached bones and we suffered as we chased the British down country, until they eluded us and skulked behind those accursed earthworks at Torres Verdras. Is this the behaviour of gentlemen? *Non*, but le Duc would not stir himself from behind his defences to come and give battle and his cunning preparations meant we could not prise him from his ‘ole.

Yet we ‘ussars bore it with the fortitude, providence and manliness you would expect of the premier chasseurs of *Le Armie Iberian*. We of



the celebrated thirteenth bided our time there, ever willing to patrol, probe and reconnoitre 'is lines and there were several minor affairs, when the more sporting of the English were willing to engage in a little light sword work. Ah, but they were magnificent days when I think of them now *monsieur*, our brave and noble fellows with their *cadettes* flying in the breeze, blades drawn as the bugle summoned us to the charge. The smell of *les chevaux*, the clash of steel, brave men trading strokes on the field of honour. Ah, it does this ruptured heart fair good to think of it.

*Naturellement* there were occasional amusements still to be 'ad away from the field and it was at one of these affairs - a ball organised by the regiment to raise *les esprits* - that I first encountered *la belle* Odette. Oh *monsieur*, words are simply not *adéquat* to describe her then in the dawn of her beauty. I can still remember the first time I saw her as if it were *ce matin*. Such poise, such elegance, the figure of a Venus, the face of an angel, such eyes, such lips, as if a very goddess has deigned to descend and walk upon this mortal plane. Forgive the moistness which invades this cheek *monsieur*, allow me a moment to gather myself and continue.

She wore the plainest of gowns and was quite unadorned save at her throat, where she wore a necklace of smoky gems. Yet these were mere trinkets, adjuncts to her beauty and I was immediately enraptured, smitten as you say *non?* I knew she must be mine and she knew it too, for there were none so bold and dashing as the men of the thirteenth and of those - despite the shade you see before you here today - none so handsome, urbane or passionate as d'Bois!

*Cœur défaillir jamais gagné beau visage* or how you say 'faint 'eart never won fair face'. In those days thought became deed for d'Bois and I immediately paid her my respects, extended my hand, swept her into my arms and onto the dance floor and for the rest of the night, the ball faded around us as we danced and laughed and fell into each other's 'earts.

As for my fellow officers? They were of no account and none dared to interrupt us, for one flash of d'Bois' eyes and a bristle of his moustaches was enough to dismiss any such imagined impertinences. The fair Odette was the daughter of Colonel d'Hiver of the guards but was a true daughter of France and we were such kindred souls, it seemed as if we had known each other for years. Ah *monsieur* they say

love is sometimes to be found at first sight, but d'Bois would not have believed such an assertion until that night. You will gauge my seriousness when I tell you that - no matter how many tender female 'earts it broke - I took an oath to immediately forswore all others for *mon nouvel amour* Odette.

*Mais* even such star crossed lovers must eventually seek respite from the giddy whirl of the dance and with aching feet but *coeurs heureux* I escorted my love to a cosy niche, while I fetched us some refreshments. I returned *tout de suite* only to find my love receiving the unwanted attentions of a most strange looking fellow. He was a *Portugais*, that I could see immediately, which may surprise you, but by no means was the whole country set against us in those days and some of the local gentry rather welcomed the enlightenment and refinements we Frenchmen brought to their rather unsophisticated land.

Even those *Portugais* who opposed us, while a little unschooled and perhaps overly prone to the retreat, were nonetheless brave opponents when they stood in milor' Wellington's ranks and would perhaps only run away one time in every two. Yet this one wore no uniform and was not even a military man yet he had the affront to engage my love in idle flirtation? *Merde!* I tell you *monsieur* it would not do! As for my love, she was plainly distressed by his ungallant attentions, but brave girl that she was, was making a formidable show of hiding it, fluttering her eyelashes with clear disgust from behind her fan, while he peered down his nose at her through his eye glass.

"*Monsieur,*" I said clicking my heels and allowing him to turn and drink in the full formidable figure and manly bearing of d'Bois. "I see you have made the acquaintance of the most beautiful woman in the world. A word of caution though, her beauty is liable to singe those who are not accustomed to its intense flame." The scoundrel raised an eyebrow, looked me up and down 'aughtily through his eye glass and I took an instant dislike to the fellow.

I suppose he was handsome in a rather obvious kind of way, with the rich, well cut clothes and supercilious bearing of a natural aristocrat and he wore his foppish rags with a certain *élan*. The fellow was dark haired but his skin was curiously pale compared to the olive hues of his countrymen and he bore the frivolous chin beard these *Portugais* nobles sometimes affect. The mouth was full and sensual suggesting a debased nature, but it was his eyes that were most disturbing, dark and



round, almost unnaturally so and they seemed to peer from that *visage* with an expression like a gutted 'alibut. Noble he may 'ave been but I could see he was no gentlemen and I knew at once that our blades must cross, if not now, then in time. If I could have known what was to come to pass, I would have drawn my blade and struck him down on the spot - without 'esitation.

"I am the Marquis Phillippe de Figueira da Foz." He gave the most derisory of nods.

"Lieutenant Gaston d'Bois of the thirteenth."

"Well despite your lack of delicacy, I cannot fault your eyesight lieutenant, Mademoiselle d'Hiver is indeed a most charming young lady. Yet I also offer you a word of caution or perhaps advice. Beware, for *la mer* cools even the most ardent of heat and this country has an inconvenient habit of separating even the most devoted of lovers."

"Indeed? Such a forced separation could only come at the cost of my life *monsieur le Marquis*." I reposted.

"Why, naturally," he said and with that, the vile fellow turned on his 'eel and was soon lost amongst the milling throng. What an ill-mannered aristo rogue, I should have punished him for his impertinence with an invitation to cross swords on the field of honour that very dawn, although I knew Odette had merely been feigning politeness to this creature. It was only out of consideration to my hosts and his rapid exit that spared the fellow. Yet I confess at that moment a shadow crossed *mon coeur* which was not so easily dismissed.

Yet my misgivings eventually evaporated as the rest of the night passed in a giddy whirl of champagne and dancing and laughter and the first 'ints of dawn were lighting the sky when I escorted my beloved Odette back to the tender care of father, Colonel d'Hiver. We said few words at our parting, yet somehow I already knew an understanding had been made between us. I skipped back to my billet born on the very morning zephyrs themselves, certain, truly, that I had met the love of my life, *vous comprenez?*

Exhilarated but exhausted I repaired to my quarters where I gratefully surrendered to the arms of Morpheus. I slept for most of the next day and when I awoke in the late afternoon, my head was still foggy and vague from the excesses of the night before. Yet while my mind was clouded, my heart was soaring and after I 'unted up a morsel of breakfast and a vat of *café noir*, d'Bois was once again restored to

his former self. The rest of the afternoon was spent lounging around in the mess with my comrades and despite their boastful tales of galantry and conquest, it was I who wore a secret smile and concealed a glowing 'eart.

As dusk became evening, I sauntered across to the stables to visit my two mares, Rosalind and Eleanor to give some *pommes* to my other sweethearts which they munched gratefully, snickering and whinnying their delight. I smoked a thoughtful cheroot in the starlight and was strolling back to the mess ready to seek a little light supper, when out of the shadows, a figure emerged.

"Monster! What 'ave you done with her?"

His sword was at once at my throat and his steel shivered and trembled, though whether through weakness or fury I could not tell, yet the point danced most alarmingly beneath my eyes.

"Calm yourself sir, then explain. What is this dreadful thing of which you accuse d'Bois?"

"Monster! The allure of her jewels was too much, was it not? Where is she? Speak or I will drive this point through your heart, so help me *Mon Dieu!*"

"*Monsieur*," I said, calm as the surface of a lake in summer. "I can assure you I know nothing of the matter to which your refer. If you speak of Mademoiselle d'Hiver..."

"I do."

"Then I will trouble you not to bandy the name of *mon amour* with such reckle..." But all the while I had subtly manoeuvring my assailant and in that moment my own sabre flashed, sparking against his blade and knocking it aside. I sprang back onto the balls of my feet, ready to deliver a fierce blow to my foe, but now that I had a full view of my opponent, I stayed my hand.

"Colonel d'Hiver!?" For indeed it the distinguished father of my love. Yet this was not the noble visage of the colonel of infantry who had led charge after charge in battle, but a pale shade of his former self. Monsieur le Colonel's face was distraught and his blade fell uselessly to the floor.

"d'Bois. Tell me you have her, I will forgive any stain, any dishonour, if I know she is safe."

"Slowly Colonel, slowly. I have not seen Odette since dawn when I entrusted her into your safe keeping. I have been asleep or in the mess



all day, what has 'appened?"

"She is missing from her bed and I thought it must be you who had taken her away. Now her *maman* is gone she is all I have, my dear sweet child, but she is a *naïf*, so pure, so innocent, that I believed she must have sought you out, or you her. She would speak of nothing else on the way back from the ball."

"Believe me colonel, I feel the same way, but to take her? *Non*. That is not the action of an honourable man and no way to win her heart or your affections. As for her gems? I care not two figs for them, they are nothing to me."

"Forgive me d'Bois, I see I was wrong. An old man's concern for his sweet daughter has clouded his judgement. That necklace is a rare, curious piece that has been in our family for generations... I thought..."

"Perhaps it has, but it is a mere bauble compared to your daughter's beauty. Would you consider such a trinket reason enough to abduct her?"

"I can see now I have ascribed the basest of motives to you with little justification d'Bois. Forgive me if you can, for she is so precious to me, that it has driven me into gravely insulting you."

"*L'amour d'un père est un puissant chose mon colonel* - the love of a father is a potent thing *mon colonel*. As far as I am concerned there is nothing to forgive."

"Yet if she is not here with you, where is she? Her room is empty with no sign of disturbance and the necklace is also gone. You might see how I have leapt to this conclusion?"

"Do not give it another thought *mon Colonel*, but clearly there is some dastardly work afoot, and I believe I know its author."

"You do? Speak *mon brave*, speak!"

"It is that villain the Marquis da Foz."

"The *Portugais* noble? But 'ow? Why?"

"His lurid, unwelcome attentions were being directed at Odette last night before I intervened. Believe me, there is little accounting for the actions of these degenerate aristos, they are always eager to acquire more coin. If there is foul work here, I have no hesitation in laying it at 'is door. I will wager he abducted her and 'elped himself to her jewellery at the same time."

"The swine, I will cut his heart out!"

"*Non mon colonel*, with the greatest respect, this is an assignment for a younger man and none will undertake it more gladly than d'Bois. Give me a moment to saddle Rosalind and we will away to your quarters to see what we may see."

A short while later we cantered to an 'alt outside the farmhouse where the colonel and Odette had been billeted. His regiment of guardsmen were camped outside, tall, strapping fellows who had swept all before them on the battlefields of Europe, but *mon colonel* had sworn me to secrecy lest further scandal arise and avoiding the picquets, we entered as quietly as fieldmice.

A quick examination of the scene of this outrage soon told me the full story and I did not permit myself to show the fear or anger that stirred inside me, lest it infect that brave old warrior. The colonel, while an admirable man in many ways, had never hunted in the forests of the Ardennes where d'Bois had spent his youth tracking wild beast and fowl and it did not take me long to discern what had happened at the scene of the crime.

The fiend and his helpers (for it was evident from the faint tracks below the window that he was not alone) had lured Odette into opening the downstairs window (perhaps impersonating d'Bois 'imself no less!) and snatched my love from there. Strange, that this activity should have gone unnoticed in the middle of an armed camp, yet da Foz was a devious scoundrel and undoubtedly knew the ground better than we and he had no doubt enjoyed some form of 'ome advantage.

Quickly, I checked my kit and weapons and made sure I had enough spare ball and powder and then I sprang upon my trusty mare and was reassuring *mon colonel*, with a confidence I perhaps did not entirely feel.

"Never fear sir, I will bring her back to you and make sure that *salaud* pays for his infamy with his life!"

A father's eyes implored me and not a word more did he need to speak. So, with a light touch of my spurs on Rosalind's flanks we were soon off the night. The moon hung heavy and gibbous in the sky and it was not difficult to follow their footprints to where they had concealed their horses *un petite* distance away. They evidently knew their business well, for they rode in single file to conceal their numbers and the tracks disappeared away to the west toward the coast. I set my little mare's nose to that point of the compass and followed as fast as



my Rosalind's sturdy legs would take us.

Mon Dieu but it was an 'ard road my friend, for while they were easy enough for a seasoned huntsman to follow on the plain, the tracks soon led toward higher, stonier ground where even my faucon's eye was tested. But fortune favours the bold and just like your English fox'ounds on the scent, I would not abandon my pursuit, for just the thought of my beloved in that fiend's arms, spurred me on and lent my Rosalind wings.



## Chapter 2

### *A Dance in the Moonlight*

On and on I rode and as I trotted into a small clearing, the sounds and scents of the night time forest seemed to diminish. Rosalind gave a snort and whinny as if she sensed something too and then, there he was, that grinning degenerate da Foz, with Odette bound and slung across his saddle bow! My whiskers fair bristled with indignation and my sabre hissed from its sheath, but he just gave a contemptuous snort, disdaining even to draw his own blade.

“So, you are a brave man *and* a fool, d’Bois. Better you had never walked this road.”

“An ‘ussar does not walk, he rides!”

With that I put spurs to Rosalind's flanks and charged the fiend point first, ready to slash those words from his throat, but the villain had prepared well and his ruffians came pouring from the trees in a devastating counter-charge. I hacked at one, slashed at another's arms, but they were too many and cunningly placed their horses between us as a buffer, with no thought for their poor creatures' health. More of his villains assailed me on foot and desperate, I forced Rosalind to dance and rear. Her hooves lashed out at another, there was a crack as his skull burst and he fell. But now their blows began to tell and as I whirled Rosalind around, a club buffeted my ribs, a blade raked my pelisse, my sabre was swept from my hand and I was dragged to the ground with blows raining down upon my Busby. *C'est vrai* I thought my last moment on earth 'ad come but it 'ad not.

“Enough!” The blows ceased and I was dragged to my feet, held in



the iron grip of Da Foz's thugs.

"Such a brave man does not deserve to die ... so quickly. At least not before he has had a chance to hear a last goodbye from his love. Say your farewells my dear, for you will not look upon his face again."

Odette's imploring eyes met my own and I held her gaze as I cursed Da Foz to the high heavens, rounding it off with an earnest lover's promise.

"...and if you sully her I will ..."

"Enough! d'Bois, continue and I will cut out your tongue as well. Yet, brave fool that you are, you should know, it was not Odette that I sought, yet I will take her virtue nonetheless."

"Make sure of me now Da Foz, for if not, I will 'unt you down..."

"Oh you'll die d'Bois, be certain of that. But a Marquis of the blood does not sully his hands with such *common* toil. My men on the other hand, have no such qualms. Fernando, I leave the details to you, but dispatch him in a manner worthy of your vile imagination. Make it both lingering and painful."

Then he was gone and I fought and shouted at the sound of retreating hooves but to little avail and soon I was trussed like a turkey at a country market. Even my poor Rosalind was subdued and hobbled and she looked at me with doleful eyes, while Da Foz's thugs debated in their debased way, the best method of dispatching your poor correspondent. They casually discussed such horrors as crucifixion, flaying, an ingenious method of rending a man apart using bent saplings (fortunately none were at hand), but the lank-haired, evil-looking one named Fernando, who had something of his master about his grim visage, ended their talk by ordering them to prepare a fire beneath one of the pine trees.

While they began to build it, I was manhandled over to a low hanging branch, strung up by my wrists to dangle in mid air while they piled the faggots beneath. In moments, the pain was excruciating and my arm sockets felt as if they were already aflame, but Fernando had more sauce to add to my torment.

"We will slow roast you Frenchman and your dying agonies will be like music to our ears. What do you think of that?"

For answer I spat at him in my fury but I missed and he gave a sneer as the final kindling and shavings were placed around the base. Then without so much as a pause, he struck a match and threw it into

the pile.

I have faced death a thousand times in a hundred different circumstances, but oh it was most painful then - but not for myself you understand. We all must die and this flesh is heir to decay and sorrow, but I had hoped to make my end in battle on the field of honour. Yet this? My humiliating death would condemn Odette to that villain's clutches and it was almost more than I could bear to think of. I began to shout and curse and scream at them incoherently, employing the rich vocabulary that only a seasoned trooper of the line could muster. My toes began to feel the first heat of the fire's embrace and as the flames licked ever higher, I tried rocking back and forth. But the motion sent spirals of agony racing up my arms, even though it brought some small relief from the gathering heat.

"Ha, we will have roast Frog tonight brothers, although this one doesn't look very tender." They all laughed at his crass witticism but real fear began to build inside me now. Do not believe any man who tells you they could face such a fate with equanimity. They are liars and I am not ashamed to say I began to babble, imploring, praying cursing, promising anything that would spare me this ignoble end.

My boots began to smoulder and even that small heat was becoming unbearable as I swung back and forth over the central flame. Now I could only hope that it would be over quickly. The fire crackled and popped, slewing showers of sparks into the cold night air and the rope which bound my legs must have been aflame awhile as it snapped, leaving me bucking like a new born colt. For one second my heart soared at this new found freedom, but my arms were still bound tight and it just bought more loud guffaws from my captors, who shouted vile encouragements and elbowed each other in their cruel delight.

"Dance the Flamenco next Frenchman!"

But I saved my breath and kicked to increase my swing, for beyond their mocking I had heard something they had not, a distant, regular drumming which a born cavalryman recognises from the cradle. The pounding drew closer and now they heard it too, for they ran to snatch up their weapons and peered trembling into the night. Hoof beats! Hah, the sound of salvation! It must be a squadron at least as the clatter echoed around the trees and now they were almost upon us and these brigands were recoiling and running around like a pack of curs in their terror! The first horse burst into the clearing, a cloaked



rider on an enormous roan and his lance buried itself deep into the chest of one of Da Foz's foremost men, impaling him to the trunk of a tree. A lancer! *Mon Dieu*, were our brave Polish allies to be my rescuers?

There was flash from the rider's sabre, my bonds parted and I hurtled earthward, more sparks flying as I danced daintily over the blaze. I must confess, it must have looked most comic, but I was in no mood for levity as I snatched up the fallen man's cudgel. The rider's pistol barked once, another brigand fell and Da Foz's men began showing their heels, scattering into the darkness. But the one called Fernando and two of his bigger ruffians were 'ow you say, made of sterner stuff and advanced upon me, determined to finish the job. I prepared to defend myself, but my arms were still like knotted bundles from my painful suspension and desperately, I searched the trees for the rest of the horsemen to come to my rescue.

Yet now it seemed the chorus of sounds had disappeared and it was just that single rider who wheeled and came to my defence. Both of Fernando's henchmen turned to receive him and I faced off against Da Foz's lieutenant with just a knobby stick, which felt like shaking matchwood in my hands. He was a brute of fellow too and came in swinging his crude sword like a scythe, as if he would beat me down like a sheath of corn.

But the art of the true swordsman is not about strength, but about finesse and timing and dancing back, I gave ground, easily evading his clumsy blows. Fernando came on with another hefty swipe, overbalancing and this time my rapid riposte smashed into his wrist, forcing him to drop the weapon. The garled head of my cudgel came up, crunching into his jaw and as he staggered, another precise blow smashed into the back of his leg, forcing down him onto his knees.

Nimbly, I skipped around and kicked him in the back, which has the desired effect of plunging him face first into the blaze which was meant to consume me. Even though it does me no credit I confess, I planted a boot on the back of his neck and held it there while he screamed as if all the torments of hell had come upon him. Finally I took pity and stoved in his skull. To this day I feel not the slightest 'int of remorse.

Meanwhile, my rescuer has dealt most skilfully with his opponents. One lay against the base of a tree, clutching his guts which another

musket ball had blown open, while the other lay wide eyed and dead, a tell tale sabre cut across his face. The pale rider walked his roan over slowly, sheathed his blade and dismounted quietly, offering his hand.

"Are you quite well sir?" He asked in immaculate French, but from his dress and manner I could tell he was not of our *armee*.

"A touch singed *monsieur*, but fortunately mainly underdone thanks to your timely intervention, for which I offer you my eternal thanks." I replied in passable English.

"Pff, think nothing of it, it would be a black day indeed when I left an honest soldier, British or French, to the tender mercies of Da Foz's rogues."

"You know that base villain then?"

"Oh I do to my sorrow and have observed his activities with growing trepidation. He courts both sides in this conflict, playing each against the other for his own darker purposes. A most cruel and unnatural fellow is the Marquis Da Foz."

"Unnatural? I know nothing of that *monsieur*, my quarrel with the Marquis is entirely personal." I said.

"Indeed?"

"This very night he has stolen the woman I love, tearing her away from her good father for his own depraved purposes. I was in pursuit when I was waylaid and overcome by his villains."

"Forgive the indelicacy, but may I enquire as to the name of this young lady *monsieur*?"

"Why it is the fair Odette, the only daughter of colonel d'Hiver of the guard."

"Ha! So his greater design takes further shape, yet why would he...? It is strange, Da Foz is not normally distracted by the temptations of the flesh. So why kidnap this mademoiselle - saving your presence - no matter how lovely and why risk discovery with so transparent a crime? It is most unlike him, he must have another veiled purpose."

"If he 'as, I care not, for I intend now only to resume my mission and rescue my love."

"Then I trust you will not object to some company sir? It seems our purposes are as one in bringing Da Foz to justice."

"If you would do me that 'onour sir, I would embrace it most heartily. If I do not mistake my guess, you are one of milor' Wellesley's Eyes?"



“Indeed, but it is not on the Duke’s business that I ride tonight, nor England’s, but for another purpose. I have been watching Da Foz for many months now, observing, studying, waiting for him to make his move. And now I find he has struck impulsively, a course of action which is most unlike him, for normally he is the most patient and careful of man. Something has changed, something significant and it is - if you’ll forgive me sir - not just milady which has prompted him to take this action.”

“Whatever his motive, I will see Mademoiselle d’Hiver restored to her father or die in the trying and the devil take Da Foz!”

“Indeed, but I fear even the devil would think twice before supping with this blackguard. Come then, let’s be about it.”

“Ah, but in all this confusion, I have clean forgotten my manners *monsieur*. I have the ‘onour to be Lieutenant Gaston d’Bois of the emperor’s own thirteenth glorious Hussars. A pleasure to make your acquaintance...?” I clicked my still smouldering heels and made an elaborate bow.

“The honour is mine Lieutenant. Seraph is my name, Major Seraph.”

After my *petite* ordeal, I was glad to be back in the saddle of my beloved Rosalind and as we began to eat up the kilometres on Da Foz’s trail, I regarded my new companion and ally from the corner of my eye. It was the work of moments to see he was no ordinary soldier, for he bore little of the manly aspect and bearing one would expect of the gallant gallopers, those dashing British officers who operated beyond the lines of the regular army.

Major Seraph sported no moustaches as I had seen the brave British ‘ussars wear and indeed his dress was most plain and sober, with nothing of the dash or panache one would expect of a *sabreur* of any nation. The buff coat and riding breeches were simple, unadorned by any braid or decoration and indeed, he foreswore even the Busby, seeming to prefer a most understated top ‘at. Yet for all these evident defects in his attire, there was a certain stern calmness to his bearing and despite the rather weak chin and long, almost unseemly, pale hair and that rather fey voice, his narrow eyes glowed with an intensity and otherworldliness, an *outré* quality, that spoke of steel and purpose. Nor would I forget that he had acquitted himself most forcefully in the heat of battle and I was glad, yet also a little nervous, to have such an ally by my side.

We passed through dark, lavender scented woods and rode along the top of desolate ridges moving as fast as we could while following the trail and all the time straining to get a sighting of our quarry, but to little avail. Now the air began to have a salt tang to it and suddenly, riding out of the dense darkness of the trees, a vast bay stretched out before us, the waves of the ocean shimmering in the moonlight.

Major Seraph reined in and produced a folding telescope from his pocket. “There,” he pointed and I could just see across the curve of the bay, a small cloud of dust of the kind thrown up by a single horseman. For a moment I thought I glimpsed the retreating figure but then he was hidden by a hill and enveloped in shadow. Above, perched on a promontory, loomed the towers and ramparts of an ancient fortress, its crenellated walls and crumbling battlements speaking of an old, Moorish lineage. It was undoubtedly the domain of the *Portugais* nobleman though I ‘esitate to ‘onour him with such a title.

“So that’s Da Foz’s lair,” said the Major. “That makes a lot of sense from what I know of the creature.”

“And what is that sir? Is he then known for his seamanship?”

“In a manner of speaking d’Bois, in a manner of speaking. Let’s just say I suspect he may have more than a passing affinity for the ocean.”

“Pff, why should this concern us? Let us onward and storm this foul creature’s castle. I am eager to be reunited with my love.”

“Steady, Lieutenant, I understand hussars are known for their bravery ...and their impetuosity.”

“It is true sir, we hold it a disgrace for a ‘ussar to live beyond the age of thirty.”

“Indeed? But this is no occasion for a full scale frontal assault d’Bois, not if you want your lady returned intact ...and alive.”

“I want that more than life itself sir.”

“Good then perhaps you’ll rein in your natural instincts and heed my words. Da Foz is no mere aristocratic fop, he is very dangerous man and here, on his home ground even more so. We may face foes here, allies of his, who are more than shall we say *naturel*.”

“Sir, surely you are not in earnest? There is little room for such superstition in this age of reason.”

“Believe what you wish Lieutenant, I only hope you are proved right. But come, let us reconnoitre further forward and seek an alternative way into Da Foz’s den.”



We dismounted and the major attempted to stealthily remove some curious looking flasks from his saddlebags which seemed to glow with a strange light, but did not deign to answer my quizzical eyebrow as to their contents. 'owever, after carefully muffling their hooves, we led our horses on a circuitous route along the cliff top of the bay. We wound over the rocky coastal paths taking care to remain out of view of the castle walls until we could conceivably lead them no further and then picketed the beasts in a small grove of stubbly trees. Rosalind was not *sanguine* and whickered most pitifully at the prospect, until I nuzzled her head and breathed into her nose.

This done, the closer we got to the walls, the more the smell of the sea pervaded, but this was not the clean fresh tang of the ocean brine, but a foul, fishy stench, like the rotting of a shoal of fish guts. It made me feel *tres mal*, but the major seemed quite immune from its formidable reek.

Now we moved forward like *tirelleurs*, flitting from cover to cover and I took the opportunity to study the castle. With each step, the major's words seem to grow in *crédibilité*, for it was a sinister place, shrouded in dark shadows which seemed to absorb or perhaps deflect the clean beams of pure moonlight. In a great many places the walls were crumbling and tumbled down, as if assailed by the ages and its whole character spoke of *désordre*, neglect and perhaps something darker. Although I could see no sentries, I had the distinct impression we were being watched from within, though *certainement*, any such observer would immediately have raised the alarm. Yet I could not dismiss the feeling and as we crept beneath the eaves of the walls, I found myself quite *crainitif* and immediately had to draw upon my reserves of manly courage to suppress a violent shudder.

"Shall we climb the walls Major?" I whispered, seeking to mask my craven thoughts with the certainty of action.

"Hm, I think ... perhaps not. If I'm not mistaken this small path may yield a more desirable mode of ingress, though perhaps... no it is nothing, come let's explore this way."



## Chapter 3

### The Sentinel on the Stair

The route the major had chosen wound down beside the walls towards the sea and each step seemed to become more terrible to me than a direct assault upon the walls. Yet an 'ussar does not blanch or 'esitate and one thought of my poor Odette quite restored my fortitude. So I followed in the major's footsteps and kept one hand tightly gripped upon the 'ilt of my sabre. Down and down we went, the winding path becoming more slippery, flecked with moistness and spume. The smell grew bolder too, more intense, such that I was forced to press a perfumed handkerchief into service, lest I gag like an *enfant*.

The path stopped abruptly above a small but precipitous cliff overlooking the roots of the castle walls and there, surrounded by choking vegetation and salt-rank seaweed, was a small break in the rocks, a cavern entrance, wreathed by the wisps and vapours of a sea fog. It was dark, black as a Cossack's soul and although I have never been prone to the night terrors, the very sight of it quite unmanned me, or perhaps I just 'ad a foreboding of what was to come?

"We must pass through here Lieutenant, I am afraid it is the only way," whispered the major, striking a dark lantern under his cloak.

"Da Foz's men would have cut us down in an instant up there."

"But I saw no-one."

"Quite so, yet there they were. This way, though more perilous, will see us inside undetected."

"More perilous?"



"I'm afraid so, there is no way to prepare you adequately for what we may encounter Lieutenant, no words will suffice. All I can say is stay close to me and trust in your courage. It is your best, perhaps your only hope."

"My only? But Major..."

"Don't talk, just follow."

The narrow beam of the major's dark light lit our way and inside we crept like mice in the wainscoting until the blackness quite swallowed us up. The walls ran with rivulets of moisture and I took one last look back at the cave entrance behind us and the comforting sweep of the moonlight. This strange man's words had unnerved me more than any explicit warning might have done and again, I found my courage tested. Another thought puzzled me too. Even the mightiest of fortifications have concealed sally ports, yet with its commanding position and formidable walls why would the inhabitants of this castle leave this way open and unguarded?

True, it was well concealed and the major had sniffed it out like an 'ound upon the scent, but my misgivings would not be so easily dismissed and I tried to quell my beating pulse. Give me a sword in my hand and a clean fight and you would not have found d'Bois wanting, but the dank eeriness of this place was hard even for the most fortitudinous soul to bear.

For it was also clear that this was not an entirely natural cave, but had been built on and enhanced by many hands over the long centuries. The ceiling was 'igh, strangely 'igher than any man might require and in places had been fashioned into arches which bore a strange geometry that hazarded the eye. Steps had been carved into the rock by unknown hands and their smoothness and great size made progress harder rather than easier, as if the way had been designed for giant rather than human feet. That awful fishy smell, which had been pungent enough outside 'ung like a discordant note in the air and added further to my apprehensions.

We had not travelled far, but already we must have passed under the castle walls and ahead, in the dim glow of the dark light, it was just possible to see this tunnel intersect another at right angles, one way sloping up, the other heading down. Suddenly the major stopped, stooping low and grabbed me with a force which belied his rather slender frame, pulling me back into an alcove in the wall. There was

just time to see his hand pressed against his lips before the shutter came down on the dark lantern and then we were pitched into utter blackness. Long moments, which seemed like minutes, passed as we crouched there in the darkness and I was just on the point of whispering to the major when I heard it, a noise, distant at first but growing closer. Oh *mon ami*, how to convey that awful, 'orrible, sinister sound which would have frozen the very marrow of your bones?

It is strange to retell even now, but it had a kind of damp quality as if it had been hauled from the depths of the sea, and I had the impression of something slippery passing over the rocks, but as if it were sucking at the stone. That smell returned, rising to a pitch, an intensity, that I wondered I did not gag and retch. Then, even though I could see nothing, I had an impression, no more, of three large, terrible shadows, blacker portions of the blackness, crossing the space where the tunnels intersected. One of the shapes stopped and I was quite unnerved and to my shame, cowered from its gaze, quite unmanned.

There were sounds, *Mon Dieu*, at once both alien and chilling, like no speech of this earth, like the ghost of a tide, the whisper of the sea. How I did not scream in my terror, to this day I do not know, but I felt as if my very soul were being torn and stretched by these unnatural shades. Then the shadow moved, passed and was gone, the wet squelching sounds receding as they, whatever *they* were, retreated down the tunnel. For long moments I was simply too stunned to move or speak, until I felt the major's hand upon my arm.

"My compliments, Lieutenant," Major Seraph whispered and as he turned to me I seemed to see a strange light burning in his eyes, like the embers of a coal fire just before they are extinguished. "Not many men would remain silent when confronted by such creatures," he said.

"What were those things?"

"Fortunate for you, that you do not know. Suffice it to say that we have just encountered Da Foz's allies and let us leave it at that... for now. With any luck, you will not meet their like again and your life will be all the healthier and your mind all the saner for it. Now, let us journey onward before they return."

The major unmasked 'is lantern and I shuddered, took a moment to collect myself, then followed as he turned right and up into the upper portion of the tunnel. I 'urried on, not daring to look backward



or downward, where distantly I could hear the waves crash with a peculiar violence against the shore.

Upward and ever upward we moved along a tunnel which had been made on the same gargantuan scale, but the more distance we put between ourselves and the intersection, the more I liked it. After a while, my natural *virilité* once again began to reassert itself and the 'ussar who feared not a mortal thing upon the face of this earth reintroduced himself.

Now we prowled under the foundations of the castle, along a path which showed the passage of the years, for the way was worn and smooth, as if many feet had walked here down the long ages. The major's lantern threw vast, elongated shadows upon the walls and I began to see many strange pictures, reliefs and friezes which came from many times and places. There were many *outré* geometric patterns after the Moorish fashion, that seemed to blend and whirl and fascinate the eye and occasionally, I would catch glimpses of some modern depictions which seemed to show uncanny creatures emerging from the sea and walking upright upon the land. One of the Moorish designs in particular caught my eye and I found myself drawn to its sensuous gyrations. The pattern seemed to quite rob me of my will, drawing me in into that shifting, opulent void, until I could have looked upon it for all the remaining days of my life. It was only the major's firm grip upon my shoulder that seemed to break its spell and return me to my senses. He quickly hurried me on before I could look again, as every fibre of my soul begged me to do.

Now, a faint luminescence began to seep through from the end of the tunnel and I could see the portal framed by the starlight and hurried toward it, eager to get beyond the womb-like confines of the earth and out in the pure clean air where I could feel the sweep of the skies above me once again. But as I drew level with the major, he held a hand out to hinder my progress.

"Not so eager, Lieutenant. The way ahead is barred."

"I see nothing Major, let us..."

"No you do not see it, but there is something there nonetheless, a sentinel of some kind, I can sense it. Da Foz would not leave the entrance to his nest - even one so perilous to traverse as this - totally unguarded."

"Ver' well, what do you propose?"

"Here, take the lantern a moment."

The major reached into the folds of his cloak and removed and unfastened a rather plain looking sabretache. Then he began muttering under his breath as he nimbly sorted through the vials and jars and potions, eventually determining the one he needed. It was a small leather pouch and contained as far as I could see, a small heap of rather ordinary grey looking dust. The major sprinkled a portion onto his gauntlet with elaborate caution and then, eyes blazing again with that strange witch light, said simply.

"Lieutenant, I would advise you to look away now, for once seen, the thing revealed cannot be unseen. Yet if you do choose to behold it, you will gain a deeper understanding of the darker nature of the fabric of the universe we inhabit and your eyes will truly be opened to the threat Da Foz presents - albeit at some cost to your peace of mind. Know that I nor anyone else will think the less of you if you decline. The choice is yours."

"...I, it is a strange dilemma you pose *un homme, monsieur*. But lay on Major, I am not afraid," I said with a bravery I did not feel. For I had already allowed fear to govern me too many times this night and I was not ready to wilt again before the gaze of this stern Englishman.

"Very well then, stand back," he said and with that breathed in, seeming to ingest lungfuls of air until he had drawn in many times what a normal man could. Then he pursed his thin lips and blew upon his palm, projecting the powder in a long, cone-like exhalation until it quite filled the doorway. At first the powder eddied and swirled, thick and choking, saturating the atmosphere with flecks like cinders. Then, as it began to settle, silver flakes glowed and glinted in the still night air, seeming to coalesce around a vaguely humanoid shape that barred the entrance. It was a vast being, the height of a man and half as much again and its limbs and body were bulky and weighty, silvery and scaled. At its neck, nebulous gills seemed to twitch with unclean life and its head and jaw were heavy, the nose multi-tentacled like the appendages of an octopus. Yet the true horror lay in the outlines of its eyes, which were cold and dead, containing a blackness like the stellar void.

Its form was ethereal and insubstantial like a ghost, the spectral outline of an aquatic demon, for such I took it to be and indeed, it seemed it could be nothing else. I, who had never doubted the path of



the sane and rational in my entire adult life, recoiled in horror, almost turning and fleeing from this apparition.

Yet the major did not tarry and was intoning strange words and phrases in a language I could not understand. His fingers wove complex patterns in the air which seemed to leave an after image behind them, the multifarious trace of a five-pointed star hung there suspended. The effect upon the creature was remarkable; at first, its insubstantial frame shook with anger and rage and its facial tentacles writhed, quivering in agitation. Yet then it seemed to quail, retreating from the image as if - foul creature though it was - it were the one afeared. As the sigil faded, so too did the creature, slowly diminishing until it was just wisps and shreds of smoke and then they too were gone and only starlight remained.

"There," said Major Seraph, "Our path is now quite safe. Are you ready Lieutenant? I see you may have questions?"

"*Merde* Major, where to begin? What mysteries, what sorcery is this, that flourishes in this age of reason?"

"A convenient label for a mere moment in the course of human history and that itself, a mere footnote in the wider history of the universe."

"But this creature, what was it? And what did you do to it? How... why?"

"Perhaps it is not wise for you to dwell too long upon this Lieutenant. Suffice it to say that being was a guardian, a sentinel conjured by Da Foz to bar the way into his fortress. As to my methods? Well he is not the only man able to marshal extraordinary forces to his cause. Perhaps now you begin to apprehend the true purpose of my coming here? I'm sure milady d'Hiver is as precious to you as life itself, but Da Foz is no ordinary villain, but a creature who consorts with the demons of the sea and the powers of the outer dark. He must be stopped before his foul purpose - whatever that is - manifests itself."

"*Incroyable*, if I had not seen, I would ...I would call you a liar, a madman if you had asked me to believe in such things. Yet now I have the evidence of my own eyes, though I can scarce believe them. What are we to do Major?"

"Let us move into the castle and find Da Foz's lair, but quietly d'Bois, we would do well not to give any signal of our approach."

"Rely on my discretion Major," I said running a finger down the

edge of my blade







## Chapter 4

### The Call of the Ocean

The portal led out to a shadowed corner of the courtyard and we took advantage of the darkness to allow our eyes to adjust and survey the inner workings of Da Foz's den. Major Seraph was right to preach caution, for upon the crumbling ramparts could be seen several of the Marquis' ruffians covering the approach to the walls. To attempt them would have been a short road to a ball through the head or a sword through the throat. Yet the way he had chosen was scarcely less perilous and I was still reeling inwardly from what I had seen. Yet amongst the many follies of youth, one of its few virtues is an ability to focus on the immediate. So rapidly dismissing any thought of supernatural terrors, my eyes quickly scouted the courtyard, searching for a way to proceed.

Far above, in the inner keep, was the *donjon*, the fortified great hall which formed the inner sanctum of any such fortification and it was there I knew we must find the Marquis. The major was of a similar mind for he indicated a set of lighted windows near its top.

A quick nod of agreement and we were on our way, seeping through the shadows, dark shades ourselves, clinging to the patches of gloom which seemed to breed within those walls. Through the courtyard we snuck our way, pausing to allow two degenerate looking hirelings to saunter past on their patrol, then secreting ourselves behind some barrels at the bottom of a stone stair. I was all for a swift dash to attempt the battlements but the major stayed my hand and it was just as well, for above I heard in broken *Portugais*.

"What are the master's orders?"

"Keep a weather eye out. Fernando has not returned and he thinks one of the Frogs may come in pursuit. Yet none have attempted the walls."

"Perhaps they have found the hidden way?"

"Pffh, If they have, they'll wish for a swift ball through their brains or their throats cleanly slit. For the sentinel does not feast upon flesh alone, but it will crack their marrow before devouring their very souls."

"And the *others*?"

"Will be up at high tide. Come, we have much to prepare, while the master *entertains* himself with the wench."

The iniquitous cackle which greeted this foul observation almost caused me to leap out and strike them down in blood and fury, and the quiet way be damned! *Tres fort!* But the major's wiser head and iron-like grip prevailed and with some difficulty, I kept my peace until their footsteps faded away. But murder was in my heart now and woe betide any of Da Foz's *suppôts* who crossed the path of d'Bois!

Onward we crept, up the inside of the stair and onto the battlements where I could hear the sea lashing against the rocks below. The major led the way with seemingly unerring instinct as we slipped through a small portico and into a side door which led into the main body of the keep. As he fastened the door quietly behind us, the major unshuttered his dark light again and we found ourselves in a dusty, long abandoned corridor.

Now we were inside the inner defences of this foulest of creatures and we began to move upward, ever upward, flitting from cover to cover and 'astily concealing ourselves whenever the servants of Da Foz made themselves apparent. In any great campaign or battle, surprise is one of the most useful allies of all and suspecting nothing of our intrusion, the creature's minions went about their business with apparent unconcern. I could not help but notice that like the brigands who had ambushed me earlier, they were an ill-favoured crew and here, away from the gaze of the outside world, their cold, bulging eyes, pallid skins and *poisson*-like features were even more pronounced. I wrinkled my nose in silent contempt at these degenerate specimens. What exactly was Da Foz the master of here?

To add to my disgust, the very castle walls emanated an oppressive



atmosphere, seeming to speak of centuries of neglect with their dingy, shadowed 'allways, rotting tapestries, rusted weapons and decaying suits of armour. That putrid, fishy smell, though not as strong as in the tunnels, seemed to permeate everywhere, assaulting the nostrils, numbing the senses and provoking a primitive, instinctual revulsion that was distinctly unsettling.

Yet despite these distractions, we kept our course true and managed to gain the upper stories of the keep without any misadventure. Our path brought us up a final set of stone steps to a wide landing. Here at least, some attempt had been made to preserve the values and refinements of normal civilisation and society. This open space was much cleaner, 'ung with newer arras and lit with fresh torches, revealing portraits of what could only be Da Foz's ancestors set against the designs of the original Moorish walls.

I was certain that the 'eavy, ornately carved wooden door must lead to Da Foz's chambers, a fact confirmed by the presence of several armed thugs lounging in front of it. I whispered urgently, "Come Major, time and Odette's honour are of the essence! Let us put these beasts to the sword and then swiftly deal with their master."

"Lieutenant, please do try and at least contain your rasher impulses. Da Foz must certainly have no warning of our coming"

"*Mais* 'ow then, Major? There is no way to dispose of these thugs so swiftly that we will make no noise."

"No natural way, but lend me a few moment's patience and I will see what I can conjure."

The major rummaged in his sabretache and extracted what looked like a small, azure jewel which glowed with some inner fire.

"Now Lieutenant," he whispered. "As soon as the jewel breaks, waste not a moment but have at them. Use sword, pistol, whichever you prefer, both if you must, but know we have exactly one minute's grace before this will help no more. Make sure the business is done by then."

"But Major..."

"Ready?" He said and I nodded not quite comprehending, but trusting that the major knew his trade and with that, he lobbed the brilliantly coloured gem into the middle of the stone flags where it shattered into dozens of multi-faceted shards. I don't know what I was expecting, an explosion or something combustible possibly, but that

was the sum of it, no more, no less and suddenly the major had leapt out beyond me to engage Da Foz's men directly. A pistol ball took the first one through the eye, the flash and powder blinding and acrid in that enclosed space and the major's next shot took another clean through the throat. That one fell clutching his neck, blood drenching the floor.

Not to be outdone in valour by an Englishman (no matter 'ow gifted), I was at his heels, pistol in one hand, sabre in the other. Often, in the heat of battle, time seems to pause, slow and curl in upon itself. One sees with such clarity, that each second lasts a lifetime as each successive move in the tableaux is played out: sword against sword, blade versus blade, stroke matching stroke. Yet as I rushed forward, steadied my hand, fired and another ruffian fell, some part of my brain was screaming that something was dreadfully amiss.

There was little time to consider it then though, for now there were just two of Da Foz's rogues left and we must press them 'ard to take advantage of this apparent minute's grace. The major took the smaller fellow, while I engaged a great bearded rogue who came swinging a wicked, curved scimitar that must have last been employed in anger in the *Reconquista*.

He dealt me a great lusty blow so that my sabre shivered as I parried and the deflected stroke cut through a corner of my Busby. My involuntary reaction was a hearty "Merde!" which I exclaimed loudly and at the top of my lungs, but the curious thing was I 'eard ...nothing. Neither my words, nor the clash of steel, nor now I thought of it, the discharge of our pistols had made even the slightest of sounds.

As a quicksilver repost cut my lumbering opponent down, I saw that the major was also laying on his strokes - but again in total silence. Major Seraph was a skilled swordsman, but perhaps lacked a touch of the martial strength we 'ussars value so highly and as he locked blades with his ruffian, an underhand elbow knocked him back, dislodging something from within the folds of his cloak. For a moment his gaze was fatally divided, then *sacre blue!* he dived to clutch the object mere centimetres from the flagged floor. This laid him wide open to the villain's sword and as the moustachioed lout pulled back for a vicious overhead cut, which surely would have made an end of the major, I was forced to intervene.

My blade caught his edge the breadth of a whisker away from the



major's forehead and then a whirlwind of cuts forced the *Portugais* to fall back and let us just say, soon he would trouble us no more. As I wiped my blade clean, I saw the major hastily conceal the object back within his cloak, but despite his precautions, I readily recognised it as one of the glowing flasks I had seen him remove from his sabretache earlier.

Curious, but I had no time to dwell upon it, for the remainder of Da Foz's villains lay around us, dead or dying. The major then went from each to each, checking for signs of life and extinguishing it if he found any. I made to protest, for this was surely not chivalrous behaviour even for such a debased foe, but the words found no substance as they left my mouth. It was as if I had been struck soundless and rendered dumb.

The last rogue died in silence just as the last points of light from the major's jewel winked out and as they did, the ordinary background hum of *la vie* returned.

Quietly the major remarked, "I know Lieutenant, it seems harsh, ignoble even to treat such a downed helpless foe, but it is necessary I'm afraid. It is imperative that Da Foz knows nothing of our approach. Quite simply I could not take the chance."

"But that bauble, how does it confer such silence? With such a device, one could do anything. Ambush battalions, surprise armies, cut the throats of generals... why, even emperors would not lie safe in their beds."

"Handy little trinket isn't it? But don't worry, it doesn't work for longer than a minute or on any such grand scale and I would have no use for such a device in the normal course of human affairs. Yet when one encounters the darkest magic, one must oppose it with all the tools at one's disposal..."

"*Vrai je suppose*, Major," though the pricking of my soul was not entirely in agreement with my words.

"And what of this flask? Was it so precious you would gamble your life for it?"

"Oh yes d'Bois, that precious and even more so."

The major, possibly sensing my disquiet at his rather maladroit evasion, said quickly,

"Now let's see about this door."

Instinctively I reached for the wrought iron handle, but the major

'ow you say, wagged his finger. "Perhaps best if you allow me, I have a feeling this is no ordinary entranceway."

While Major Seraph inspected the door, I took the opportunity to reload my pistols while he looked it up and down, intently scrutinising each element of its composition. At one point I swear he even sniffed at it. The door was old, the dark stained wood worn over the centuries and its intricate carvings faded by the rigours of time. It must surely have come from the Moorish era of the castle's occupation.

Major Seraph touched but did not turn the handle, then he raised a sceptical eyebrow and desisted from trying the lock at all. Instead, his fingers traced their way across the flowing patterns and then his gloved hand hovered over the points of a faded star near the top hinge. He pressed each of the points of the star lightly, there was a barely audible click and then the portal swung open gently without a sound. The major motioned with a silent finger placed over his lips, then insinuated himself inside, beckoning me to follow.

Da Foz's bed chamber was fashioned like the inside of some oriental potentate's seraglio. Lofted, delicately arched columns divided the room into a series of smaller spaces and it was richly decorated, with many fine pieces of dark wooden furniture, ornate room dividers, opulent hangings and plush, richly patterned carpets. The room contrasted with the shabby, faded state of the rest of the castle and evidently its master revelled in the refined taste, elegance and a certain sensuous luxuriousness that he denied his brutish followers. Here no fishy odours lingered but instead a warm, sweet, 'eavy scent pervaded the air, spreading an ardent, drowsiness as if desire itself had been made flesh.

Low, sensuous music played like the piping of many flutes or a chorus of ethereal otherworldly voices, though I could detect no source and the music seemed conjured from the very air itself. It leant the scene a most disturbing, salacious, erotically-charged air.

On one wall a large open fire burned away in its hearth, lending the space a sultry warmth and as we flitted from pillar to pillar, its flames seemed to flaunt themselves brazenly, throwing dancing shadows across the ceiling. At the furthest wall was a grand four-poster bed and there, strewn amongst the sumptuous scattered pillows and cushions, in a state of partial *deshabillement* was the pale form of my own Odette! My first instinct was to dash to her at once, but remembering the



major's words, I heeded his warning and stayed my hand.

On the opposite side of the chamber, was a large table stuffed with all manner of esoteric arcana and strange devices, like the explosion of an alchemist's laboratory. Ancient, weathered tomes lay in stacks on its surface and by its feet and on the wall behind were pinned up many maps and manuscripts, scrawled with strange symbols and glyphs which I could - or rather would - not discern with any clarity. Many of them carried motifs and pictures drawn from the sea and there were more disturbing images too which showed beings emerging from the waves, terrible things, like the strange offspring of man and fish that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand to *l'attention*. There, poring over a book bound in some strange pale leather, was da Foz, sat like a lobster over its supper, one eye hugely magnified through a set of nested lenses. My thumb slipped easily upon the hammer of my pistol.

"Pah, the *Cithaat Aquadingen*, such a crude translation from the middle English, wouldn't you agree? Come sir, step out into the light, don't be shy," the creature said in a half-mocking tone without bothering to look up from his work. At this, the major subtly signalled me to stay hidden and stepped boldly out.

"Ah Major Seraph, of course, I thought it must be you, for indeed, who else could it be?"

"Who else indeed, da Foz? You know why I am here."

"Of course, but it will avail you little." Silently, I worked my around to one side of the pillar and sighted the length of the barrel down my arm at the scoundrel's body.

"And Lieutenant d'Bois too? Ah, I am blessed, but please no need for such toys, Gaston." Da Foz made some strange gesture with his hand, which caused my eyes to recoil and suddenly my pistol seemed to squirm and twist in my grasp as if it were possessed. Throwing the cursed weapon to one side, I had half drawn my sabre and prepared to meet him with cold steel.

"Stay your hand, Lieutenant," said the major. "I am curious to hear what the Marquis has to say, for if there is one thing I have learned about his kind, it's that they can never resist a chance to boast of their nefarious designs."

"Indeed? You are too kind, *Senhor* and well, I am flattered naturally, for your name is spoken of with the highest respect in the circles I

keep. Respect and not a little fear, I might add." Da Foz laid off his study of the object beneath his lens and stood up to address us both.

"I am glad to hear it," said Major Seraph nodding with a most supercilious incline of his forehead, "Though perhaps, Da Foz, you would satisfy my curiosity on one point?"

"Please, ask away," said the villain.

"Why the girl? Why reveal yourself by such an action? Surely you must have known you would be pursued? That this would provide just the pretext I needed to hunt you down? Why would a creature of your inclinations have any use for a mortal maid?"

"Oh, you mistake me sir, oh I am certain - saving your presence Lieutenant - the fragrant Odette would breed me many fine sons. But forgive me, it is almost laughable to suppose I would have risked so much just for the daughter of a mere colonel, whatever her more... obvious charms. No, no, you quite mistake me sir, it is not *la donzela* I sought, not *la donzela* but her treasures."

"What!?" I interjected. "But she has no treasure, no dowry, her father is an honest man, but poor..."

"Oh but she has Lieutenant, though not one that many ordinary men would recognise perhaps. Indeed you were close to it all night and your breath must have caressed its very surface, yet you saw it not."

"You speak in riddles villain..."

"Then let me bring.. enlightenment. And with that Da Foz lifted Odette's necklace up into the light. The dark smoky stones glinted in the firelight and seemed to dance with an interior light that had I had not seen before. Da Foz cradled them as if he clung to life itself and his eyes glittered with avarice.

"For this trinket, this bauble you have abducted her, insulted her, made a mortal enemy of me?" I exclaimed.

"Oh please, have no concern for your *amour* Lieutenant, her virtue remains intact, I assure you. She is a charming young woman, yes, but such are common enough. No, what I find extraordinary is how one such as she came into possession of these stones."

"I have no idea, her father mentioned they had been in the family for generations. But this is absurd, you kidnap her, attempt to murder me, for mere stones? Why, they are not even diamonds."

"Not even diamonds? Pff, you have no conception of their true



value, their true power, do you d'Bois? I should have known, hussars have the intellect of a carthorse, but the Major sees, the Major sees, do you not *Senhor* Seraph?"

"But this is extraordinary," said the major and momentarily, even his impassive features dissolved into an expression of perturbation.

"Surely these cannot be those fabled stones, the ones thought lost and passed beyond the knowledge of mortal man for millennia?"

"Ah, but they are Major, they are. Yes, yes, even you feel their pull and now you begin to understand why I risked all. Time passes swiftly on the surface, but oh so slowly beneath the waves and we have not forgotten what was once ours. Can you imagine, can you even conceive of how I felt when I glimpsed them around the slender, delectable neck of Mademoiselle d'Hiver?"

"I believe I do."

"How, down the long centuries they fell into her possession I do not know and I do not care. But it was all I could do not to snatch them on the instant, even without the churlish threats of our rash Lieutenant here. But my will cannot be resisted and now these crystals will once again reside in the hands of their rightful owners."

"He babbles Major, let me run him through." I said. "We will revive Mademoiselle, return her jewellery and be gone..."

"I wish it were gibberish Lieutenant, but I rather fear the Marquis speaks the truth and this is a much graver matter than I first suspected. Many thousands of years ago, when the isles of Atlantis reared their spires against the primordial skies, the first men fought a great war against the sea demons, beings from the depths of the ocean, the so-called Deep Ones. The conflict raged for decades, centuries, until a great sorcerer rose among the Atlanteans. He is said to have stormed the Deep One's temple and succeeded in capturing one of the sources of their power, a vast alien crystal which he shattered into many shards. It is some fragments of these lost shards that appear to form Mademoiselle's necklace.

"The story is widely held to be legend and has only come down to us in whispers, rumours in some of the darker, forbidden tomes of ancient times," continued the major. "No one has seen an actual piece for centuries. To discover an entire set, why, it's almost inconceivable."

"Inconceivable, yet surely you believe the evidence of your own senses, Major?" said Da Foz suddenly stalking across the room and

holding them up to the fire. "See, see how the flames dance in their opaque depths. How can you doubt it is so? And if that were not proof enough, I feel them, feel the tingle of their magic through my fingers, feel it coursing through my veins and I think you sense it too. Oh have no doubt Major, these are indeed how you British say, the genuine article."

"And what do you propose to do with these lost treasures?"

"Do Major? Why restore them to their rightful owners of course."

"Monster," I said. "Even if we suppose all this were true, why would you side with these creatures, these Deep Ones, against your own kind?" I asked, incredulous.

"Oh but we are not his kind are we, Da Foz?" said the major. "For he is one of them unless I mistake my guess. Note the pallid hue of the skin, the strange cast of his eyes, the Marquis is one of their foul spawn, part human, part demon."

"You see much Major," said Da Foz inclining his head mockingly. "Your reputation is apparently well deserved. You are perceptive to name me their offspring, though I prefer the term 'hybrid', a composite being who combines the strengths of both species."

"Or their worst vices."

"Naturally I prefer to look upon it in a more positive fashion, but yes, I cannot deny I hear the call of the deep. I have already bathed in the currents and tides, frolicked in the ocean's garden. It will not be long before the call becomes irresistible and I will descend and return to the surface no more. But what a gift I will bring to pave my way to immortality. I will be the one who restores our ancient power and banishes the depravations of man."

"The depravations of man?" said the major.

"Yes the depravations!" He spat. "For even now my brothers and sisters have noted how mankind begins to grope his way toward enlightenment and the first stirrings of the industrial age. In under a hundred years you have harnessed the power of steam and tamed the forging of iron and steel. The smoke from your factories belches into the sky and heralds the dawn of a new age, when your machines will allow you to spread across the surface of the world like a canker. I will convince my brethren that we must not allow it."

"And how will you stop us?"

"Oh very good Major, allow me to prattle on so I reveal my plan to



you, making it all the easier to thwart I suppose. But no, I rather think that this time, I will leave you in suspense.”

“Leave us where you wish villain,” I said, having subtly manoeuvred myself closer while the beast raved. “For you will never leave this place alive!” And with that I slashed at his throat meaning to carve a crimson streak there.

But the villain was quick, as quick as I have seen any man, quick in a way that was not quite natural and he ducked under my blow, slid aside like quicksilver and stabbed at a portion of the mantelpiece. To my amazement, the whole stone fireplace suddenly rotated, like it was on oiled hinges, taking Da Foz with it and then he was gone, somehow secreted safely on the other side. There was a sound behind me and where my darling Odette had lain, now there was just an empty space on the bed.

“Rash Lieutenant, very rash!” said the major with some irritation, rapidly patting the mantelpiece where Da Foz must have depressed a secret switch.

“Don’t waste your time, Major,” said Da Foz. “It is a one-way mechanism which quite seals the chamber. The Moorish architect was indeed a cunning fellow and most thorough. Don’t worry Lieutenant, I will take the utmost care of Mademoiselle d’Hiver. Now, perhaps I can continue my oration without further interruption, for there is no earthly chance of your escape.

“A keen student of ancient lore such as yourself Major, will know that my brethren have many cities and dwellings spread across the depths of the ocean floor, indeed, even the crude scholar who translated the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, supposed as much. Yet we are still very much at the mercy of distance: time and tide and all the natural hazards of the oceans. It was not always thus, for in ancient times, before that cursed Atlantean interfered, the power of the crystals allowed us to open up a secret pathway, to travel almost instantaneously across the void, ignoring the perils of topography and the expanses between our mansions.

“These fragments will allow us to span those deeps once again, uniting our scattered colonies in a way that has not been possible for millennia. We know that these crystals seem to speak to each other and with the correct rituals we will be able to trace even more if any survive, allowing us to link our ancient dwelling places until we domi-

nate the land as well as the sea, once again. Then the paltry industry of man will avail him not, for the new dominion of the Deep Ones will begin!”

“Never,” said the major quietly.

“‘Never’ in this case will be a very short time Major, for the hour approaches when I must again convene with my brethren and give them these glad tidings. Say your second final farewell to the Mademoiselle, Lieutenant, for neither of you will leave this room alive. As for you Major, it has been neither an honour nor a privilege, yet I would have expected rather more from a man of your reputed talents. No matter, for I see you are quite disappointingly mortal after all. Farewell then, perhaps you should be glad you will not live to see it, for the conquest and enslavement of mankind is likely to be a most protracted, not to say painful process.”

The villain’s footsteps echoed down some hidden stairway, but his taunts lingered in the air along with their import. I looked to the major, but he seemed lost in thought, yet we were not spared in our deliberations for long, for almost immediately there was a noise from beyond and a low, seething began to fill the chamber. For a moment I was at a loss to explain it, then I saw the heavy, smoky vapour which was seeping through vents in the bottom of the walls. It curled and writhed insidiously over the floor and one small breath of that foul, noxious odour was enough for me to determine that Da Foz was not flooding the room with expensive cologne.

The major was already tearing at the bed sheets making makeshift masks to wrap around our faces. I hammered at the door where we had entered, while the major tried the mantelpiece once again, but both were in vain, the room was sealed tight as a drum head.

As we hastily donned our improvised masks, the vapour swirled around our feet and ankles, slowly climbing toward our knees, but Major Seraph’s voice was calm and deliberate as he ordered, “The gas is heavier than the air, we must seek higher ground, quick up, up on the bed.” We leapt onto the mattress of the four poster as the gas tip-toed ever upward, its vile curls and twists eddying like malignant fingers. Perhaps we only delayed the inevitable, but what else could we do? One fights for every last second of life when one is ‘ard pressed.

*Merde* but our situation was desperate and in that moment I would gladly have faced a dozen of Da Foz’s thugs, that strange, unquiet sen-



tinel or even those loathsome unseen creatures from the passageway - singly or all together - rather than succumb to this creeping death. Despite his many fine qualities, an 'ussar is made for action not cogitation and I could see no way out of our current predicament. Surely we were not to die here, caught like vermin in Da Foz's foul snare?

"Major?" I enquired and could not entirely keep the tremor out of my voice as the vapours began to seep upward and wash over the mattress onto the covers and curl around our boots.

"There must be a venting mechanism, something so that he can return to the chamber unharmed..." The major muttered to himself. "But where to find it? Not in the room for certain. Well, desperate times call for desperate measures... Lieutenant d'Bois, I will trouble you to face away from me."

"You have an idea?"

"Perhaps, but under no circumstances and I mean *no circumstances*, no matter what you hear, must you turn around. Do I have your word?"

"*Oui* Major, *oui*, anything."

"Very well, look away d'Bois, quickly now, if you please."

I did as I was bid, turning so that I faced outward. The deadly fog was rising higher, up to my waist now, as I stood on the bed. Whatever the major's plan, he would need to enact it at the charge!

Then, from behind me I heard strange sounds, guttural words, incantations, *étrange* phrases that seemed to have no right to exist in the human tongue. There was a flashing of light in colours that I had never seen before or since, there was a retort like a *blancmange* being sucked through a whisk and it was only with the greatest difficulty, I restrained myself from turning to see whatever strange business the major was transacting.

Yet I had given my word and an 'ussar's is not for breaking even though the vile vapours continued to rise, swirling above my chest, insinuating their way up toward my neck.

In spite of my vow, I must turn to seek higher ground or be engulfed by those vile mists, yet when I did, I saw nothing but the vapours, the major was quite simply not there! He had vanished like a wayward priest's conscience when he views a comely maiden. Cursing through the mask, I leapt upon the dresser and scrambled up to on the topmost canopy of the bed. I was in shock... surely my comrade

would not have abandoned me to so *terrible* a fate? Yet where was he and more importantly, how had he made his escape?

Reaching higher ground, I shouted, "Major! Major Seraph!" But answer came there none and as the deadly fog continued to rise, the vapours wisped and curled over the edge of the canopy, oozing and percolating through the cloth. I raised my head to the highest extremity I could until it scraped the stone ceiling. Then I held my breath like a drowning man against the tide and as the first wisps began to twirl over my moustaches and seep through the cloth, the acrid scent penetrated my nostrils and I coughed and gagged. My last thoughts were of my lost Odette and I knew now that if we met again, it could only be in eternity.

It is said fate, *destinée*, is inexorable, but I believe it can be cheated or at least held at bay by certain gifted fellows and the major was one such, *un homme extraordinaire* who could twist and bend it to his will, as the blacksmith works the steel. For just at the final moment, when I believed I could hold no more air in my lungs, there was a great wrenching, a sucking sound and then strong currents of clean air blew through from below, filling the chamber and causing the deadly miasma to dissipate. *Merde*, but I have never smelled anything as sweet in my life! It was a close run thing, for I swear, another breath or so and I would have been done.

I exhaled a great gassy sigh, spluttering from the small amount of noxious fumes I 'ad inhaled but quickly scampered to the lip of the canopy to discover my means of deliverance. There, wedging a make-shift stopper into an expanse of a semi-revolved fireplace was Major Seraph, who greeted me cordially.

"Ah, Lieutenant, there you are, I am glad to see the venting mechanism was prompt and my actions were not too tardy. How are you feeling?"

"As if I had smoked a thousand cheroots and inhaled the discharge of the entire imperial artillery, but I am still here Major, which is more than I could have 'oped mere moments ago..."

"Good, good. Well look lively, come down and give me a hand with this will you?"

I scrambled down from the arras and helped the major wedge a pole axe into the mechanical device which allowed the fireplace to revolve.



“But how did you escape the chamber? ‘ow did you pass beyond the wall? ‘ow did you find the means to save me?” I asked as we gave the poleaxe a last heave into position, snapping the head into its gears, so it was jammed *ouvir*.

“It is probably best that you don’t peer too closely into my methods, Lieutenant. Shall we just say they are not readily explicable to the man of reason and leave it at that?”

“Ver’ well, if you insist Major, I will not press you further, let me simply offer my thanks for my own unworthy ‘ide.”

“Not strictly necessary old boy, but you’re welcome nonetheless. Besides our work here is not by any means done and I could and would not abandon so dauntless a comrade.”

“Da Foz...” I said and I believe my eyes narrowed at the mere mention of his name.

“Indeed, I believe the perfidious Marquis means to enact his ignoble plan tonight and while breath remains in my body, I mean to oppose him. How are you d’Bois?”

“A little dizzy, that is all Major, but eager to land a blow on that villain and restore *mon amour*.”

“You’ll do then. Come, I don’t believe we have much time.”



## Chapter 5

### The Bridging of the Void

Scarcely pausing to gather weapons and snatch a lantern to light the way, we were soon proceeding down the hidden passage where Da Foz had made his cowardly retreat.

The narrow stone stair wound down through the vitals of the castle, twisting into its very core and in this ‘idden space, its occupiers had not bothered to hide their affiliation with the dark. Strange, otherworldly motifs and reliefs spattered the walls, showing men worshipping things from beneath the sea, bowing down before them. Dozens of more horrible, unmentionable scenes were also illustrated, including some which featured diabolic orgies and unnatural congress with these beasts. I shuddered and tried to keep my eyes averted from such depraved depictions, instead keeping a tight grip on my pistols and my feet at the double behind the major’s.

But what would we find at the end of this passage? Despite my own uncanny experiences earlier and these horrible works of ‘art’, I could still barely credit Da Foz’s assertion about this submarine race who needed Odette’s jewels to - what was it? Project themselves across the abyss? It seemed insane, inconceivable, far easier to dismiss him as an utter madman. Yet if one thing leant it credibility, then it was the major’s absolutely ironclad certainty about this *incroyable* tale. He was no *naïf* - and that is perhaps what unsettled me most of all.

As we descended into the bowels of the castle, the light from my lantern scarcely seemed to illuminate the walls at all, as if it were being absorbed by the darkness, but that foetid, fishy smell began to as-



sert itself once again. Lower now and as the stone steps finally began to run out and give way to more natural formations, I could hear the sound of the waves lapping and breaking against the rock - and close by too. Then the steps came to an end and the rough floor and walls of a natural cavern disappeared off into the dark.

"That lantern will warn them of our coming, best extinguish it, d'Bois."

"But 'ow will we find our way?"

"Don't worry, I was born part feline, just grasp the end of my scabbard, follow close by and watch your step. These rocks are likely to be slippery."

Deploying what I believe you British call *haussement d'épaules Gallique*, or what we call simply 'a shrug' to display my insouciance, I did as I was bid. Slowly, we crept through the dark, my left hand grasping the major's sword casing, the right groping ahead of me so I would not falter. We moved on like *deux souris aveugles*, pardon... two blind mice, but the major seemed to indeed have the vision of *une chat* and although that rotten smell and the misgivings of my own querulous 'cart caused me no little dismay, onward we continued to press.

Fortunately, it was not long before a faint light began to trickle through from the way ahead and I was able to leave off trusting to my guide's surefootedness and begin to make my own way.

Now I could hear the sea resounding as it crashed against the rock and the salt of the surf hung 'eavily in the air, as we inched along the last few metres of passage and concealed ourselves behind a small outcrop of rock.

From our vantage point, I could now see into what looked like a huge natural stone cavern. Furthest away from us, to seaward, a great aperture opened in the rock to admit the waves, which washed into a saltwater pool foaming across the floor of the cave. Great stalactites and massive formations of rock 'ung down from the ceiling of this sinister place and they had been carved, brutalised almost, into twisted unnatural pillars and arcane forms that gave the place a most ill-starred air.

At the landward end, near where we lay, the rock had been hewn into a huge natural altar and looming over it were two enormous statues, vast loathsome amphibious monsters in 'umanoid form. The quality of their workmanship was unnerving, for it picked out fine de-

tails on their scaly skins, rippling gills, savage crests and webbed limbs that gave them a hideous, realistic quality, such that you would swear that at any moment they might spring to horrible, ghastly life.

The remainder of the cavern was comprised of many tiered terraces and galleries honeycombing through the rock and now, pouring through them, a foul congregation began to assemble, as if summoned by some silent signal. Da Foz's followers were an *hétéroclite famille* - a diverse group - comprising those muscular villains who guarded his castle, some degenerate looking peasants and even a few deserters from the *Grand Armée* and milor' Wellington's ranks, judging by the ragged remains of their uniforms.

As they shuffled in and took their places, my attention was drawn to the altar itself and the most singular object which dominated it. There, inside a weighty frame fashioned from some unearthly glittering metal was what looked like a great polished mirror, though no reflection played upon its mirrored surface. Its irregular shape was decorated with the treasures of the deep and at each point of the compass - from North all the way around to North North West - was placed a strange socket shaped like the fronds of an anemone. It was a most alien and disturbing object and although the mirrored surface was opaque, it seemed to pull the mind toward it and scatter one's senses in many directions. It was only with a supreme effort of will, that I managed to avert my gaze from it.

Now the last members of that vile coven had taken their places, a quiet descended over their unholy ranks and even the sound of the waves seemed to fall into an ominous silence. Suddenly the air was rent by a singular voice

"Father Dagon! Mother Hydra, hear me!" Da Foz stood next to the mirror, his voice echoing back from the walls and as one, his flock turned their gaze toward him, their breath an echoing sibilance, like a whisper of the deep. He wore a cloak of lustrous dripping seaweed, interwoven with vile ocean flowers, a crown formed of the spines and claws of *les fruits de mer* and in his hands he clutched a twisted, barnacled trident, like 'orrible parody of Neptune. His eyes brimmed with fervour as his voice reverberated.

"By the waxing of the moon and the rising of the tide, your servant calls, let the sound echo from deep to deep. Let your family, once more, be complete!" With this he struck the mirror-like object a



resounding blow which caused it to ring out in a single, atonal note which carried across the water. At this, the congregation fell silent and its gaze turned seaward.

At first, nothing much disturbed the surface of the water but then after many beatings of *mon coeur* it was as if the very motion of the waves paused, frozen in a moment. Ripples and bubbles began to appear in the water as *they* began to emerge from the tidal wash. The moon was behind them at first, making silhouettes of the abhorrent heads and crests which broke through the waves. Bulging, piscine eyes glowed with a terrible malevolent phosphorescence and their gill sacks heaved and rasped as they first tasted earthly air. They stood upright now, hulking bodies tipped with scales and ridges, the grey-green of their flesh contrasting sharply with the pallid white flabbiness of their bellies. There were perhaps fifteen of the creatures and their webbed, amorphous limbs brought them to a halt on the edges of the pool, where they stared up at Da Foz in silent, terrible communion, smaller reflections of the vast effigies above. As one, their mouths opened and a terrible croaking emerged, like the high pitched squabbling of a flock of diabolical gulls.

"Deep Ones," whispered the major, but his chilling observation was interrupted by the sound of Da Foz's greeting.

"Welcome brothers and sisters, welcome! Now we are assembled and the family of the ocean complete." Da Foz scanned the cavern and his voice rose and now swelled with triumph.

"You come to us my brothers and sisters when the moon is full and the tide is high and you arrive at the cusp of a new age, a new era when the tyranny of mankind will be overthrown." Da Foz held up Odette's smoky jewels which brought an audible chittering from the horrible conclave below.

"Yes brothers and sisters, yes," continued Da Foz. "That which was thought to have been lost forever has been found! The forgotten pieces gathered! The ancient pathways may be re-opened!"

Now the creature's high-pitched squawks became even more animated and murmurs echoed and spread amongst the ranks of the human congregation.

"Bring her!" Shouted Da Foz and two hefty henchmen appeared from the wings carrying a forlorn looking Odette between their greasy paws. I cursed loudly, but fortunately the sound was swallowed up by

the excitement of the crowd.

"Steady Lieutenant," hissed Major Seraph.

"But what shall we do Major? I will die before I let them..."

"Stay calm and be ready d'Bois, I just need a moment..." While the major cogitated, I eased a pistol from my belt and loosened my sword in its scabbard. The henchmen were chaining Odette to the upright slab behind the altar now and the sight made my blood boil and my moustaches quiver. Pffaw! Futile or not, at that moment I cared little for my own life and I was quite ready to rush the altar and die with my sword in my hand defending my beloved from their vile depredations. Damn their eyes, I would make sure these vile beasts remembered the name of d'Bois to their dying day.

"For mankind waxes strong!" screeched Da Foz. "His smoke pollutes the skies, his dyes run into the rivers and his effluent begins to pour into mother ocean. Unchecked, his machines will ravage the earth, poison the seas and he will spread like a plague across the face of the waters. He must be curtailed, brought to heel, contained. It is time to re-establish the natural dominance of the Deep Ones, time to restore our ancient byways, time to re-open the crystal void! Tonight, Mother Hydra and Father Dagon will be our witnesses!"

"Damn it, this is worse than I imagined. He means to summon the Deep One's rulers to put the seal upon his infamy," said the major. "This changes the complexion of things somewhat."

"I know nothing of complexions major, but I do know my Odette lies trussed and upright there like *une poulet* in a butcher's window."

"Just give me a few more moments, d'Bois."

"*Dépêchez-vous* Major, for I will not suffer to witness this for long." I glanced back to where Da Foz continued his oration.

"...for mankind's transgressions are plentiful, his sins against the bountiful seas legion and his jealous eyes covet our ancient treasure. Even now, his envious spies lurk amongst us! Seize him!"

Suddenly I was aware of them behind me, burly arms reaching out to take hold of me and my sword whirled, carving a crimson arc through the air. A limb flashed, I parried a blow from a cudgel, skewered one of the ruffians *en point*, but an 'ussar's blade is made for cutting not thrusting work and as I tried to withdraw, the metal turned and lodged in his guts, causing him to howl. I levelled my pistol to take a shot at the sea of faces, but then a cruel blow caught my wrist,



the pistol dropped, they swarmed over me and I was pushed to the ground.

Blows rained upon me until I thought I must lose my senses and then, abruptly I was dragged upright. Futilely, I attempted to shake off my captors, but my arms were gripped firmly by many hands and I was dragged and hauled along the galleries and up to the dais.

There Da Foz's mocking eyes greeted me, a sardonic smile playing about his lips and just as my vision began to clear, I was forcefully bound upright alongside my *amour*. Odette bravely whispered 'Gaston' and both relief and terror were there in her face. '*Courage mon amour*' I mouthed back, but where our salvation was to come from, I could not say.

"I am surprised to see you Lieutenant, alive at least," leered Da Foz. "How is that possible I wonder? The Major's magics must be more formidable than I supposed." Suddenly I realised Odette and I were alone up there. Where was Major Seraph? I had not been aware of him during the brief fight; had my comrade deserted me... again?

Balefully I gazed at my tormentor and at that moment it was not death I feared, but the humiliation of dying without a sword in my hands and a curse on my lips.

"The Major *est mort*," I sneered. "He succeeded in springing your trap, but succumbed to your vile poisons. I will mourn my lost comrade later, but unchain me now you hound and by god..."

"Not by your god, Lieutenant, he has no place here in the womb of Mother Hydra."

Weak though I was, I strained against my bonds to free myself and land a blow on the villain. But it was no use, I was bound fast and all my efforts were to no avail. Da Foz merely laughed and leered and took up the stones, dangling them mockingly in front of me. He began mumbling an incantation and words which were not words came tumbling from that twisted mouth, the spell growing louder and louder until it echoed the speech of the creatures below. They, in turn, responded, emitting high pitched clacks and chirrup, their excitement and agitation growing and the chanting grew louder, taken up in a horrible chorus by the human worshippers, until the atonal dirge swelled and boomed, filling the cavern. Then, when the cacophony was at its zenith and I swore my ears drums must shatter, Da Foz raised his arms above his head and the place fell to a sudden silence.

"Let the oldest ties be renewed!" shrieked Da Foz and carefully, methodically began to place a stone in each of the sockets. As he went around the face of the mirror, each of the small fissures opened, expanded like a flower and then gave a small sigh, as tiny, anemone-like tentacles grasped each stone and pulled it fluidly into place.

"Let the ancient avenues be restored!" Now that all but the topmost stone had been placed, small rivulets and streams of bright water light began to flow between them.

"Let the void... be opened!" said Da Foz placing the last stone and then the circle was complete. For long moments nothing happened, then a change began to come over the mirror, the solid surface turning liquid and rippling with small waves, as if it were subject to the pull of time and tide. Unholy dark light played around the portal and then a watery image began to form inside, slowly resolving into a coral dais which overlooked the peaks and spires of a vast underwater city, one populated solely by the same creatures which lurked at the tide line below! *Mon Dieu* it was horrible, yet strangely fascinating to see those demons in that vast alien vista.

Da Foz's worshippers watched too, a collective moan issuing from them as they beheld the change. I looked around desperately, wracking my brain to formulate a plan of escape, yet my bonds held tight as ever and this poor 'ussar could see no means of escaping his fate.

"Yes brothers and sisters, the way is open and soon we will rejoin our family as we step through to greet our brethren beneath the waves. I will summon Father Dagon and Mother Hydra to receive their blessing for this hallowed endeavour."

At this the congregation gave up a strange keening and the creatures below began to take up a new chant, one that was rich and guttural, laden with sinister cadences. Da Foz began tracing strange paths and movements through the air and even though my eyes could scarce credit it, I swear his hands left a faint afterglow so that the symbols seemed to linger visible for a moment, horrid import contained in their unholy patterns. Now Da Foz's voice joined the 'orrible cacophony of man and creature, but it took on a more urgent, insistent, beckoning quality, as if he were calling someone or indeed, *something*.

Far out to sea, huge spouts of water suddenly erupted from the ocean's surface and the waves began to rage and swell, resolving themselves into two gigantic plumes which began to move ominously



toward us. The dirge grew and swelled and I cursed I had not the liberty of my hands to stop up my ears, for I felt I must go mad with it. Da Foz's speech rose octaves and his voice seemed to enter a pitch which had no natural place on this earth. As the spell reached its climax, the two plumes began to charge and race and surge toward the shore, swelling and dancing until they dominated the whole horizon, their shadows filling the sky. Da Foz now pushed his face mere inches away from mine own.

"You first d'Bois, then the girl!" He spat. "Your blood shall usher in a new age, the end of man and the beginning of the hegemony of the sea!" He returned to that vile alien language to complete his incantation, drew back his trident for the thrust and I braced myself to receive the killing blow....

But suddenly that cruel face was enveloped in flame, the sounds from his lips transforming into screeches of agony as fire played 'orribly around his features! The chant died, the trident tumbled and Da Foz staggered away as he desperately tried to beat out flames which began to engulf him. With the invocation interrupted, out to sea, the giant waves seemed to pause, then falter and subside, their peaks diminishing, petering out, until they became just a succession of white plumed rollers, which broke placidly towards the shore.

I wrenched my head around to see what miracle had intervened to save us and there, *sacre bleu!* who should it be, but the major himself?

Yet this was not the fey, rather *outré* British army officer who had first accompanied me on this night's dark adventure, but a vengeful archangel, wreathed in a shroud of smoke and flame! A fiery cloak adorned his shoulders, burning fiercely, flame writhing and twisting over his body and I swear he hovered a metre above the ground rather than walked upon it. Those pale, unblinking eyes had been transformed into fiery coals wreathed in sulphur and brimstone, which seemed to have been drawn from the lake of Gehenna itself. Flame played about his face and head, a halo of fire, although strangely, it seemed not to consume his flesh. On either side, he was flanked by two glowing *efrits*, strange female creatures of light and flame seemingly drawn from the fable of a Thousand and One Nights, blazing like miniature suns as they orbited around him.

For a moment I was rendered speechless by this apparition, as, it seemed, were the unholy congregation about me and the only sound

was Da Foz's scream as he plunged and fell from the dais into the water below. Seraph, or this fiery vision of him, regarded the scene for a moment and then stretched out a finger- like Da Vinci's creator reaching to Adam - and with a blazing smile playing across his lips said, "Allow me, d'Bois."

Liquid fire arced from his fingers, searing my bonds which dropped smouldering to the floor and it was the work of seconds to retrieve my weapons, then position myself to protect my darling. I was ready for any onslaught from the sea demons or Da Foz's degenerate minions, yet I should have saved myself the trouble, for Major Seraph and his flaming houris chose that moment to begin their assault, laying about them with a flaming vengeance.

The major extended his arms and sent a series of fireballs careering into the galleries and colonnades of that unholy temple. Where they landed, they flared, exploding with a deadly force, charring flesh, singeing hair and scattering Da Foz's human disciples. With shouts of dismay and cries of terror they left that place far more quickly than they had entered, beating and trampling each other in their panic to escape from the major's searing retribution. *Mon brave* it was a stirring sight, the emperor's own artillery could have done no better and it was with much joy I watched those foul worshipers beat a headlong retreat with 'ow you say, their tails between their legs.

As for the sea demons, well at the major's unspoken command, the *efrits* began to engage them, hurling cascades of fire which rained down into the shallow pool where the Deep Ones still stood with their fishy eyes and gaping jaws. One had the presence of mind to hurl a trident at the *efrits*, but the weapon charred and melted as it touched the djinn's molten skin and that seemed enough for those sea-born horrors. With a great hue and cry they turned tail and fled, diving back into the water in a maelstrom of scaly skins and thrashing limbs, until they were quite swallowed up by the waves.

The unequal contest may have lasted moments or minutes, I quite simply could not tell, for I stood shielding my darling, but also gazing in awe at the fearsome havoc the major had wrought. It was truly a wonder, the major wielded the power of flame and hurled thunderbolts as if he had personal command of a more potent version of those absurd Congreve rockets which we 'ussars frankly consider are only good for scaring donkeys, peasants and small children.



As the last of Da Foz's disciples disappeared off howling into the night, the major floated down onto the dais close by me. With a delicate bow he saluted the returning *efrits*, those strange denizens of fire and they acknowledged him too, returning the salutation. Then, they seemed to turn inside out and be sucked back in upon themselves, diminishing from fire to smoke, then they vanished, leaving behind just the faintest trace of brimstone. I watched with fascination as the major's fire-shroud seemed to burn itself out, the flames smouldering and sputtering, until it too was just a faint outline and then was gone. The last thing to vanish was the blaze in his eyes and he allowed himself a small smile at what must have been a look of utter astonishment upon my face. But in a moment, that expression of amusement had turned into a shouted warning,

"d'Bois, look out!"

My blade whirled in a defensive motion and my instincts served me well, for my parry just caught and locked the points of the trident which had been spearing towards my vitals. Da Foz, his skin raw and blistered had been transformed into an awful, ghastly, crisped thing and this blackened shade spat malevolently at me as he tried to wrench back his weapon. But he was too slow and my own backhanded slash cut it from his fingers and those fingers clean from his hand. His curse lingered for a moment on the air, before my sword took out his throat and he died gagging and frothing on his own blood, a fitting end for that despicable creature.

"Nicely done *mon brave*, and I would say that concludes our business here," said the major as I began to sever the bonds which still secured my beloved.

"Perhaps for you Major, but I will not forget this night so easily, nor will my sweet Odette."

"Nor should you my dear d'Bois, but I hope that its conclusion proves satisfactory for both you and your mademoiselle." At this he bowed gallantly to my dearest one, who, freed from her bonds, was now crushing me with her embrace, smothering me in a welter of kisses and innumerable 'Oh Gastons!' I must confess, I found it most gratifying.

"Apologies, *mes amis*, that I appeared to desert you, but I had to await the critical moment, when the final opening of the crystal void exposed both Da Foz and his creatures. I'm sorry that you had to play

the unwitting role of the bait upon the hook."

"I understand Major, *les moyens justifient les extrémités*, the means justify the ends. Please, think nothing of it."

"But how did you know what would defeat him?"

"Elemental my dear d'Bois," the major smiled. "It is said the best way to fight fire is with fire, but naturally it also follows that the best way to fight water is also with fire."

"...and this magic you employ, those demons, the *efrit*?"

"Creatures of darkness, like Da Foz, are not the only ones who can draw upon the elemental forces of the universe to do their bidding. As for the *efrit* as you call them? Well I carried them with me within those two jewelled cases for just such a purpose. They scarcely needed any encouragement, for even without my enchantments, beings of fire are naturally opposed to those of water. I had a feeling they might come in handy."

"So the matter is concluded then and I may return my poor Odette home?"

"Very nearly, Lieutenant," said the major as he reached over to where the surface of the great mirror churned and thrashed like the waves in a storm. On the other side, great legions of those creatures seemed to have gathered and they swarmed malevolently, some darting toward the mirror's surface, before veering off at the very last moment.

"That's quite enough of that, thank you," said the major as he deftly plucked out each smoky jewel from its socket in turn. Almost instantly, the surface of the mirror calmed, faded and then resumed its former opacity.

"Stand back, if you please," said the major and when we had retreated a sufficient distance, he sent a searing bolt of flame straight at the mirror's surround, melting and contorting it, until it was just so much blackened slag.

"Now that, I very much hope, is the end of that."

"Mon Dieu, so that is it? Victory? Da Foz and his evil are no more?"

"For the here and now, yes, but the struggle continues. There are always those who would harness dark powers, mingle their blood and make unholy pacts with beings from the depths. Yet fortunately, there are always good, brave men willing to oppose them." The major



nodded in my direction and I found myself experiencing le rouge au front, 'ow you say the reddening of the cheeks.

"You are too kind Major, but my assistance was hardly crucial."

"On the contrary d'Bois, it was invaluable. Without your distraction I would never have had the time to complete the magics which ultimately defeated Da Foz and his allies. Alas, I'm afraid I won't be able to return mademoiselle's jewels, these must be taken and hidden far beyond the reach of the Deep Ones' allies. However I'm sure a representative sample from Da Foz's accumulated treasures upstairs will provide more than adequate recompense. There should be more than sufficient there to set up a young, newly married couple for life; a life which I'm certain will be both long, fruitful and full of great joy. Come, mes amis, let us be away from this dark place and return to the clean night air."

And so we made our way back up into the now abandoned castle itself and indeed most, if not all of what the major predicted came to pass, for he had an uncanny ability to part the veil of the future, that man. My darling Odette and I were indeed wedded before the end of that very year and although I followed my beloved Empereur, until all came to an end on that terrible day in the muddy fields of Belgium, I defied the ordained fate of the 'ussar and lived to enjoy a long and prosperous life. Using Da Foz's treasures, Odette and I secured a beautiful, thriving stud farm in my beloved Ardennes where we bred exceptionnel chevaux from my beloved mares Rosalind and Eleanor. Together we also raised many handsome sons and beautiful daughters to continue the tradition of our line.

As for the major? Well I did not see him again until many years later. It was after the dream had finally died and mon coeur, l'Empereur had been banished and begun his final exile in the remote fastness of the South Atlantic.

Milor' Wellington had been appointed ambassador to the court of the Bourbon usurpers and having declined to serve the white cockade, I had retired from military service and become a man of substance and was beginning to make my reputation as a refined élevage de chevaux, an 'orse breeder. I was up upon a rare visit to Paris, concluding some trifling legal affair and I had just left the office of my avocat

when a tap on my shoulder caused me to turn with sudden alarm.

"Ah, there you are d'Bois, the very man I was hoping to bump into. Now, if you can spare me a few moments, there is a small matter I wish to lay before you."

It was the major of course and so, from such innocuous beginnings began the second great adventure I shared with him. But as for the telling of that tale monsieur? Well you had best ask mon patron to bring us another bottle. And we had best make it a supérieur too if you would be so kind, for I will require much additional fortitude to sustain me through the telling of that terrible tale."

*Fin*







If you liked *The Crystal Void* why not share the love [by writing a review](#), recommending to your friends by Tweeting [or sharing on Facebook](#) or dropping by the author's site [www.john-houlihan.net](http://www.john-houlihan.net) or Tweeting [@johnh259](#) and saying hello?

Be sure to check out the other two Mister Seraph adventures, **The Trelborg Monstrosities** and **Tomb of the Aeons**. Available from Modiphuis on [RPG Now](#) or on [Amazon!](#) Or perhaps read all three in the Seraph Chronicles

[Volume One: Tales of the White Witchman.](#)

Keep an eye out for the next Seraph adventure **Before the Flood** appearing 2015.

John Houlihan's next published work will be as editor of **Dark Tales from the Secret War** published by Modiphuis in 2015.

**The Seraph Chronicles:  
one man defies the might of dread Cthulhu!**

**The Trelborg Monstrosities**

It is 1943 and the war hangs on a knife edge. Set free by a leading Nazi occultist, an ancient evil stirs in the snowy fastnesses of the Norwegian border, threatening to unleash an ancient artefact which could not only alter the course of the war, but the fate of humanity itself.

Hope though endures, as a band of brave resistance fighters and a crack team of British special forces combine to plunge deep behind enemy lines to confront this ancient horror. Yet is their strange civilian adviser, the mysterious Mister Seraph, truly on the side of the angels or pursuing some dark agenda of his own? Can the fearful Trelborg terror even be defeated by mere mortal men?

“A wonderfully evocative tale of blood, bullets and ice.”

**David J Rodger**



**The Crystal Void**

The year is 1810 and as Napoleon's Grand Armee chases Wellington's expeditionary force through Portugal to the lines of Torres Verdras, the dashing if rather dim French Hussar Gaston d'Bois is astonished to encounter the love of his life.

But the fragrant Odette is soon swept away, abducted, before d'Bois can consummate his passion by the Marquis Da Foz, a ruthless and sadistic Portuguese nobleman. The hot blooded Hussar is soon in deadly pursuit, but can d'Bois save both his true love's virtue and his own life and who, truly, is the mysterious British ally Major Seraph who comes to his aid?

What strange horrors lurk within the shadows of Da Foz's ancient Moorish fortress and can the heroic duo foil Da Foz's dark machinations, defeat his unnatural underwater allies, rescue the delightful Odette and ultimately prevent the opening of the dreaded Crystal Void?



### **Tomb of the Aeons**

‘The sands of the desert seem as unchanging as the aeons, but they constantly shift reform and remake themselves, so that one is always looking at a frozen moment in perpetual chaos.’

- Commander Siegfried

It is 1941 and as Ernst Rommel, the Desert Fox, swings his great armoured right hook to send the British Eighth Army scurrying back toward Egypt, the crew of Ingrid, a mark IV panzer pursue a lone British tank into the deep wastes, but are ambushed and knocked out. When they awake hours later, Ingrid’s commander Siegfried and his surviving crew begin the long weary trudge back to their own lines, but soon become lost in an unnatural sand storm which seems to blow up from nowhere. When they stumble upon a strange temple complex and find a unit of dead Black Sun SS, they are forced to penetrate deep into the heart of the unholy ziggurats and recover a lost artefact, the Fangs of Set, by their guide and fellow captive Captain Seraph. Will they defeat this charnel house’s newly awoken inhabitants and can they survive the horror lurking at the very centre of this tomb of the aeons?

