



Napoleon's Gambit

A novel by Eric Goldman

Sailing through history ...
to commit the perfect crime

Chapter Eight

March 8, 2011

I inch my way amidst the scooters and cabs, toward the curb at the airport. Cassius taps his foot, glancing at his watch every few seconds.

I pull up and leap out the car.

“Goddamn, you’re late!”

“Yes, sir. Sorry. Nice to see you, sir. Did you have a pleasant flight? I had a wonderful voyage, thanks, sir.” I lift his large trunk onto the back seat while he walks to the passenger side, his briefcase and overnight bag in hand.

He gets in, slams the door and glowers out the window. When I start the car, he says, “No. Switch off. We will deal with your report first. Can you survive at sea for a year without fossil fuels?”

“I think so, sir. Can’t now, but I spoke to Carl Greenwood a few days ago, just after I called you. He told me they have engineered a new breed of algae with even larger receptors. They also added another layer of algae on the bottom of the spiral and installed a set of mirrors underneath to reflect sunlight up. He has agreed to install the washers I requested: the glass gets covered in salt and I had to rinse them every day to keep them running efficiently. I’m expecting a set of four new spirals soon and should be able to test them in about two weeks. If the numbers pan out like we think they will, I will have enough energy to allow me to use power whenever it’s needed. So, yes, sir, you may safely assume the boat works. And now that you don’t have to kill me anymore – it’s open kimono time. Spill the beans, sir.”

He slams a fist into his palm, chortles and beams at me. “Excellent news, Joshua. Indeed! In that case....” He searches through his briefcase, extracts a single sheet of paper and says, “You must swear this affidavit now, before we continue.”

It’s an oath to secrecy that survives in perpetuity: to tell no one (defined ad-nauseum), or be convicted of breaching the *Official Secrets Act*. We sign. He files the paperwork carefully in a folder, slips it in to the briefcase, locks its clasps and slides it under the seat. He turns to me, “Drive to number fifty-six Adi Avenue. Do you know where that is?”

“No, sir.”

“Head towards the harbor and I will direct you. We’re heading for Doctor George’s lab. You are about to have your mind blown.”

“I’m not all that fond of surprises, sir.”

He ignores me, chuckles to himself and looks about with glee. “In fact, I’ll wager, you won’t believe it for a while, and when you do – well....” He laughs and slaps his thigh. Even his eyes sparkle.

We drive through the Walu area’s stainless-steel pipes and tanks and pull up outside a warehouse. The brick building has a lacey, wrought

iron façade, its once pink trim now gray.

I park the car. The sun shines brightly outside and the car is hot. Cassius looks cool in his pressed t-shirt and cotton slacks, but I'm sweating and my back feels clammy.

Cassius smiles. "Joshua. I am going to introduce you to a man who will show you something you will not believe is true. I'm not going to tell you yet; you'll just think I'm up to one of my tricks. As I said before, the only way you will believe, is to see it for yourself. So we're going to go in there and show it to you."

His smile fades and he leans towards me, pointing his finger. "But here's the very important thing: what we are planning to do with this device will remain a secret shared by you and me. The boffin you are about to meet doesn't know about it, and never will. As far as he's concerned, you're going to do a one-minute test with it."

I stare at him for several seconds. "You know Cassius, all this time I didn't trust you, and now I see why. You've been lying to either him or me. Probably both."

He waves his hand impatiently. "He thinks you're going to use his device for one minute – you have known from the beginning, that you will be required to support yourself and your boat for a year."

I try to protest, but he cuts me off. "We're wasting time – you need to see it; then we'll talk. Just remember. Ask as many questions as you wish about the device – ask none about what we're going to do with it." He turns to open the door.

I reach across, put a hand on the dash and shake my head. "Hold on, sir. You're implying if this thing does anything useful, you're going to tell me what we're going to do with it and he will never know? Why me and not him?"

"How many times do I have to say this? If I tell him, I have to kill him."

He's drumming his fingers on the dash, near my hand. My irritation surges and I push down on his fingers. He snatches his hand from mine and stares at me in surprise. I say, "Given that he built a machine to do what you need, which is what I have done, why is it you can tell me and not kill me?"

He nods, pauses and laughs, returning to his new jovial self. "Keep your powder dry, will you? He gets to own his invention. Not a bad reward and he doesn't even pay me back for the development costs. And you, because you risk your life both trying his invention and undertaking this mission, you get five million dollars and your boat. Are we clear now? Talk to Doctor George about his technology, not what can be done with it."

"Aye, sir. After you." I follow him onto a stone path, past some large wooden doors, to a lane. Palm trees shade the entrance and their flickering shadows cast fantastic shapes across the untended garden. He unlocks a side-door with a key and we enter a hall with a ramp and loading dock. Our footsteps echo as we walk to a doorway on the far side and into a short passage.

We stop outside a closed metal door. He knocks. A voice cries out. "Admiral! Is that you? Wait four seconds and I am yours!" Seconds later, the door is yanked open by a man about five-feet-ten, with a sun-tanned face sporting a look of permanent surprise. He wears jeans, a short-sleeved silk shirt with a collar, and a pair of loafers - no socks. He moves with the quick jerky movements of a bird. He snaps his hand out at me, a gleam in his eyes as he pumps my hand, and says, "You must be Captain Joshua Rick. I'm Herbert George. Man, am I pleased to meet you! I want to thank you personally for being the guinea pig. I mean I think it's safe and all, but, you know."

He has a good handshake and intelligent green eyes. Cassius smiles at him, "Doctor George. The Captain here has not been fully briefed. You'll have to start from square one."

I laugh and say, “Doc, pleased to meet you. But the Admiral here is a real scream, isn’t he? What he meant by that statement, is that I have no clue why I’m here. But he is right on one count - I have volunteered to be the pig, so why don’t you just tell me what it is you would like me to test.”

He looks open-mouthed from the Admiral to me. “You truly mean you don’t know? But he... I mean... does he know he will be the first human being, to try it?”

“Doc,” I say. “Please, let’s begin with what it is. Then I’ll decide whether I want to be that sort of pioneer.” I turn to Cassius. “I knew I was right about you; the slow hook – that’s what you’re good at. But I’m here. Let’s see what the Doc has done.”

The Doc frowns, first at Cassius, then at me. He sighs, mutters under his breath, and beckons us in to the lab. A heavy electrical panel hangs on one wall, a web of cables cross the floor to a control panel matching the dimensions of the one I have yet to install on *Bit-by-Bit*. One side of the windowless room contains a bench filled with oscilloscopes, test rigs, soldering irons and computer screens. Across the far wall is a dogsled mounted to a conveyor belt.

Dr. George stands in front of the panel and says, “I have spent twenty years studying science, relativity and physics. My research led me to believe there was a single place on earth, one spot, where all the Space-Time Continuums intersect. I figured, if I could find this Time Gate, I could build a machine to leap backwards or forwards through time. About four years ago, I found The Gate, here, near Suva. The Admiral was kind enough to fund my experiments, and I have to tell you, I have in fact done it!”

“Done what, Doc? You can’t possibly mean time-travel?”

He jabs his arm and index finger upward. “Precisely! My device is called a Time Gate Machine, and it does indeed generate the time-

pulse The Gate needs. The closer one gets to The Gate, the less power one needs to jump. In this lab I can only move a small object, but with the machine installed on your boat, fired at The Gate, we can reduce the power required to move you and the whole boat to ten kilowatts. For the time-pulse to work, the machine must be traveling at exactly eight-point-eight miles-per-hour.”

I turn to Cassius. “Remember we talked about Alice? I feel like I’m having to run real fast to stand still.”

The Admiral bangs his hand on the table. “Doc, just show him how the thing works, will you?”

“Of course, of course. I thought if you were risking your life, the least I could do would be to explain how it works.”

“Doctor George,” I say. “Forgive my skepticism, but I’ve always thought our path through time was fixed in forwards and ticked by one second at a time. If you can prove it – by all means, let’s get on with the show.”

He nods. “That’s a good definition of the conventional Space-Time Continuum, but let me show you how it can leap sixty seconds in one. I think this might help you to believe. We will borrow a scene from my favorite movie and do the *Temporal Experiment Number One*, in which Doctor Emmet Brown sends Einstein, his dog, one minute into the future and then brings him back again.”

Dr. George calls *Emmet, Emmet!* A black and white terrier skids around the electrical panel and slides to a stop, barking, gazing at the Doc’s face. The Doc bends low. “Emmet, would you like to go for a sleddie?” The dog yaps, runs to the sled and climbs on. Attached to the rear of the sled is a stainless steel box about the size of what I have been calling the power-mad cube. A flexible cable snakes from it to the control panel.

“Is that the Time Gate Machine? On the sled?” I ask.

The Doc nods. He takes two stopwatches from his pocket. He clicks them on simultaneously and shows me that they are both reading the same time, advancing second by second. He hangs one around his neck, the other on Emmet's neck and attaches a safety harness to Emmet's collar. He clears the area around the belt, stands in front of the control panel and keys in some information. Looking at me, he says, "We're going to send Emmet one minute into the future. He will begin living his life second by second, ahead of us by one minute, right? The machine on his sled has been programmed to send him back here sixty seconds after he arrives, to the same time he left plus two seconds. He will have been gone a minute, while for us he will be gone two seconds. Understand?"

I nod and he hands me a pair of welding glasses. "Put these on. The machine emits an intense flash."

I say, "Hang on a mo, Doc, will you?"

I walk to the sled and hold my fingers under Emmet's nose. He's a friendly fella and he sniffs and licks, so I pat his head and scratch his ear. I walk back and nod to the Doc, who smiles. I slip on the glasses and adjust their strap. The Doc switches on the controls, flicks a switch, and the belt accelerates rapidly, Emmet barking and wagging his tail. The Doc pulls a lever with his left hand and nods for me to close the lenses. He presses his right index finger onto a small red button.

The Time Gate Machine hums, light blazes from it and everything in an elliptical bulb around it disappears. I stumble forward - it's like looking into a bottomless void: one second all is well and the next a dark nothingness gapes. Two seconds later, the black hole opens like a valve, an elliptical light shines out and there's Emmet on his sled again.

I flip the welding glass covers open and sway slightly in shock. "That... the damn thing was swallowed by a black hole..."

Cassius laughs and the Doc smiles.

Doc George gives Emmet a cookie as he unhooks him from the sled. He shows me the two stopwatches. Emmet's leads his by sixty seconds. The dog had literally been somewhere else for precisely the right time. I walk over to him and he barks, tries to lick my hand and presents his ear for another scratch.

"Can we do that again?" I ask.

"Sure," says the Doc and sets it up. Emmet leaps on and flashes forward and back in time to get another cookie. I try standing alongside the sled this time, closer to where it all happens. I actually feel a pull as the thing vanishes and comes back. Almost like a light wind in my hair.

"Okay, you guys," I say slowly. "How does this work?"

The Doc rattles on about Bendian space times, wormholes, Fluxtick data and capacitors. As some of what he's saying sinks in, I say, "One minute, Doc. Emmet is pretty close to me as an animal, isn't he? I mean not as close as a chimp, but we have similar organs, similar life processes? He survives each run. What's the risk to me?"

"To your head," he says looking serious. "Emmet has a dog's limited comprehension of the world. I liked your impromptu test of his brain functioning, Josh. Would he recognise you again? I have in the past tested his blood, both before and after each run, and he is not changed chemically by the experience. But his worldview doesn't cope with a great many problems - it just ignores them. You, on the other hand, may panic. The transit could throw you into a state from which you never recover. I don't know what you will see, feel, hear and smell while you are transiting in time. You may literally go insane."

I think about Emmet's desire for a cookie. Is it that simple? Is his tasty treat my five million bucks? But he did recognise me. He seemed totally unfazed.

"Doc." I say, nodding. "You said at this point, here in Suva, you

need all this power to move the sled, Emmet and the machine. What's the weight limit at The Gate, when we're using ten kilowatts?" I say this looking at Cassius.

Cassius, on the point of telling me to shut it, suddenly looks at the Doc, waiting on his answer.

The Doc frowns, "Well that's not really an easy number to calculate."

I say, "Does it matter if the boat weighs different amounts between traveling one way and the other?"

"What a strange question – why would it? But no, provided the total weight lies within the limit you will be okay. And that limit would be, let's see...." He sits down at one of his computers and begins calculating.

I say, pretending calmness, "Doc, what happens if I exceed the weight on the way back?"

"Oh," he says without looking up, "you and the boat will be scattered across the Space-Time Continuum in a form of infinite explosion. But, why would you worry about that? As I said, a strange question, but here we are – the answer to your weight limit is thirty tons, give or take."

"Give or take? Come on, Doc. Can't you be more precise than that?"

"A ton, more or less. I'm sorry – there's no way to know for sure - not until you've done it the first time."

"Okay. In that case, I only have one more question. What's the limit in terms of travel? I mean this test is one minute – what happens when we go farther afield as it were? For longer than a minute?"

"If you survive the one minute test, it won't matter." He delivers this answer matter-of-factly, but then his eyebrows shoot upwards and he leaps from one foot to another. "But when you said only one more

question, does this mean you're in? You've agreed to do the test?"

"Probably, Doc. I need to think about it. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"That would be great," he beams at me and shakes my hand vigorously.

Cassius smiles and leads the way back to the car. We don't talk on way to the marina, and we settle in the cockpit of the boat, sipping juice.

He opens his briefcase, extracts a file and hands it to me. It's marked *For Your Eyes Only*, and has a sealed band labeled *Operation First Nudge*. "So this is just the first? I guess that would make sense." I break the seal and read it through. I lay it aside and stare at him. "You're kidding, right? This is nothing but a glorified heist. These chests must be worth, what, a few billion dollars today? I thought this wasn't illegal?"

"It's not. During war, a Navy officer is obliged to do what he can to confound and destroy his Queen's, or in this case, his King's enemies. The British Army stole most of the money anyway. All we are doing is redressing the balance. We're ensuring that the Navy earns the reward."

"With just little me? The chests weigh two tons and must have been guarded by hundreds of men."

"By a platoon of forty-one men to be precise," he says. "You get help, of course. *Impérieuse*. The year, man. The date. June 1813. Captain Cochrane and Doctor Guthrie are right there, near San Sebastian. They lead the attack on Aix Roads, a couple of days before you need them. What do you think you've been reading about them for? The operation is to fall in with *Impérieuse*. Persuade Captain Cochrane and Doctor Guthrie to intercept the vessel that carries the chests to San Sebastian on the evening of the 17th of June. To board her, remove the chests, and return to the present as quickly as possible."

"Bringing back the chests, of course. What about *Impérieuse*, Cochrane and Guthrie? What happens to their share?"

"Today's Navy gets a finder's fee of half of the contents,

Impérieuse gets the rest and you get the Admiral's share of their slice. It's your five million."

I sit back, astonished. "That's some bonus scheme – do the impossible and you will earn your promised reward?"

He nods, laughs and claps his hands. "Well, boy? What did you expect – that someone would pay you five million times what your life is worth for a Sunday sail?"

I shake my head – about the only thing we agree on, is what I'm worth. I say, "Sir. From what records did you extract the information?"

"One of my ancestors, a Grandfather Gabe, wrote about the battle in his memoirs. I've worked on this for years and the list of sources is extensive. Suffice it to say, the French Commandant, a man called Jean Coignart, left a paper trail of receipts. For the billeting of his men. He was honest enough, for a Frenchman. Paid for everything, even in Spain."

"Question, sir. What if these terms are not acceptable to Cochrane and Guthrie? They just may consider your half, beg pardon sir, today's Navy's half, a little excessive?"

"You will be armed with twenty-first century savvy and weapons. They will hardly be in a position to argue." He pauses and adds absently, "You will be given a set of forged papers detailing how to deal with the chests."

"I don't like the sound of that, sir. And I'm not sure about lying to Thomas and James on *Impérieuse*."

Cassius looks at me open mouthed. "You can't be serious. Just like you, even if you told them the truth and they were crazy enough to believe it, they would do it for the money. In the end, everyone always does it for the money. Now cut the crap and let's get on with it."

I look down at the tabletop. He's right – we're all in it for the money.

I shrug and lift my gaze. “Why don’t you tell me what you have in mind, sir, and I’ll tell you if I think I can do it. All this, of course, provided the Doc’s machine really works.”

He laughs in delight, stands, and begins to pace. “Right then, listen up: we transit you back to early 1813. You sail from here to Aix Roads. Obviously there’s no Panama Canal, so you go via Cape Horn. You fall in with *Impérieuse*. You give him the orders. He agrees to undertake the mission. *Impérieuse* and her crew intercept the frigate, *La Clorinde*, carrying the gold. You take the gold, our share of it, I mean, and hightail it back to Fiji. Of course, on the way back here, the Suez Canal isn’t available yet, so you go round the bottom of Africa, via the Cape of Storms.”

“Of course,” I say. “The two worst Capes in seafaring history. And now I see why the boat has to work for a year. It will take almost that long to sail around on that route. But are you serious, sir? I mean with this plan?”

He stops pacing to stare at me. “What’s wrong with it?”

I look at him in surprise. “Well for starters, sir. You said fall in with *Impérieuse*.” I hold my hands palm up. “In what? In *Bit-by-Bit*? I doubt I could get within a mile before they blew me out of the water. Can you imagine what they would think of her?”

He waves his hand in dismissal and begins pacing again. “I have planned my share of naval operations, Captain. You will steal a boat from the period and approach *Impérieuse* in that. You will go aboard dressed as a post captain. The trunk in the car contains all your props. It has the private signals and responses for the period. Your orders will be in the correct code. You have learned the way to address his Lordship and Doctor Guthrie. Ses has taught you enough of the etiquette of the times, to allow you to spend a few days with them without them sensing who you are.”

“And if I miss them, or find them too late to intercept *La Clorinde*,

sir?”

“There is of course a Plan B to cover contingencies. You get Cochrane to form a landing party – a couple of wagons and forty-one men – an easy ambush if you know where and when they will be traveling along a deserted road skirting the coast. Right, pay attention.”

March 15, 2011

I rig a tripod over the forward locker, and the Doc and I attach the Time Gate Machine to a block and tackle. I climb into the locker below it and lower it into place.

After bolting the steel box to its mountings, the Doc and I exchange places. He leads the heavy electrical cables through their rubber seals on the case and connects them to their terminals. Then he feeds the fiber-optic cable through its seal and joins it to the lens. He wipes his hands on a rag, climbs out of the locker and we go into the salon.

He sits in the helmseat, swivels to face the starboard-side instruments and inserts a key into the time-circuit control. He draws a deep breath and turns it. A loud hum emits from the locker, the dials on the time circuits rotate and the one marked *Today* settles on March 15, 2011, and below that the time, 15:15. The dial for *Destination* displays zeroes and the power meter indicates a steady consumption of twenty amps.

The Doc says, “The power circuits are warming up. When this light turns green they are ready.”

A moment later, the green light in the center of the controls illuminates and the Doc leans forward. He dials in 15:25 and today’s date into the *Destination* circuit. He points to the key’s three positions: *Transit*, *Off* and *Diagnostics*. He places his hand on a lever and says, “To

make doubly sure you mean to transit, you must have the key in *Transit* and you must pull this lever down, like this, from its spring-loaded *Test* position to its *Transit* position, and then press this red button.”

I nod. He lets the lever flip back to *Test* and presses the button. The cabin lights dim, a whine issues from the forward locker, the power meter flicks to ten thousand watts and the green lights flash across the destination dial. We both breathe for the first time in seconds and the Doctor stands. “Excellent, Josh. Excellent installation. Well done. You’re all systems go.”

He pumps my hand, snaps photographs of his machine’s controls and, as he’s leaving, he pauses at the door, “I do so wish I was going in your place. It’s a high price to pay for failure. Someone else’s life, is it not?”

“I’m glad you see it that way. But technology advances by experimenting with the dangers hidden in the next refinement. If you try this and it doesn’t work, we lose the opportunity for you to get it right. If I do and it fails, you will hopefully learn enough from the process, to try again. And they picked me because I’m expendable.”

“The Admiral may think you’re expendable. But looking at what you have built here – I don’t think so.” He nods, smiles, shakes his head and says, “Don’t forget the speed. You must be traveling at, I think you said, eight knots, eight-point-eight MPH, when you hit go.”

March 29, 2011

Cassius, who arrived back in Fiji this morning, inspects the boat, asking questions about each control and every item of equipment. It’s obvious he knows small boats, but his questions regarding the sail controls show he’s a power-boater. When I’ve shown him everything, he seats himself at the couch in the salon, with his chin on his chest. Finally he

looks up and asks, “Have you solved the mission problem of having to find a boat for the period?”

“Yes, sir. But I’m going to need some equipment.”

He stares at me for a time and says with a gesture of impatience. “Like what?”

“SCUBA gear for about eight, an underwater sled for four, some C4, and some smoke grenades for the rocket launcher. Sir.”

“Is that all?” he says dryly. “Sure you don’t want a helicopter? Tell me what it’s for.”

“Aye, sir. Some of it is in case I miss Thomas in *Impérieuse* at sea, or find her too late. We may have to SCUBA in to San Sebastian to do something about that.”

I outline my plan to steal a wooden boat and he sits in silence for a while. He says, “I’ll have Sergeant Davis send it all out – should be here in about a week. By the way, how is the voice control system?”

“It’s fully operational, sir.”

“Can I speak a command to it?”

My face flushes. “No, sir. *She* has not been programmed to recognise anyone’s voice but mine.”

He smiles sardonically. “Why? Is that not a safety issue?”

I relax a little. “She has to be taught to recognise a voice, sir.” And then I smile, “Besides. You ordered me to sail solo, remember?”

He stands and crosses to the nav-desk. “You will instruct it now, to accept commands from me.”

“Why?”

“I’ll ignore the lack of a *sir* for now, sailor, but that is an order and you will obey it. Now that you have accepted this mission back to 1813, you remain firmly under my orders. So tell it to listen up.”

“BeeBee,” I say, “We will add a crewmember to the roster. Enter Admiral Edmund Clayton Stoke as able-seaman.” I step back, turning

my face away.

“Aye, sir. Admiral Stoke entered as able-seaman.”

“Very funny, Rick. Make that Captain.”

“Very well, sir. BeeBee, enter the Admiral as an alternate Captain.”

“Aye sir. When will we add his voice commands?”

“BeeBee. Stand by.” I turn to Cassius. “Sir. To properly command her, she needs to record your voice pattern for every command in her database – the process will take you about three hours. Do you want to do it now?”

“Yes. Let’s get on with it,” he says, glancing at his watch.

“BeeBee. Begin add crewmember’s voice now.”

“Aye, sir. Admiral Stoke, welcome aboard, sir. My command list contains six categories: Sailing, Housekeeping, Maintenance, Systems, Emergencies and Communications. We begin with Sailing. Sailing is divided into Sail Handling, Navigation, Motoring, Mooring and Anchoring, and General Boat Functions. Sail handling is divided into four: Main, Genoa, Jib and Spinnaker. We begin with raising the mainsail, sir. The basic command is, *BeeBee. Raise mainsail*. On hearing this command, I will rotate into the wind and raise the mainsail to its maximum height – the head of the mast. Please repeat after me, sir, *BeeBee. Raise mainsail*.”

We are scheduled to begin the mission in eight days. I have work to do. I leave him and continue with my checklist. He takes longer than I would have thought, and then he leaves to find the trawler he has rented for the next two weeks.

April 7, 2011

The day before D-day, Cassius finally leaves at 17:00. I shower and eat a light meal in the cockpit, thinking about tomorrow. Death is less

scary than the fear of never knowing about Ses and me. This thing had better work, Doc. I run through the before-heading-to-sea checklist and retire to sleep.

Bit-by-Bit's port transom dips and I wake. Soft footsteps on the deck, muffled from my cabin on starboard. I glance at the clock above the bunk - 22:15. I walk in bare feet to the companionway and climb the steps to peer into the cockpit. A muffled figure lifts an arm and knocks on the door. The hand is female and there's something about the stance, the way she holds her head... it's Ses! I leap forward to open the door and remember that I'm naked. I clutch wildly and find a tea towel, which won't circle me, and end-up holding it like a matador in front of me.

I manage to unlock the bolt and slide the door open. She's inside in a flash and says, "Quick. Close the door. Josh! You are a sight for sore eyes. Oh God, let me hold you." She puts out her arms and, without thinking, I do the same. The towel slips as we crush together.

Our mouths find each other and we are both laughing and kissing. And then she breaks, pushing me away. I search for the towel and she says, "I need a shower, something to eat and drink, and then I have two things to tell you. Can we do it in that order?"

"Your wish, my lady, is my command." Embarrassed about my bare ass, I motion her forward to the shower, show her how to work the drain, give her a towel and say, "What are you going to wear when you're done?"

"I thought I might borrow your tea-towel," she says with a giggle. Back in my cabin I put on sweat pants and a t-shirt, and head to the galley to scramble eggs and make tea and toast. I feel seventeen again. I can't stop smiling. It takes me three trips to the fridge to remember to take anything out, and all this time I'm listening to a woman in my shower, splashing about, singing a song about *letting the bath water out*. Talk about a *First Nudge* of a different kind; just when

this mission couldn't possibly get weirder, it does.

She seems to be gone for days, and then she's walking towards me in a towel which doesn't cover her curves. "Josh, love. Why'd you get dressed, then?" She sits and eats quickly, mops up the scraps with her toast and sips her tea. "Thanks, love. I haven't eaten in about twelve hours. Don't even know what day it is, to be honest. But, please." She stops and looks about the boat and then at me. She shrugs shyly, her head down. "This is more difficult than I thought – never asked anyone before. Can we make love?"

I slide one arm beneath her legs, the other behind her back, lift her up, and carry her to my cabin. Our lovemaking starts with a gentle drawn out kiss – lips caressing, licking, nibbling, and I feel this slow heat begin inside. It rises and rises as we explore with our hands and mouths. We thrash to a climax and lie gasping, sweating, intertwined with her head on my chest.

"For the first time in my life, I know why the French call it *the little death*. I love you, Ses."

"I love you, Josh."

April 8, 2011

We must have dozed, for when I gaze at the clock above the bunk it reads 01:00. She stirs, opens her eyes, smiles and snuggles closer. "I thought I was dreaming," she says.

"I think I'm still dreaming," and I pinch her arm.

"Ouch! You're supposed to pinch yourself, silly."

"Ses. Believe me, I'm not complaining, but what are you doing here? I'm sworn to secrecy, but I'm leaving in a few hours, and, well, I may not be back for some time. I'm sorry, I should have told you that, before we made love."

“Why? Do you think it would have changed my mind?”

She sits up, clutching the sheet to her throat, looks down for some time and then says so softly that I have to lean in to hear: “Josh. I said I had two things to tell you. Well we’ve dealt with number one – I love you.” She looks at me then, almost defiantly, and I tense. A shiver replaces warm contentment. She takes my hands and brushes her lips with my fingers, holding them there for a while, and then she lets them go and says, “It’s me who should be apologizing. I should have told you much earlier. It’s just; it’s just that it was always so difficult... oh shit. I hate myself for this.” She sobs.

I lean forward to touch her shoulder, to stop the tears. I say softly, “What is it you hate yourself for?”

She shakes her head and cries quietly. Suddenly it all clicks into place. “Oh no, Ses, not you. You knew? Ah... no! All along... When you signed my book on Thomas? About the chests? About San Sebastian and this crazy time-machine? You knew!” I’m whispering in shock, I feel faint, and her sobs become moans as I sit up and move away. I go up stairs to sit in the salon. I pour a stiff shot of rum and sip it while staring at Suva’s lights. A bleakness overwhelms me, hopelessness in the face of fate. Deprived of my rudder and compass. Even if I knew where to steer, I can’t move. I don’t know how long I sat here like this, but then she’s in the salon with me, dressed in the dark clothes she wore when she arrived.

She sits opposite me at the table and says softly, “Do you hate me?”

I continue staring out the porthole and say quietly, “Hate? Love? What’s the point? I feel like I was born onto a sinking ship.” I turn to look at her. “You know, for a while, when I was falling in love with you, I felt better about life -.”

I trail off unable to relate to that feeling and she sobs, a low

keening sound that cuts me, but doesn't soften my mind. "For fuck's sake, Ses! Why? Just answer me that. What did you hope to gain? Or him?"

"That's just it, Josh. I don't know. It's the way he set it up. Set me up as his research assistant, told me to find two sailors, showed me the machine here. It was all so exciting. I don't know what it was about him that attracted me – maybe the money, the power. He was so kind at first – almost like a father. I never planned it, it just happened and then it was so difficult to get out. He... he scares me, Josh."

She pauses for a moment, stifling a sob. "He's violent at times, carries a gun." She looks up at me. "He's dangerous, Josh. He should scare you, too." She shakes her head, looks down and carries on in a low voice. "He asked me to work on this mission. And then I found you. You seemed perfect. It was all just a fantasy, at first, but then you arrived at Heathrow. Your intelligence shining in your eyes, your ponytail, the way you moved – and then in the car, when you talked about death and half-empty. I've flirted with that, too.

"I asked Teddy, Admiral Stoke, I mean. Cassius – you were right to call him that – if I could tell you. He ordered me to keep you in the dark until you got here, and like you, I was under oath. I'm here because I want to go with you. Tomorrow."

"You what?" I stand and walk to the other side of the galley. Whirling to face her, I say, "You have to be crazy to ask now. Aside from the issue of trust, what am I supposed to do with you on this mission? The boat may already be too heavy on the way back – how am I supposed to feed you? What would you wear? What would I do with you when I meet *Impérieuse*?"

She raises her head to look at me and begins to formulate answers, but I cut her off. "If you're actually going to answer, start with trust. How could I trust you now? For all I know, this could be yet another ploy of Cassius's, using you as insurance. Make the stupid Captain fall in love,

keep you here and force me to return with the gold.”

“Oh Josh,” she wails. “That’s just. I deserve that. I’m not going to beg, but I am going to be honest. I’m here for two reasons – I love you and want to be with you, and two... well, this adventure is too good to be true. To meet Thomas and James, sail on *Impérieuse*. Actually live in history instead of reading about it. You loved me half an hour ago, I’m the same woman.”

“You’re not. I trusted her. No. This is not going to work. Good-bye, Ses.”

I get up and head down the companionway, back to my cabin and lie down on the bunk in my clothes. She cries for a time and then she’s quiet. After a while, she blows her nose and washes her face in the galley sink. The salon door slides open and shut. She walks across the deck and *Bit-by-Bit* dips and rises as she jumps to the dock. I look up at the clock - 03:00. How can one’s life change so radically in so few hours?

Operation *First Nudge* begins with a meeting on Cassius’s trawler at 08:00. When the alarm beeps, I lie there. Cassius planned this mission well – my changes were mostly refinements. Neither of us included Ses, though, so her presence on board would only complicate matters. But she was to have been on board in my head, and now she’s gone, and there’s no denying the way my heart leapt when I saw her in the cockpit. I could not go on the mission – just give the Doc back his machine and sail off into the sunset. But where does that leave me? Cassius will probably have me killed. I’d feel like a coward. At this stage of the mission, what reason do I have for not going? All that work, the lure of going back, as Ses said, to live in history, to meet Thomas and James. All that money.

I dress and eat breakfast, walk the few docks to reach Cassius’s trawler and go aboard to be greeted by both Dr. George and Cassius. We

run through the procedure again, the Doc gives me the co-ordinates for The Gate: about a hundred miles from here, southeast of the island chain. Cassius dismisses the Doc and we run through the mission again. He hands me charts of San Sebastian, aerial photographs of it and the route from it that Coignart used to get to the pass up the Pyrenees. As I'm about to leave, his mood turns from a wide-eyed grin to somber. He reaches up to touch my shoulder, and says softly, "Take care of my coins, you hear?"

The hairs on the back of my neck bristle, and I move away from his touch. I say coldly, "Yeah. I'll try to bring me back, too."

He dismisses me. I return to *Bit-by-Bit*, cast off and sail towards The Gate, Cassius piloting the trawler, keeping station a few hundred yards astern.

I will soon become the first person to push the little red button while holding the lever in transit. If the boat blows up or I lose my mind, the judge will grant me a slightly higher value than he did in the hurricane off Bermuda: Sensei will mourn for a while, Cassius will be pissed, and the Doc would care, but not enough to not look for the next pig. So my passing will affect three people, and perhaps cause real grief to a fourth. Perhaps.

Using the satellite phone, I dial my Internet service provider; log onto the official US time site and as accurately as I can, set my watch, the ship's three brass clocks and the computers' clocks, to this time. I will need to know the time exactly, so that I can navigate the way they did in 1813. I instruct StarFix to take a photograph of our position at precisely 16:00. A few seconds later I switch off the phone and check that only the electrical equipment and electronics essential to the operation of the boat are on. I douse and store the sails, cover the hydrogen spirals, and prepare the boat for action stations: when I go through The Gate, I will not know what weather or shipping is present in the other continuum.

I fire up the generator and wait until it's running steadily. I check

its power output and insert the time machine key. I click it to *Transit* and the loud hum echoes from the forward locker. The green power light glows - twenty amps on the meter. The *Today* display reads: April 8, 2011, 16:25. I dial March 1, 1813, 11:45 into the destination dial and with the lever in its *Test* position, press the *Go* button. The instrument lights dim, the generator drops a tone under the load, and the green lights above *Destination* flash.

I look across at Cassius's trawler, keeping close company, but not too close, off the starboard side. Doc George and Cassius standing at the rail. I walk to the port side of the cockpit, kneel on the teak sole and set the timer on the explosive device lying there to seventy-five seconds. I check that its small antennae is inserted correctly, click the receiver on, and using the coach-house to shield my movements from the trawler's view, heave it overboard. As expected, it sinks and should stop forty feet below the surface. I continue on around the coach-house, forward, turn and walk to the starboard side and back into the cockpit, hoping they will assume I have just performed a quick inspection of the boat. I wave a thumbs-up. The Doc waves back and I return to the internal-helm station.

Remembering the flash of light during the demonstration with Emmet, I put on my sunglasses, steady *Bit-by-Bit* on her course and accelerate to eight knots. I note the time - 16:29. Pull the lever from *Test* to *Transit* with my left hand, key the small transmitter to start the timer on the bomb floating beneath us, and bring the tip of my finger down on the little red button.