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"How can a bunch of anti-nuclear protesters take a nuclear power station off-line, and what's more come ten seconds away from causing a nuclear accident?" The French President was addressing a representative from the nuclear industry's safety commission who'd been investigating the near disaster. "I thought they had safety devices on their safety devices?"

"They do have a double backup system in effect but the protesters managed to disable the primary power source together with the first backup before the police even arrived at the plant," the safety inspector explained.

"That still left a second backup system. What happened to that?" the president continued. He was determined to get to the bottom of the matter if it took him all day.

"One of the police officers had a slight accident. He dropped his riot baton into the generator workings and the machine burnt out," the safety inspector reported. "It could have been worse though," he added, trying to indicate that the situation hadn't been the total disaster that it could have been.

"How the hell could it have been worst?" the president screamed. "We were only ten seconds away from losing half of Normandy."

"We could have been ten seconds past saving Normandy," the safety inspector replied with a slight chuckle in his voice.

"And that's supposed to make me have confidence in your safety program? On a different note, how many casualties were there in the end?"

"It could have been wo..." the safety officer started, but decided against that line of approach when he noticed a rather angry look on the president's face. "Sixty five police officers and seventeen protesters hospitalised," he eventually settled for.

"Sixty five police officers injured?" the president repeated back. "I won't go into the details about how that happened. Did any nuclear material leak out of the plant?"

"No Mr President. The containment remained intact."

"In that case the official line will be that the protesters on a spree of criminal damage, triggered the warning siren after short circuiting the power supply to it. At no time was the plant in any danger and the safety systems worked effectively. Further mention that we intend to keep the plant off-line until repairs to the damaged ancillary equipment is completed."

"Couldn't we take this opportunity to blame the protest groups for causing a near disaster? It's a golden opportunity to get one over on them," the safety inspector suggested.

"Not a good idea," the president replied. "The press have a habit of writing only one line about who was responsible and a front page headline of the fact that there was a near disaster and our safety systems failed to prevent it."

"But it was the environmentalists who destroyed the generators," the safety inspector complained. "It was their fault. I've got plenty of evidence to prove it."

"Stick to aspects of safety because in politics you soon learn that the press conveniently forget certain aspects if the story sounds better without them. In law you may have to tell the whole truth but in the media they only tell the sensational bits that grab the audiences."

Back at the Cap de la Hague power station, the cleanup campaign had begun in earnest as teams of electricians and builders, repaired or replaced the damaged property. Their first priority had been the domestic transformer, which allowed them to draw power from the national supply. With the transformer repaired the primary systems were re-established and the control rods could be locked in place. Although the rods had completely descended into the radioactive core, the power had gone out before the massive locking bolts could be moved into position. It was only an added safety precaution but the control room staff felt considerably more relaxed after they'd received confirmation that the core was locked down tight.

"What the hell went wrong?" Marcel Pouvoir asked Pierre, looking for some explanation as to why the situation had deteriorated to the level that it had.

"It was impossible for my staff to be everywhere at once," Pierre replied. His voice still sounded a couple of octaves above it's usual level. "We pursued the bulk of the anarchists and concentrated on controlling them."

"While you were playing shooting ducks at the fairground, the rest of them came close to triggering a nuclear holocaust," Marcel chastised while Pierre stood uncomfortably in front of him. "Don't you want to sit down? You look like John Wayne standing there with your legs splayed apart."

"I'd rather stand if you don't mind." Pierre replied. "No offence, but I'm feeling a little bit sore at the moment."

"I'm not surprised after that woman reporter caught you off guard."

"Don't remind me about it. Have any of those photographs reached the tabloids yet?"

Pierre was concerned to say the least that embarrassing images of his incapacitation would be world headlines by now. Fortunately for him Anne hadn't developed the films yet as she was still on her way to rendezvous with the Environmental Challenger in Alderney.

While the two chiefs conducted a post-mortem of the disastrous activities that had just beset the nuclear power station, the loading of the French dump-ship had restarted again. Captain Bévuc and his crew had returned to their ship after the plant security officers, together with the local police, assured him that no more shooting was going

to take place. It was a long process to load thousands of tons of concrete encased nuclear waste into the hold of the massive ship and the task hadn't been made any easier by the recent delay. Well behind schedule and under considerable pressure from Marcel Pouvoir to get his ship into the open sea and away from the power station, Captain Bévuc had his crew working around the clock. On the bridge with him was his first mate Louis Fidèle, another veteran of the nuclear waste dumping business.

This wasn't the first time they'd locked horns with environmental protesters and they were well used to the protest ship's tactics of dodging small inflatable craft underneath the falling barrels. On a few occasions they'd ordered the crew to release the barrels anyway but after one protester was nearly killed the bad publicity that followed had caused the French government to order them to avoid confrontations rather than continue dumping regardless.

Looking out of the bridge windows towards the massive hold that stretched out in front of them, dockside cranes busily transferred barrel after barrel from the power station jetty into the bowels of the ship. This was the first nuclear waste dump for a considerable number of years. The French government had originally suspended their policy of deep-sea disposal after extensive pressure from the rest of the world. Now with the old situation mainly forgotten and the storage facility at Cap de la Hague full to capacity, it had become necessary to undertake one large sea dump in order to clear space at the plant. The French authorities fully expected the international community to complain furiously and they knew that they'd have to suspend operations again, but one dump was all they needed with this Goliath of a ship.

"Where is the accursed Environmental Challenger now?" Captain Bévuc asked.

"Her last known position was approaching Alderney," Louis replied. "There's no chance of us getting out of here before they arrive."

"If it hadn't been for those bloody demonstrators we stood a chance of getting underway before they got here. Now we're going to have to fight our way out of this port."

"Why can't they just leave us alone? We're not doing them any harm. What's a few little barrels compared to the whole ocean?"

The large cash bonuses the French government were paying the crew of the dump-ship probably had some bearing on their agreement with the overall policy. Amazingly people became blind, deaf, dumb or stupid if enough money was offered and this appeared to be one of the blind stupid occasions.

Only a few miles away in the town of Cherbourg, the casualties of the battle for control of the power plant lay in the local hospital licking their wounds. Of the sixty-five police officers who were injured, only ten needed to be detained for observation. Eight had suffered head injuries from falling masonry and the remaining two had sustained broken limbs. Only one of the demonstrators had required more than minor treatment and that was only because her mental state was such that she needed constant observation. A new category had been added to the compulsive disorders

section of future medical textbooks. Along with compulsive eating and nymphomania was to be added an unnatural desire for vibrating objects. After ten minutes on an activated world war two air raid siren this young woman had experienced delights she'd never even thought possible, and similar to a drug addict she now craved a similar unobtainable high point again.

For the staff at the hospital the deafness of those standing nearest to the siren had presented a slight communication problem. Luckily most of the demonstrators regained their hearing gradually while they waited for treatment, but not before the medical staff had developed sore throats from all the shouting. The casualty unit at Cherbourg hospital was sounding like a London back-street market with everybody competing to see who could shout the loudest. Questions of a personal nature had stayed personal no longer, as the replies had been as loud, if not louder, than the questions. Being suddenly deaf the injured protesters had no idea that they were actually speaking until what they thought was a whisper filtered into their brains.

The auditory testing equipment had consisted of various implements for determining different levels of response to stimuli but the tuning fork had mysteriously disappeared after only ten minutes. A search of the casualty unit had eventually resulted in finding it in the possession of the woman who'd been sitting on the activated siren. Getting her to relinquish her hold on the tool had necessitated the enlistment of four burly male nurses from the psychiatric ward.

Never before had Cherbourg hospital seen such activity. It was usually just a sleepy dockside town. Ferries from the south coasts of England and Ireland supplemented the fishing fleets and the largest workload came from negligent fishermen. Cherbourg had a love hate relationship with the facility of Cap de la Hague. In one respect the power plant provided considerable employment for the area and the locals rationalised that if the plant wasn't in Normandy, some other part of France would profit from it. The other side of Cherbourg opinion came from the fishing industry. They'd had to abandon their regular fishing grounds and search further afield for their catches. The local fish had started to glow in the dark despite reassurances from Marcel Pouvoir that radioactive emission into the sea was well within EEC guidelines.

It was a local Cherbourg fisherman who'd smuggled Anne Urquist and her cargo of undeveloped film out of France. Pierre Matraque had alerted the French police of her activities as soon as he could catch his breath enough to speak. Even then his old friend and chief of Cherbourg police kept asking to speak to Pierre in person. With a high pitched squeaky voice that trauma to the testicles can cause, Pierre had sounded more like a woman than a big butch hypermacho security guard. Penny would have been impressed, it had taken her years of practice to sound as feminine as she did and Pierre had achieved the same quality of elocution in seconds.

Similar to Karl Erikson, Jacques Corroux, the French fisherman who provided Anne with her escape route, had lost most of his business after the French government had ignored Cap de la Hague's repeated contamination of the local waters. He'd expected to hand down the little trawler to his son, but his son had deserted the maritime family and taken a higher paid job at the nuclear plant. Now at the age of 78 Jacques had outlived his own son, who'd died from cancer a few years earlier. The now retired fisherman and former marine biologist was convinced the radiation from the leaky

power plant had killed his son after an accidental spillage. Pierre Matraque had covered up the accident so well though that when the old man complained to the government about his son's death, he was rewarded with a lawsuit from the plant for slander. He'd lost the trawler, his life's savings and his home. All he had left was a little cabin cruiser, which he now lived in and which was currently heading towards the British Channel Islands.

"Do you know if the Environmental Challenger has docked in Alderney yet?" Anne asked Jacques as he steered the little craft in the direction of the island which was situated only seven miles off the coast of France.

The close proximity of the Cap de la Hague power station to the Channel Islands was an ongoing bone of contention with the Channel Islanders. Being situated in the middle of the English Channel and benefiting from the highest average sunshine in the British Isles, the tourist industry had been booming until a nuclear accident that even Pierre Matraque was unable to cover-up. Only one year after the death of the old fisherman's son Pierre's luck had ran out and a large quantity of nuclear waste was accidentally pumped into the English Channel. The radioactive debris had washed up onto the beaches of the Channel Islands and tourism nosedived accordingly. (For some reason British tourists liked their beaches sunny hot rather than radioactive hot.)

Of all the islands Alderney had been the least affected, as tourism wasn't their strongest point. Guernsey and Jersey had therefore taken the brunt of the decline but in Alderney life just kept rolling on as usual and the pubs stayed full.

"From what I hear, your ship entered Crabby Harbour this morning," Jacques replied. "They're making their presence known in the town as far as I know."

"Why don't you come with us?" Anne asked. "You could leave your boat in Alderney and join the crew of the Environmental Challenger for this mission."

"What use would you have for an old man on a mission like this?"

"Your knowledge of the local waters around the power station would be extremely valuable in our initial confrontation as they leave port, not to mention your considerable scuba diving experience" Anne reasoned. "As Tactical Planning Officer I could argue for your inclusion in this mission. What have you got to lose?"

This was a pretty valid point. All the old man now owned was sailing across the English Channel towards Alderney. He had no reason to return to the little fishing village outside of Cherbourg that had been his home since his retirement from marine biology. For the last few years his only focus in life had been to harass Pierre Matraque as much as possible and the security chief hated the old man with a passion.

"I have to stay here in order to force the French government to close Cap de la Hague permanently. If I don't do it, nobody else will. Most of the locals have accepted their bullshit about the safety of nuclear energy. Somebody has to fight back."

"You can fight them on the Environmental Challenger just as well as on the ground. With us you'd be able to fight back harder." Anne liked this old man and instantly recognised another committed environmentalist.

"But I'm a Frenchman," the old man argued. "Your first mate hates anything French from what I hear."

"Don't worry about Kia, he hates the French all right but only the environmentally unfriendly ones," this was a little bit inaccurate but Anne hoped she could placate Kia with an assurance that all French citizens weren't like the saboteurs of Auckland Harbour.

The small boat passed the northern edge of Alderney and was chugging on down the western coast of the island. Although it was only seven miles from the French coast to Alderney's eastern beaches, the harbour lay on the far side of the island.

"There's the Environmental Challenger in the harbour," the old man reported as the little cabin cruiser passed between the end of the long breakwater and the old wartime fort which guarded the harbour entrance. "She's anchored near the dockside. Let's hope there aren't any secret service agents around to sink this one."

It wasn't long before the small boat was tied up alongside the converted trawler and the old man had accompanied Anne onboard. Kia had acted as expected, instantly accusing the old man of being a secret service spy, but Karl had recognised an old seadog and the two disappeared in the direction of the captain's cabin to discuss old times.