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"What's happening at the gates?" Marcel Pouvoir, the nuclear power station director at the Cap de la Hague plant on the Cherbourg peninsular, asked.

"Just a load of trouble makers protesting about the proposed dumping," his security chief replied.

Pierre Matraque had been the security chief at the Cap de la Hague facility ever since his early retirement from the CRS riot police in Paris. Some of the staff had heard rumours that his early retirement had been the result of his heavy handed handling of student demonstrations around the city. It was a strange coincidence that he decided to retire shortly after two students from the Sorbonne had died as a result of being hit repeatedly around the head, with what was purportedly a riot policeman's baton. Pierre had been identified as the responsible officer but the main prosecution evidence, (his blood stained baton), had surprisingly been mislaid by the evidence officer. The case was consequently dismissed because of lack of evidence and Pierre had decided to retire from the force.

"Don't they understand that our storage facility here has reached its capacity? We don't have any choice but to dump the excess in the ocean," Marcel explained.

"You're talking about environmentalists here," Pierre spat the term out. "They don't listen to reason with anything. All they care about is saving the bloody planet."

"We've encased two kilos of waste in one ton of concrete before we dump it. What more do they expect us to do?"

"Shut down the power station," Pierre replied and both men laughed at what they regarded as a big joke, but to the demonstrators outside the gates it wasn't a laughing matter.

At the front of the crowd of demonstrators was a British environmentalist and member of the Environmental Challenger crew. Anne Urquist's title on the ship was that of Tactical Planning Officer and along with the small boat skipper, was responsible for determining the most effective way to harass any opposition. Together with a local environmentalist group, she'd organised this protest as a decoy to facilitate gathering valuable information on the nuclear plant and specifically the dump-ship.

Walking up to the gates of a nuclear power station and taking photographs would clearly arouse the attention of the security services in any country but photographing a demonstration outside the fence was a different matter. Just in case the local gendarmerie started asking too many questions about her activities, she carried a fake press card to present to them. The telephoto lens on her camera gave her a clear view into the plant and after the demonstrators tried climbing the fence close to the dock, she managed to get some close-up shots of the French dump-ship, which was tied up to the dockside, as hundreds of barrels were being loaded onboard.

"We could do with some detailed shots of the ship itself. Any chance of getting inside the plant?" Anne asked her French colleague.

"Shouldn't be a problem," the French woman replied, then lifted her walkie-talkie to her mouth and gave a few commands.

Within minutes the main bulk of the protesters had ran around to the side of the facility, leaving only a token contingent to keep the gate staff occupied. With hundreds of bodies pressed against the chain-link fence it hadn't been long before the fence had given way and the protesters surged forward into the confines of the plant itself. As the mob charged forward the sound of alarms echoed throughout the facility. Anne had slipped the film taken so far into her underwear, just in case she was arrested and her pockets searched. It wasn't uncommon for plant security officers to rip the film out of reporter's cameras and she didn't want to lose the intelligence gathered so far.

The mob had surged as far as the dump-ship before the security guards had coordinated themselves enough to combat the problem and Anne had secreted a second film in her hiding place before continuing to take more photographs of the demonstrators climbing the superstructure of the ship.

When the sound of the breached perimeter alarms echoed Pierre Matraque had been laughing with the plant director about the idea of shutting down the plant. It had taken him only a few minutes to discover where the breach was and using his radio, called for the plant fire engines to be brought to the area. Protesters were running towards every direction of the plant in groups of fours and fives before Pierre had even left the director's office. The job of the security chief had been made that much harder by this action, as he didn't have sufficient forces to control every single protest action.

"Call the local police. We're going to need every officer they can spare," Pierre ordered his deputy. "And after you've done that take a squad of ten officer to guard the breach. We don't want any more of them getting in."

It was like shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted but the deputy security chief had done as he was instructed. Pierre waved down one of the fire engines as they charged by and positioning himself behind the roof mounted high-pressure hose, instructing the driver to position himself behind the line of security officers that now lined the dockside. Three quarters of the protesters inside the facility had located themselves on the superstructure of the dump-ship and in fear for their lives the crew had abandoned ship. It wasn't because the protester were expected to be violent that Captain Bévuc had ordered his crew to disembark, he was more wary of the likely reaction of the security chief to this activity and he didn't want any of his crew to be caught in the crossfire.

"Right, let's get the bastards!" Pierre shouted, his adrenaline running wild as it usually did at times like these.

Behind the line of security officers dressed in riot gear, the fire engines of the plant emergency service opened fire with jets of water that were designed to reach the highest points of the five storey facility. Clinging to the ship's superstructure the

hundred or so protesters were one by one being blown off the far side of the ship into the water of the harbour.

While the security chief concentrated on removing the protesters from the dump-ship itself, the small bands of demonstrators had scattered themselves throughout the complex and were causing plenty of havoc on their own. Only the locked security doors of the plant's control room had prevented an invasion of the nerve centre and the director had chosen this location to cower in fear of being taken hostage.

"The bastards are destroying my power station!" he exclaimed as he watched the carnage on the security camera monitors, before they all suddenly went blank. "What's happened to the pictures?" he screamed at the controller who was frantically trying to restore some kind of reception.

"They've taken out the domestic transformer," he reported. "We only have the generators and the emergency batteries now. If we lose them the cooling turbines will trip off line."

"Let me see if I understand the situation correctly," Marcel replied. "If we lose the cooling turbines the reactor will overheat and meltdown?"

"Precisely sir, but I'm shutting the reactor down as we speak. The control rods should be in place in ten minutes. If we don't lose the generators before then we'll all be safe."

"You said generators in the plural. How many do we have?"

"Two sir. It's a double backup system to the domestic supply," the control room operator reported. "Correction to that sir, we've only got one now."

"Don't those idiots know what they're doing? This mindless destruction of the plant could cause the nuclear accident that they keep complaining about."

"I think you might want to inform the local police of the situation sir. If we lose the last generator before the control rods are down, they're going to have a major disaster on their hands."

"Define the term disaster a little bit more for me will you."

"Visualize Normandy disappearing off the map."

"Point taken," Marcel said before picking up the telephone on the controller's desk. "Are we supposed to have a dial tone or do I have to press a button?"

"No sir, it's a direct outside line," the controller took the handset off the director. "Line's dead sir, they must have taken out the telephone lines."

"How long before the control rods are down?"

"Five more minutes sir," the controller replied nervously.

The whole control room was noticeably on edge as they listened to the clock tick and they crossed their fingers that the last generator would stay on line long enough to complete the task of shutting down the reactor. The battery backup was only designed to provide emergency lighting and didn't have nearly enough current to power the control rod gantry.

Totally oblivious to the potential catastrophe happening in the main power plant behind him, Pierre Matraque was enjoying his water cannon target practice. He could hear the sirens in the distance behind him, but in his mind the local police could deal with the small groups of demonstrators that were still running around the facility.

He concentrated on his aim and pulled the lever for the water release again, sending another environmental protester flying through the air into the water of the harbour. By now this was the only fire engine still firing as his staff hadn't been as conscious of their limited water supply as he'd been, and consequently just left their water jets on constantly. They'd now completely run out of water and just sat there awaiting further instruction. With three-quarters of the protesters in the harbour, Pierre ordered his riot police to move forward and storm the ship. This allowed the fire engines to move to the dock edge and the firemen threw pump hoses into the water between the ship and the dock. With a new unlimited supply of water all of the fire engines started firing again and the few protesters that hadn't been knocked off the superstructure up to this point started climbing down again before they were knocked down.

Pierre took a few seconds to scan the whole area, as the situation on the dump-ship seemed to be fairly well resolved. He could see local police vans screaming through the front gates and disgorging their complement of riot clad policemen. A glance along the dockside itself and he saw Anne still taking photographs of the activities. Pierre was down from his position on top of the fire engine and along the quayside in no time at all. As Anne was aiming her telephoto lens at another part of the ship's superstructure, to get a detailed profile of the layout of the ship, she was unable to see him approaching. The first Anne was aware of his presence was when his riot stave made contact with her camera and sent it skidding along the tarmac.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Pierre screamed, whilst hammering the fallen camera with his baton. "Who said you could take photographs in a security area?"

"British press," Anne announced showing her fake identification. "And you've just damaged some valuable equipment."

"I'm going to damage some more equipment if you're not careful," Pierre declared, grabbing Anne by the arm. "Consider yourself under arrest for trespassing on private property..."

Pierre Matraque never finished his sentence as the radiation leak sirens suddenly sprang into action and distracted him. Sounding like the old air raid sirens that they were, the staff at the plant were well aware of the significance of the noise and even the fire engines stopped their renewed target practice, reeled in their hoses and redeployed to the plant buildings.

While Pierre's mind was on other matters, Anne had taken her chance to avoid arrest, and almost definitely a search that would discover the films secreted upon her person. With all the power she could muster she put into effect the self-defence training she'd learnt at rape prevention classes and landed a steel toe-capped hiking boot into Pierre's groin. While the security chief lay curled up in agony on the dockside, Anne made good her escape through the missing fence. The security guards guarding it had long since gone to investigate the reason for the emergency sirens being activated.

In the control room of the power plant, Marcel had activated the emergency sirens after he'd discovered the telephones were cut. With only five minutes to go before the possibility of an irreversible meltdown occurred, he needed to find some way of warning the plant staff, as well as the local population, of the imminent danger they were in. What they could do in the short time before the area suffered a severe nuclear catastrophe was debatable but it was his only available option.

"Are those control rods down yet?" Marcel asked again.

"Not yet sir," the controller replied. "We still have another minute and a half before the reactor is shut down completely."

It was like waiting for a kettle to boil as the seconds slowly ticked by. All eyes were on the large clock on the wall as the second hand gradually made its way around the dial.

"Only one minute more and we're safe," the controller remarked as he too watched the second hand on its slow circle of the clock-face.

On the roof of the building the small bands of protesters had caused considerable havoc with what they regarded as destruction of accessory equipment. Their intention was to damage as many small items in the plant as possible, making it an inconvenience for the staff to replace them. The thought that the generators were needed to shut down the facility and work the cooling turbines hadn't even crossed their minds. To the destructive demonstrators the generators were there to provide the staff with their creature comforts of heating, lighting and entertainment. The staff cafeteria and the recreational facilities were in fact the first places to suffer at the hands of these enraged anarchists, but the domestic power transformer and generators had come a close second. After the local police arrived on the scene the situation became even more chaotic, as the police officers clad in riot gear fought to arrest the protesters. Many policemen had fallen to the hurling of missiles from the rooftops and a fleet of ambulances arriving from as far away as Cherbourg, started ferrying the injured to the local hospitals. It was at this point in the battle that the nuclear leak siren sounded and the group of demonstrator sitting perched on the rooftop in front of it at the time went remarkably deaf. One female demonstrator actually sitting astride the cylindrical siren when Marcel activated it became transfixed to the spot, with a Cheshire cat grin on her face, as the huge siren vibrated away merrily with its own sonic resonance.

Beside the second and final generator a group of protesters were poised to destroy this vital piece of equipment, as the local riot police bounded across the rooftops after them. Riot staves swinging, the police charged headlong into the group of

demonstrator and in a bid to defend themselves from the flailing weapons, the protesters charged back at the police lines. Riot batons were useful weapons at arm's length but when demonstrators were intertwined with the police officers, it was too easy to hit a colleague instead of a protester and this tactic had worked well for the demonstrators in previous battles. On the edge of the rooftop one of the riot policemen lost his balance and toppled over the edge onto the remaining generator. The policeman himself landed on the casing that housed the generator itself but his large wooden baton slipped down into the workings of the machine and jammed in the mechanism. With a cloud of black smoke and a shower of sparks the generator ground to a halt and only the circuit breakers had prevented a full-scale fire. The complete loss of all but battery power silenced the wailing sirens and in the control room the lights flickered off, only to be replaced by the dim emergency battery lighting.

"Is that the end of the last generator?" Marcel asked the controller sitting beside him.

"It certainly looks like it sir," the controller replied. All eyes had transferred from looking at the clock on the wall to looking at him. "It was a close thing. The control rods are in place and the reactor is shut down. We did it with only ten seconds to spare."

Everybody breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed onto their desks. Marcel wasn't sure in his mind what the best outcome would actually be, a meltdown and certain death or the mountain of paperwork he was now facing, and almost certainly a board of enquiry.