

**- CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR -
JUPITER, POTUS, AND THE SKY**

*5:47 p.m., 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington,
DC 20500, United States
The White House, Basement of the East Wing,
White House Bunker*

Thomasson, two trusted generals, their NCOs chosen from the cream of the crop, a handful of analysts, and a few stewardship staff. The bare minimum to ensure the chain of command, from the launch of a nuclear weapon, a drone targeting operation, or even a ground operation.

All chosen for this very moment, after a slow, trust-based skimming by Thomasson himself.

That's all there is to it.

And all this little world watches the incongruous spectacle on the briefing screens, and the interim President, stiff as a court of law, in his big chair.

This room has served as the command headquarters for the most secret operations conducted by the United States, if not to protect presidents from external or internal threats. Some here



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

present have been there in the past. To follow attacks against foreign countries, targeted assassinations by special forces, bombings... but never, ever, are they found locked up there, around such a huge question mark.

No one knows whether they will witness a live massacre or a rescue operation.

Thomasson has just put the rug down.

And you must see what it's based on: a real do-it-yourself.

On the big main screen, an incongruous image that changes military transmissions at high encrypted speed, of rigour in such a place. Sandwill, poorly lit, dark, in videoconference by Facetime, from an old model iPhone. Impossible to reach the president in the bunker due to the lack of network: Margaret first called the White House with Silvio's phone, and was hung up twice, before ALM gave him the codes of a year-old priority line he had kept in his memory. When Sandwill's voice echoed through the room, there was widespread relief. When the communications technicians managed to establish the video link and adjusted the blackish image until the old Vermont Senator's head was vaguely visible, there were shouts of joy, and some applause.

— Really nice to see you again, Thomasson.

— Archie, ALM, I am infinitely happy to see you both alive, are you all right?

— Well, Mr. ALM chose his moment to have a myocardial heart attack, and... well, he's still breathing a little oxygen, but... he's getting better!

— What, don't tell us he has Covid 21?!

— No, it's just a story about arteries that are now as clean as a new-born, and, well... it's far too long to explain. We are late and that's why we are currently in a clinic.

— But, where are you? Speak freely, we are in the White House Bunker, and I have only let in people I have absolute confidence in. What is this story of enemy fire that Marge talks about in her message?

Surprise on Sandwill's face.

— Well, that's right, that... where are we, exactly, Margaret?



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

We hear a busy mumbling on the other side, Sandwill turns the phone over: slanting image, bluish, lunar reflections, Margaret aiming her rifle through a broken French window, behind an overturned desk riddled with arrows.

Return of Sandwill's head:

— We are, dixit, "at the Tuffeau clinic and all they have to do is search on google maps". But we can do much better!

—That is to say, Archie?

— We received a text message from Mackto Urulala, and, well... she should be able to show you her satellite images as well. We're surrounded, look!

There, Sandwill sticks in front of Silvio's phone, his own phone, into which the billionaire's SMS fell like magic. Thomasson lets out a smirk.

Satellites... Really very good. That's how she knew about the heart attack... Knowing her, she's been watching them for a long time... She didn't tell me anything, didn't reach me... Thomasson, breathe, you're walking on eggshells...

— ...we are under fire from hostile people, who are extremely skilled with bows and arrows, Sandwill continues. We don't know their precise intentions, but... we don't necessarily need precision. From what we've seen in the pictures, there are about 15 of them, and we'll soon run out of ammunition to contain them. Marge has decided to call the "Cavalry", I hope you have that in mind.

Deathly silence in the room.

Everyone knew that tonight would take place a repatriation operation in the greatest secrecy. But not a militarized rescue operation.

— Well, I'll tell you the colour. Absolutely not. The principle of this operation was discretion, and I might as well tell you right away, the cavalry will be French, or will not be. I am waiting for the French to call me back and I will play fair with them. In the meantime, gentlemen, please put me in touch with Urulala right away.

Silence in the hall.

Sometimes staring at the screen, sometimes at the acting president scratching his head with the greatest seriousness in the



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

world, the faces realize at the same time as he does, the enormity of what he has just said.

The communications operator, timidly:

— Mr. Chairman, forgive me, but I... I have no idea how to reach his orbital module.

Thomasson coughs, and stays put.

— Otherwise... you want me to ask... NASA? Then I follow it on Facebook, I'm a big fan, but... it's not very clean, eh?

— Ahem... Sandwill? Can you ask him to call the White House? She seems to have your direct line, doesn't she?

— Why don't you... Oh, yeah, right. I've got the number on the display! But... does she have a network, in space?

Thomasson takes his head in his hands and broods:

— Archie, please, she's watching you by satellite, she's the queen of telecoms, she has her own rockets, so she'd be on the moon she could send you selfies!

*Two minutes later,
Bunker of the white house.*

Joey Macallister, a telecom officer, is red with shame in front of his screen when he is unanimously signaled to do so by everyone in the room.

On the internet browser, he clicks on the little red dot to answer the call. The head of the billionaire finally appears on the screen in a small blue rectangle, in the colors of the very popular instant messaging service, audio, and video, Facebook.

We are obviously on the personal account of the operator, seeing his profile picture drinking a beer, browsing through the "Camacho A-HOLE" banner. Arms folded, the weightless decoration of the capsule, which has become famous in recent weeks, is slowly turning behind her:

— I guess what I see there is the bunker... and I would be happy, one day, to come and teach you the basics of secure emergency networking protocols. Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

No matter when or where, the billionaire has always been able to take up a lot of space.

— ... but between Sandwill calling me on his tele-phone, showing me the live feed with you on the other phone, the feed-back that makes my eardrums pop, the White House operator keeping me waiting, and the mentally ill who are shooting their arrows, there's a moment ago, you have to get moving. Anyway. Thank you to Mr. "Jo-hey 666", for having communicated his name so that we could be called

— Good evening, Mackto... it's wartime, I would say.

— That's just it, Mr. Thomasson. How, and with what, do we get them out of there? Because I have worse things to show you, as you can see.

Jupiter Room

11:49 p.m., Palais de l'Élysée,

55 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris

Official residence of the President of the French Republic,

Mr Marc-Antoine Théron

When it is said that the Ministry of the Interior is just a stone's throw from the Elysée Palace, it is inaccurate. It is 120 meters, or about 150 steps, door to door.

One hundred and fifty steps that Ghislain Poizat, the Minister of the Interior, crossed by running briskly in the icy and dark night of the rue du faubourg Saint-Honoré, without even putting on his coat, accompanied by his director of cabinet, his bodyguards, an officer of the DGGN who was on duty at Place Beauvau, and an officer in charge of communications. Frightened, the minister noticed that a man on duty was tasting a duck breast, standing on a table set up in the middle of the sidewalk. The guard returns a similar astonishment when he notices that one of them, the DGGN guy, is in slippers. The large porch is opened to them: they enter from the left side, and once past the security gates, they are received by a member of the president's strategic cabinet, who signals them to follow them: no time to



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

enjoy the splendour of the sumptuous Elysée Palace, we speak little, we walk fast, we know where we're going.

We go down.

An endless staircase. An armoured door which dates, in the pure style of the vestiges of the cold war. Behind, a corridor: cold, shrivelled on itself, and two soldiers on duty.

Here they are in the room of the "Jupiter Command Post": third time since the beginning of his mandate that the Minister of the Interior goes there, and second time because of the Darwinians. A narrow bunkerized space, with 3 impractical rooms, 70 meters underground. The place was put back in the taste of the day by Valérie Giscard d'Estaing, when he had discovered with amazement that the strategic cabinet that held the launch command post of the French nuclear weapon was poorly hidden in a lounge of the Elysée Palace, within reach of visitors... The former atomic shelter has become a sober, secret, uninviting workspace - unlike the golden salons of the palace, which are always an opportunity for some to show off. On the walls, a few dummy windows diffuse a bluish, neutral, calm light. Stiff faucets, fixed telephones, old-fashioned.

In short, ideal if you want to work there efficiently: the only guarantee of modernity, a large, state-of-the-art electronic command post with communication equipment and large screens. A president sitting at his post, visibly struggling with a big, fixed phone, and in a foreign language at a speed that is beyond comprehension and without an ounce of French accent. Next to him, the two members of his "EMP", the President's Personal Staff. First, his aide-de-camp, the president, with three of them, one from each army, who literally live next to the president, sleeping in a room next door and accompanying him on his travels. The man oversees the nuclear "suitcase" that goes everywhere with him: while there is nothing equivalent in the CP, he has nevertheless taken it down, because "at least we know where it is. The man is busy simplifying communication with the various chiefs of staff of the armies so that General Defrattes, the second man in the EMP, can enter into direct communication with them.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Poizat, moving the room towards his armchair, receives a salute from the PR's chin and asks the young director of the cabinet, who looks even more lonely than usual:

— Why is Marc Antoine speaking in English?

— I don't know. In line with the White House, all we know. A certain "Mac Coy".

With a new chin, the president puts one hand on the microphone:

— Poizat, on the screens, we need visuals on your teams, on the Chambord intervention and the field liaison with your men. The PM will be here in five minutes. I want both of you here, there's some very heavy stuff on the menu.

Neither one nor two. In the room, the two men we need exchange quickly and get to work: the telecom liaison officers, one from the Ministry of the Interior, the other from the Élysée Palace, come out to take up positions in the adjoining room to establish links with Mattei's HQ on Chambord.

Five seconds later,

A stone's throw from the White House Bunker

Mac Coy finishes to exchange with the French president. Alone, next to the Bunker, lost in a large room where a few officers come and go aimlessly. Coming and going...

Like an insane vacuum.

Silence has invaded this large house.

After the surprise and enthusiasm about ALM, nothing more. Soldiers busy "messing up the Atlantic".

It's a strange occupation to pretend to wage war on one's own camp.

The atmosphere that settles in weighs on these legendary walls: it is a great veil of doubt.

An atmosphere of last breath.

The small world of the USA is suspended in an inaccessible, inaudible, closed place. Mac Coy swallows, plays the piano on the tele-phone and transfers the line.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— President Thomasson, I have President Théron on the line.

— Thank you, Mac Coy, put him through.

— Right away. Are you... are you all right? Anything new on ALM?

Bitterness. Worry. And again, the warm voice of Thomasson.

— Oh, yes, it is. I... can't say more, I know your emotion and I imagine your frustration. Thank you, Mac Coy, for being at your post. I need you out there... If we get out of this day... you'll be coming more often to the other side, with me and our future president. We'll even have a drink in that bunker. Come on. Come on. Come on. Put him on.

*Twenty seconds later,
Elysée Palace.*

On one of the screens, a mosaic of miniature images: about ten fixed or static video transmissions from the Château de Chambord, from different angles. This is the same puzzle that Poizat watched five minutes ago from his own ministry, before deciding to come storming in when things turned sour.

Green or dark images. Night vision field views, some fixed, some mobile. A screen called "de Mattei", probably the transmission of camera images from his assault helmet. We can see stone, movement, and what we imagine to be volutes of smoke. The other screens are top views in thermal mode, by the observation microdrones NX 70: we see white and moving silhouettes on black images.

At the base of one of the towers, flames. Destroyed vehicles. And the bad news often going together, the fire that rises, and begins to take on one of the sides of the castle.

Poizat grabs the microphone that is handed to him.

— From Mattei, can you hear me? There is a fire at one of the towers, where are you?



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

A glance at the president, who is speaking in English and who, with his eyes, discovers, frightened, the images of burning vehicles around the moat.

Mattei's reply can be heard by everyone through the radio link broadcast over loudspeakers:

— Very heavy losses for us. We are grouped together at the entrance of the Keep for a final assault and hold the upper galleries. More than half of the enemies have been killed, but the others are inside, and we will have to enter.

— Can you put this fire out?

— With all due respect, the state of the estate matters to me, but less than the lives of my men, Mr. Poizat. It is up to you to mobilize the local firemen, but wait until the housework is done, otherwise you will have more corpses.

— Ok... I...

— Mr. Minister, shall we continue or not?

Intuitively, the few people in the room turn to the president, who, always on the phone saying "Hon hon hon, Yes, I stay on the line", rubs his eyes, blows, looks down... and gives his chin approval.

— De Mattei, go ahead, let go of Poizat, do what it takes to take back the castle.

The voice that takes over is none other than that of his own Dir Cab:

— That's it, I have news from the other side of the Darwinians. There was a massacre on a bridge. A squadron of gendarmery took them in pursuit and is following them with drones.

To which the Minister replied, with regret:

— A gendarmerie squadron "took them in pursuit"? You've got some good ones! Have you seen what is happening at Cham-bord? Good, and where are they going? Send the pictures!

— I'm going to get us a satellite image of the region," said General Defrattes, until then silent, picking up a handset.

After fifteen seconds, on a second screen, the whole Jupiter room contemplates the thermal image of a column of 500 wild savages hurtling down the road with an open tomb. Poizat is stupefied.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— Exactly as when they took Chambord... But in the middle of the night? Fuck, they are going to take the Blois castle! I read a note from the DGSI, they were talking about it!

An unexpected answer comes out of the microphones: muffled and distant voice, scrambled, Poizat realizes that he was already in line with the field.

— Negative. They have just passed Blois and they keep going down, they are on the D952 towards Amboise.

Without even being asked, then appears on the screens a relief map of the region, a red line of one kilo-meter moving slowly, symbolizing the mad race of the Darwinians. The map is covered with indicators, including the average speed: 60 km per hour.

— Who's talking?

— Lieutenant Ngo Stéphanie, gendarmerie.

— Ghislain Poizat, Ministry of the Interior, Lieutenant Ngo, you who are over there, can you go up, I don't know, road-blocks?

— Well... I... They have firearms, vehicles.

— What do you think you can do?

— But... there are hundreds of them... We've seen what they can do to a helicopter... I don't see what can stop them, honestly.

Poizat covers his face with both hands and puts both elbows on the table. Then, staring, lost, General Defrattes, then the man from the DGGN who looks away.

— Just... Did we validate them, our scenarios? Did we do a good job on some stuff if those sickos start up again? Yes? Or are we naked right now?

The man in slippers answers the minister without looking him in the eye:

— Yes, but... well... those weirdoes were only supposed to have penknives and bows, so we only worked on at-tacks... from the supermarket. Once they got hungry and... By the way, maybe that's where they're going!

— Perfect, yippee, let's go for the supermarket, but how do we stop them?



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— Well... we imagined... to use a non-lethal answer... rubber bullets... gas, water lances... It was the instruction that you... well ...

— What, answer, damn it!

— Well... that's the instruction you gave us, since "they're popular", these sick people. No deaths, you said.

Not even the time to let a white man float, the re-marked arrival of Ingrid Robard who suddenly breaks the ambient maelstrom. The Prime Minister is surrounded by two members of her own strategic cabinet. Impeccable in a black suit, the radiant fifty-something, a tall, solid blonde whose smile, always sincere, can be as warm as it is terrifying. Polytechnician, enarch¹ and former national champion swimmer, the former captain of industry in the field of recycling goes all out as usual:

— Well, what's going on? I hear it's burning at Chambord, what about global warming? What the hell are you doing? Ah..., she does, stopping abruptly in front of the screens. Ah shit... It's fucking true! There's a tower burning!

President Theron, with a cloud of smoke overhead, covers the microphone on the phone and says:

— Just two seconds ago... I'm on the landline with the White House, silence, thank you.

*At the same time,
Castle of Chambord,
At the foot of the "Donjon".*

He must have been eight years old at the most.

Pictures of Christmas vacations with the family in the region. While visiting this fantastic place, not far from the family home in Touraine, little Jean Camille remembers having made his father notice that what is called the "Dungeon" at Chambord was nothing like the usual dungeons of castles as they are drawn in books.

And the child that he was, was right.

¹ Famous french schools



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

The heart of Chambord, a jewel of the renaissance, is the antithesis of what medieval fortified towers are: all is elegance through these four walls pierced with exterior passageways and huge mullioned windows, surrounded by the four gigantic towers that make up the corners: the whole re-covered with a roof bristling with chimneys, rectangular turrets and bell towers. Just in front of the keep, there is a large inner courtyard about 20 meters wide: whoever crosses it is just below the inner windows, all as numerous as outside.

Twenty-five years later, he would never have imagined storming here, drowning in the night and tear gas.

De Mattei knows his job: he considered it less dangerous to go outside under cover of smoke than he did in the internal passageways of the castle - perfect for the kind of ambush that just cost him twenty-five of his men.

Come on... do the job, and let's try not to completely destroy this place.

— Portable shield. We'll keep the masks. Team 1, in the main entrance, we clean the first floor. Team 2 exterior stairs North and you take the second floor. Team 3, outside stairs South and you take the second floor. Go.

Three groups of eight men go, each to their entry point.

Ten to twenty seconds to pass the courtyard.

Nothing.

Except the body of a Darwinian in his blood, his face shattered and his foot dangling over a broken ankle.

No arrows. No flames. No quibbles. No enemies. And for their part, no hesitation: when they arrive at their entry points, they rush in, take over the rooms, continuing the radio exchanges:

— PC drones?

— Nothing, no heat signature.

— Snipers?

— ALL CLEAR.

De Mattei, through his night vision goggles, crosses the large hall of the dungeon with his pair, under cover of a shield. At the back in front of them, Leonardo da Vinci's double-revolution staircase.

No barricades.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

No arrows. No movement. On the ground, without knowing it, General de Mattei treads the icy blood of Beagle, the one who founded the colony of the "Darwinians".

Two minutes: that's how long it takes the three teams to secure the various rooms on the respective floors.

— Teams, report.

— Team 2, second floor Clear. We've got a bunch of bodies, but we've entered their "Selector". It's disgusting, they've been dead since a while.

— Team 3, second floor Clear. We too have cold meat, but it's dried boar and deer.

— Team 1 ditto, first floor Clear. PC drones, have you seen any runners?

— Negative.

— Ok.... They're hiding under the attic and the roof; we've got to get up there and dislodge them. Team 1, we're going up the central stairwell. Snipers, search under the roof.

— What do we do, do we summon them to surrender?

— We see once we're there.

And here are eight of the best French elite men in service, who take the superb double-resolution stone staircase.

Step by step, despite the greenish image transmitted by his night vision device, there is something wrong with him. De Mattei, in second position behind the front man, ticks. He patted him on the back.

— Stop. More smoke. I take off my mask, I must see something.

Immediately, his heart rate increases. When he realizes what's happening. It's not the drip sound or the impression of water flowing in that deadly silence, like a stream, that hits him first.

It is the smell.

— Shit... it smells like gasoline, damn, it's everywhere in the staircase! STOP FIRING, DON'T SHOOT! HOLD FIRE!



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

*A few moments before,
On a secure telephone line between the two respective bunkers
of the White House and the Élysée Palace.*

— Well... If you could see what I see on my screen, it would simplify things, President Théron.

With one finger, the young Frenchman switches the conversation to the loudspeaker while answering, slowly, in an English with a deliberately dreadful accent, which everyone here is therefore able to understand. The small committee meeting in the Jupiter room finally realizes the magnitude of the stakes of the second crisis that is unfolding on French soil.

— I just want to be certain that I have understood, Mr. Thomasson. You are telling me that your presidential candidate, Archie Sandwill, and former president ALM, are under siege by assailants, in our country, in France?

— Exactly. They are blocked and surrounded at the Tuffeau clinic, not far from Tours, and some elite American soldiers who are loyal to us are holding them in respect, but... they will soon run out of ammunition.

Neither one nor two, without letting go of the handset or the conversation, Marc Antoine Théron, eyebrows raised, eyes exorbed, fixes his chief of staff and his aide-de-camp, and swirls his index finger brandished and straight as an "i".

The message is clear : "Branle-bas de combat"².

General Defrattes opined. Calm and determined, he picked up a line and whispered into the handset, "Give me the Special Operations Command for the EMP, Defrattes," inaudible under Thomasson's voice, which continued in English:

— ... it is not a matter of merriment, and I am aware of what I am asking, but we need you, urgently. It sounds crazy and it is not, but would you like to speak to Mr. Sandwill in the field? Or Mr. ALM? In visio?

— Of course, I would, but frankly, President Thomasson! Excuse my frankness, but that's nonsense! Why didn't you tell us about your operation beforehand? We are a friendly coun-

² French expression for « fighting commotion »



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

try! You're bumping into me like that, as if I didn't also have a mess to deal with at home right now! And I find out that you have armed men deployed? On French territory? And that they're shooting? You'll admit that it's coffee strong!

— That's... the exact truth. So, excuse my frankness in turn, but in the same way, on June 6, 1944, there were armed men, Americans, who landed overnight on your territory without warning, Mr. Théron. Ten miles of them, including my grandfather, lie at Colleville-sur-mer, in Normandy. We are living in troubled times and it is precisely because you are a friendly country that we thought of France, and the history that links our two nations means that I would not have hidden them anywhere else.

Silence.

In the Jupiter Room, the various occupants see the young president, a hand choking the microphone of the handset, saying half a word to them:

— But for God's sake... He's funny, him!?! But what do you want me to say to such a thing?

He blows, take a shot at him, look at the images from Chambord. The one in the Darwinian column. The videos broadcast from the helmet of General de Mattei or that of his men, tracking the enemy in the galleries of one of the most beautiful pieces of heritage in the country.

A free country.

A freedom that wasn't always there.

— President Thomasson... consider that it is the surprise that makes me bitter. Not the rest of it. I have the utmost respect for Mr. ALM and we know the nightmare that is going on right now in your great country.

— My thanks, and my apologies, Mr. Théron.

— OK. We'll see what we can do. I'll switch the line to one of my telecom operators. Let him talk to his counterparts on your side, and make sure they do their "machine stuff" so that we share a common screen. Yes, we want to see what's going on. See you in a bit.

And the president to switch the line to the communications operators for his instructions, while saying:



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— General Defrattes, tell us we've got a rescue team in the area?

— We have helicopters at Air Force Base 705 in Tours, 20 minutes to get them in the air. But it depends on...

Immediate intervention by Minister Robard:

— Hop hop hop hop, easy general... precisely, you have barbouzes with flame-throwers to put in your helicop- Because you've seen what they do with helicopters! With bows and arrows!

Long sigh. An anger contained in the general, who responds politely with his eyes that it is not to an old monkey that you make faces.

— Madam Prime Minister, that's what was going to happen behind "it depends". I agree with you, this is not a rescue, but an extraction in a hostile presence. So it's the responsibility of the special forces, which as you know, and as you can see on the screen, are already, in part, very busy at this very moment.

— OK General Defrattes," Poizat answers, "it's all right, we're following you, the COS is proposing something?"

— Affirmative. The COS has 40 RAID men from Air Force Base 107 at Villacoublay, mobilized within 20 minutes, transported by the GIH, it takes them 40 minutes by helicopter to arrive in the area, 10 minutes to establish an assault strategy, and another 10 minutes of transport on site in an armored vehicle. They're not going to arrive over the mess like flowers, given what I see on the map, they have to be dropped off discreetly from a distance. One hour twenty.

— Fuck, but that's much too long!

The president flies off the handle of his Prime Minister, noting that his general and his aide-de-camp are as vexed as lice.

— Ingrid, calm down. General Defrattes thank you for these precise answers, but perhaps you had a "point two"?

— Absolutely, if anyone is interested.

— Don't get into it either!

— Good. Look at the map. There are currently in Indre et Loire, three distinct theaters of operations. Up Chambord, it's in progress, and they are Darwinian. In the middle, the cavalcade of other Darwinians, big question mark about their objective and the answer to be given. Yes, those ones, they shot down helicop-



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

ters with arrows and with guns, so read the reports, Mrs. Robard! As for the third one, below... the Tuffeau clinic... as far as we know... nothing tells us that their attackers are Darwinians. CIA, Russian, Chinese why not... I'm sorry, Madam Secretary. But this is a shortcut.

An angel is passing by.

Poizat is thinking. The President looks at the map, doubtful. And the Prime Minister opens her eyes:

— Excuse me, uh... General, but did you take a good look at the red line there? Who's running towards the clinic thing and who's out of Chambord? Of course, they're going there to kill the two Yanks, there's a price on their heads!

Too much is too much. The president slaps his fist on the table:

— THAT'S ENOUGH! Order for God's sake, and in cold blood or I'll send you out to breathe! The video link with the USA is coming, you want us to look like idiots?

*Four minutes later,
Tuffeau Clinic Lobby*

Barricade.

Ambush.

I point my weapon in front of me. Right. Ready. Loaded and armed.

And I wait.

A 9 mm caliber. Polymer gun, a Glock 17, the most classic and reliable. In the distant past when I practiced sport shooting, I think I even shot with it, although this model seems more recent to me.

Two large corridors in front of me: empty, dark, calm. Like those children's bedroom cupboards from which one always wonders if a monster will spring out of the half-open door. I aim. Try to stay concentrated, ignoring the three disarticulated and bloody cadavers that lie on the ground not far in front of me.

One of the women is eviscerated on the ground, her intestines spread all over the place.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

But if concentrating is harder than I thought, it's because of something else: like the feeling that my future is more behind me than in front of me.

I don't know what's going on between them.

There's too much arguing. The speaker phones are spitting out eight different voices.

Sandwill, ALM, Urulala, Thomasson... the tone was courteous until now... From what I understand, they are online, just that, with our president Marc Antoine Théron - president that we have hastened, in mocking good French, to nickname Marc Antoine "T'es-Carré"³. Funny. The president. Now I don't even see that as one of the countless oddities of the evening anymore: what's going on is finally in the order of things.

I'm listening. It's cacophonous, English is chopped up, Aaron Louis Mandala is negotiating the terms of a quick rescue. From what I hear, it sounds like it's going well. For a second, I even dare to let a glimmer of hope dawn, the one that comes to warm the heart and whispers that the light is coming.

Thought for my people. My wife, my children.

Then I hear "Mackto something": the voice of this providential woman and her satellites, who explains having spotted a large column of savage assailants, ready to fall on us.

Images to support it, she says.

And then it gets tense. The French do not agree among themselves; a cacophony comes out of the phones through the loudspeakers. There is a story of a general who "asks to see". Our Prime Minister who asks to "hurry up", in incisive and not very elegant French terms.

Sandwill ticks, he understands our slang very well.

Strange.

In any case, if there are 500 men like what we have outside who are coming at us, in my opinion, we might as well get it over with right away.

I look at my gun. Pensive. No desire to suffer. Maybe I'll have to turn it against me.

Will I have the courage?

No desire to end up in their legendary "Selector".

³ Pun in french "Théron" : "you're circle" / "T'es-Carré" : "you're square"



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Only want one thing, to leave a goodbye message to my wife and kids. I would steal their phone, they owe me that, ALM and Sandwill.

And then the tone rises. A notch higher.

Something happened when ALM turned the screen to Margaret, explaining that this "woman was with Stefania and Silvio, the last bulwark before Camacho's election as head of what's left of the United States.

Obviously, something doesn't feel right.

A burst of voices behind my back.

Margaret.

Again, and again, Margaret. I turn around briefly: she has ripped one of the phones out of ALM's hands and is rushing towards me.

— Frogguy? My dear, your president and your ministers, they are breaking our nuts. Will you talk to them, please?

I stare at ALM, who shrugs his shoulders, but incites me to answer again, with a big smile.

— Margaret... is this a joke?

— Sincerely, I'm cracking up. You're getting us out of here, Frog. Thank you.

And Margaret drops the phone in my hands. Close-up on the screen, the head of the president I voted for in the last presidential election. And in a small corner, on a screen in the background, the face of a man we've often seen in the press lately.

Of course. While we're at it.

Let's talk with the interim President of the United States, Stanley Thomasson.

But of all the things I've experienced today, I think the most hallucinating thing is to be given a dressing-down by my president, when I didn't ask for anything. There's no shortage of salt.

— Good evening, President Marc Antoine Théron, and from what I see on the reports you must be the doctor... Guy Lafaye, right? You know you're wanted? For destroying the hospital in Tours? And killing our military? In cold blood? That's all you're wanted for? What are you, a cardiologist or a mercenary, for God's sake?

Silence.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

I'm painfully swallowing

— I'm...

— Can you explain? Because we're a little lost here. And the lady who talks about my "Nuts" we have formally identified her on the videos of your attack on the CHU of Tours. What's up? Be brief, clear, because a lot depends on what you're going to tell us.

Remembrance.

Do not disassemble.

One day, when I was a young intern, a big boss tried to blame me for a mistake I had only been involved in from a distance. The guy came in confident and rather aggressive. Since I was not responsible, I decided not to let it happen and sent him back to his goals.

I hate injustice. And corticosteroids, definitely, it gets on my nerves.

— Good evening. Yes, I am Guy Lafaye. I'm a cardiologist, and... I know I'm wanted. But I haven't done anything of what you're saying, I'm just a passive spectator, that's all.

— Excuse me? And this woman who accompanies you, "Mar-garet", she killed our men, on our soil, and with your help, can you imagine that I can sit on that?

— Okay, then yes, I'm a mercenary. A health mercenary who at the moment is tearing his ass out, has been treating people from Covid-21 at Santé réunie, do you think, and has given up his little business for the common good, is that in your report?

— Absolutely, it is also written that in your youth, you practiced shooting sports!

— And? I would like to point out that you are a hunter, Mr. President, that does not make you a mercenary. Can we be factual? Can I explain myself?

— I said brief and clear.

— That's fine. I'm a family man who wants to see his kids again and has a gun to his head. I was on duty yesterday. Margaret, Mrs. "Nuts" to take you back, kidnapped me for my cardiological skills, and after being robbed of enough money to treat him at the Tower University Hospital, I was brought here to take care of Mr. ALM who was having a heart attack. Yes, it's a cra-



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

zy story, and... Anyway, I succeeded. I've been working continuously for more than fifteen hours, I'm exhausted, I've been shot with rifles and arrows, I almost burned up, I'm freezing, and yes, I saw our men die before my eyes at the hand of this woman, and I'll never, never get over it! But Mr. President... I did something today. While I was up to my neck in shit and my world collapsed when I learned that I was wanted just that.

— We are listening to you.

Guy... Choose your words carefully. This is the moment.

Might as well just be sincere.

— I've done my job. And our country will be lost in the end if you start not doing yours. Because if you let ALM die here, it's... I mean... nothing makes sense anymore. Shit... what have we been fighting for, for months? If it's about tearing down the walls in one fell swoop? It's our whole world that's going to fall apart if you let this happen! Of course, there have been deaths! We were taken for Darwinians at the CHU of Tours, we were ducked, we had to let ourselves die? Did you see the stakes we're talking about? So, come and get us, quickly.

I have his attention. It only hangs by a thread.

Find something, Guy.

*At the same time, Chambord castle,
On da Vinci's grand staircase,
In radio headsets*

— PC drones? Snipers?

— Still clear, General de Mattei.

— Especially since no one's firing. One shell casing on the ground and we all go up in flames. Team 1, 2 and 3, rifles on the shoulder and pistols on the belt. Take out the combat daggers and bayonets.

The men have understood. We're putting the guns away. Psychologically, we prepare for hand-to-hand combat.

General de Mattei's Team 1 resumes its ascent four by four and joins Team 2 on the second floor. Above, they see the shadows of Team 3 waiting for them.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— They have to go all the way up to the lantern tower that extends the staircase. Go. No neighbourhood, Team 3 go in front we are behind.

And as they finish climbing the stairs, a voice from above shouts in the staircase:

— The Darwinians are fighting like Darwinians! Go up! We are waiting for you!

A wooden door. It is broken down with a water hammer.

Finally, the wood gives way.

The men enter one by one.

When de Mattei crosses it, surprise. Amazement. In incomprehension. In the centre of the room, only one man. Alive. A Darwinian, who seems exhausted. He looks at them, smiling. Wounded, a large scar runs across his face.

All around him, the floor is strewn with bloodied corpses.

Everywhere, petrol cans full of stab wounds are being emptied.

*At the same time,
On the departmental road 952,
In the horde of Darwinians*

— Bettina? Yeah, it's Cricri. How long do you think? Twenty minutes? HaHa... Let's park, circle around... take the clinic by storm. Shoot the shooters and get the old man, then we go home!

*At the same time,
Tuffeau Clinic*

Frowning eyebrows, Marc Antoine Théron is waiting.

He is a statesman. He is waiting for what will establish his decision. Wants to weigh all the arguments.

He wants to understand.

I feel nothing less than fighting for my survival.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

The "struggle for survival"... "Struggle for life" ... well, it seems like I'm becoming a Darw...

Eureka.

I'm catching something next to me. In my field of vision. This thing that both annoys and terrorizes me. I turn the smartphone around, pull a big blow on the rod planted in the armchair, and tear off the object that Margaret hastens to illuminate with a small flashlight.

I have the full attention of President Marc Antoine Théron and Jupiter Hall.

In my hand, an arrow.

On which is engraved the name of the father of the theory of evolution.

— Darwin. Here it is. It is written DARWIN. Those who besiege us and those who rush us. They are the same, Mr. President.

He nods his head.

I almost won.

When I see him turn his face away. He looks as if he's heard something terrible. He suddenly gets up, suddenly grabs his head in both hands and screams in terror. The last time I saw someone do this, it was me.

September 11, 2001.

*A few seconds earlier,
Castle of Chambord,
Under the lantern tower.*

The men circle the lonely man, sitting on bodies in the middle of the large room. At his feet, a tomahawk. A small axe, powerful and deadly. They ask him to stand up, hands on his head.

Sniggering.

— Sorry guys. I want to beat you. I have to.

— Surrender. Stand up.

— No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I have defeated all the others. I have earned the right to beat you. That's



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

all I have left and that's the struggle for survival. We killed each other over who would have the right to beat you. I have earned that right.

De Mattei, keep his legendary calm. One of his men excels at throwing a knife: one move and he makes it fly straight through his heart, but his superior holds him back with one hand.

— None of my men will engage in hand-to-hand combat with an unarmed man alone.

— I said "fight". Not "you" beat, man. All of you.

And he gets up, opening his coat, wide.

Dropping a bucket of embers on the ground.

Jupiter Room

Fear, screams, devastation.

— We are dead!

These will be the last words of Brigadier General Jean Camille de Mattei. On the video, his helmet is no longer transmitting.

It moves on the drones and satellite images.

Black and white.

First, a big bright white flash at the top of the central tower overlooking Chambord. As if the windows had been lit from the inside.

Then the roof that deforms strangely towards the outside swells.

The top of the castle, in its centre, explodes. In cascade, the walls collapse in the moat. The blocks of legendary tufa stone fly all over the lawns. We lose contact with the drones that are blown up by the explosion.

On the satellite view of the area, Chambord is no more. Instead, a gigantic inferno spewing giant flames through the windows of the still standing walls.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Tuffeau Clinic

ALM took the phone back.

On the French side, there is only the image of an empty seat. On the American side, Mackto Urulala has posted new images. You can't see well, but you can clearly guess flames.

After some "Mr. Theron? Mr. Theron" which remain a dead letter, ALM puts down the phone. We keep our positions.

We listen.

A Darwinian arrow comes crashing against a wall, nobody pays attention to it.

After a few seconds, we hear, very clearly, the voice of the young French president, totally devastated.

But at the same time, determined.

— Well, well... Let's burn them. All of them.

Jupiter Room

— Defrattes? What do we have on hand?

Ingrid Robard, in tears:

— It's... but shit, Marc Antoine, it's... but what are we going to say? What are you going to say at home, tomorrow? They are human beings, and...

Mark Antony Theron takes the height. Neither dryly nor candidly, it is naturally that the first words of the Declaration of Human Rights come out of his mouth:

— Men are born free and equal in law, but it is not written that they have the right to become monsters, Ingrid. I want these lunatics to be stopped. Immediately.

Poizat, white as a sheet, says:

— In any case... When they will learn that Cham-bord is destroyed... They're going to go somewhere else; they're going to... I don't know, the castle of Blois. Amboise, maybe they will take Tours, they can take... a whole town.

— That's it. There's no choice. And between you and me, those who don't respect life, no problem, we'll adapt. It's time to



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

give back to Darwin what's in Darwin. Get all these sick people out of here.

Everyone turns to General Defrattes.

Who, with both hands on the table, eyes in the air, contrite, remains dumb as a carp.

White House bunker.

Great white.

In the USA we have already experienced a similar bruise. More dreadful, heavier, more Dantesque... But a bruise in the pulpit of a country is something unique. You are attacking an entire people, and all the people feel it.

Nevertheless, we must move forward. After having respected a time of silence, Thomasson coughs:

— Mr. Théron, believe that we would like to help in the face of this drama. But ... from what we calculate in terms of threat, I think that these savages, there ... the Darwinians will reach the Tuffeau cliff in 18 minutes.

Jupiter Room

— What do you mean, we have nothing?

General Defrattes swallowed painfully:

— They are... fucked. I'm sorry, Mr. President.

— Huh? What the fuck do you mean?!

— The madmen, there, they... will be on them too quickly. We don't have enough manpower... 18 minutes we can't do anything. I'm sorry, sir. I can't deploy men, I can't fire cruise missiles from our ships at sea, it's... way too far. A bombing let's not talk about it, by the time we'd equip planes, we'd arrive in 30 minutes and we'd kill everybody, including ALM.

— So what if we did? Put missiles on them, on your planes!



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— Mr. President, what I'm trying to explain to you is that it takes assembly time to equip fighters with SCALP missiles, you have to take them out of the hangars, put them under the wings... those are made for ground attacks, but once again, it will be too late.

— But... it's not...

The young president is trying to keep all his composure, but you can feel that he is struggling. Prime Minister Robard comes out of the room:

— I don't want to see that, I don't want to see that!

— Just, I can save us two minutes, I think. But that's it, eh.

Everybody turns to the man in the DGGN in slippers:

—... Well yes... I sent the gendarmes of guards in Veu-zain-Sur-Loire to blockade; they're going to drop their vehicles across the road and run away.

— Very good! That's always a good idea, but general, on earth, what do we have? What about our missiles at Taverny? And Albion?

— Nuclear ballistic missiles, that's not possible. We have anti-missile missiles, but they're absolutely not designed to intercept a ground target. We have nothing to attack our own ground, cleanly and precisely, in less than 30 minutes. I'm sorry.

— But, well... What the hell? What about Operational Permanence? They can be in the air in seven minutes, call them, damn it, Defrattes!

— Mr. President, the O.P. is two guard bursts equipped for Air-to-Air interception. They stop and guide planes flying over us! They have two MICAs, small missiles that target aircraft, and again, it doesn't work for the ground. It's not made for! You can barely shoot down a truck! And they have their Nexter gun for in-flight combat, and...

Illumination.

— Ah.... Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. Hang on a second.

This whole little world is hanging from the lips and hands of General Defrattes, who's picking up his phone again.

— Put me through to the Air Force headquarters. Yes, I'm waiting... Thank you. Thank you... Hello? General Gauthier



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Valentin? Hi, it's Defrattes. Oh no, it's not going to... Say, we'll be quick, Highway of Death, Iraq... remember? Yes ? Ok, well, we have the same kind right now, which is driving somewhere in France, but without tanks. Huh? Well, well... Ahem... How to tell you... cars and bicycles. But with guns, anyway. How many guns? About a kilometer long. Your bursts of O.P., like that all of a sudden there, if they take off right away like that, they can do damage in something like that? With the cannon?

Mumbling on the other side of the line, the general makes "hon hors" out of his head.

— Where? Well, it happens towards Blois. Is it base 113 that is on guard at PO tonight? Ah... OK.

He covers the microphone, and says to the President and the First Half-Minister:

— It's ok. Cannon-passing maneuvers, our PO bursts can do something. Seven minutes to take off, 12 minutes flying time to be there. Shall we do the Scramble?

Poizat and Théron, in chorus:

— Of course, we do Scramble!

10 minutes later.

In the air,

Above French soil

Mont-de-Marsan, Lann-Bihoué, Saint-Dizier and Orange. Of the 4 bases that ensure the French PO, today it is Saint-Dizier. Under the two gusts of wind that are flying at 1100 km/hr, France. The aircraft have already left the Aube for the Marne sky, and are about to pass over the Yonne.

From the legendary base 113 in Saint-Dizier, although the pilots of the Operational Permanence only receive their orders once in flight, Lieutenant-Colonel Édeline Coinde and Captain Noémie Coron already knew when they took off that the mission would be anything but ordinary.

Scramble Alpha.

Usually, it is Tango Scramble that resonates within the walls of the guardroom, which means a simple interception of



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

lost aircraft most of the time. "Alpha" is the one that is rarely heard and feared.

The real alert.

The two pilots know they have left for a combat mission.

— Captain Coron at radio control, course held, awaiting objective and instructions.

— Acknowledged. Switch to afterburner, you're too far away.

— Roger that. Let's burn up some fuel, we're going to get out of here in no time, Control?

— Keep your heading, and enough time to do 10 minutes of combat on target on the ground. Authorization not to come back and land at Saint-Dizier, the Tours 705 base is waiting for you if necessary.

All is said.

They go on a ground target and you have to go very fast.

— Roger... we will wake up the region. Go, good evening France!

Violent acceleration while outside, the sonic bang of the sound wall startled thousands of people peacefully asleep. The two pilots crash into their seats by starting their afterburner, which allows them to go from 1200 to more than 1800 km / hours in less than thirty seconds.

Lieutenant-Colonel Coinde says in his helmet:

— Completely unusual as a mission, control, we are not equipped with bombs.

— Control, do you confirm Captain Co-ron's request? Target on the ground?

— Yes, it is confirmed.

— What are we shooting with, and at what?

— I'll put you through to headquarters.

The voice of General Gauthier Valentin, legendary pilot and military doctor, resounds in the helmets

— Captain Coron, Lieutenant-Colonel Coinde, General Gauthier Valentin. Your target is a column of armed and dangerous civilians running down a road in Touraine, near Blois. Coordinates and visuals sent in your helmets. They have just killed about a hundred GIGN men in intervention at Chambord and are rushing towards an objective. No quarters. I know you



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

are under-equipped, but I recommend cannon passes over the target.

— Roger, we'll do what we can.

— We're also sending you coordinates of a target to spare that's right next door. It's a clinic with, barrica-dee in it, some of our guys. No friendly fire, just the road.

— Roger that, sir. Road's straight, keep going Co-ron. Edeline, how do you feel?

— Low altitude fire, speed 220 knots, firing slope 10 degrees from one kilometer from the target.

— OK. Take it easy on the Nexter, we're probably going to be passed several times.

The general is not saying anything, which is tantamount to consent. He announces to them, right away:

— The order is direct presidential, and Mr. Marc Antoine Théron wants to say a word to you himself.

Brief pause.

— Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, this is Marc Antoine Théron, President of the French Republic. Be assured that I am aware of what the country is asking of you. You are preparing to fire on our own soil, but let's not shoot first, I wanted you to know that. Our job is to fight all our enemies. From the outside, as well as from the inside. I order you to fire at will.

2 minutes later,

On the departmental road D952

The Darwinians have finished clearing the road. Three gendarmerie cars and a truck pushed into the Loire by dozens of men.

We tie up on the harnesses.

And one sets out again.

— Cricri, it is Bettina. We cross the Loire again, there is a bridge right there, otherwise we will have to push until Amboise to arrive on the clinic. Attention... It is a small road.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

2 minutes later.

Both pilots feel their blood freezing. Just below them, a little to the right of their aircraft, Chambord passes in a flash: the castle is in flames.

— Target in sight. The column is oblique I think they're going to change course. I make a first go, I fire a burst of 21 shells.

In her helmet equipped with a sighting system, the pilot has a reconstructed colour vision of the terrain. At a speed of 220 knots, a little over 400 km per hour, the first burst passes and approaches the column from behind. She presses the trigger for half a second.

Illuminating the sky with their tracing trajectory, the road, instantaneously, turns into a nameless hell that is covered with small explosions.

The 30 mm shells cause carnage.

Blood. Screams. Falls in chaos. Bicycles leave the road or fall into the Loire, carried away by their tractor vehicles whose drivers were killed instantly. Tympani torn by detonations, men and women cut in half. The Darwinians are first sounded, and some armed men now fire in the air, in vain, on this invisible enemy, which is nothing but a thud of reactors firing in the dark.

The second burst that had passed them attacks from the front and repeats with a salvo of 42 shells that tears the sky and then the ground.

In three minutes and five passes, the column was broken. The Darwinians still alive run and disperse into the wilderness.

— Control, almost dry for firing, I have more than a 21-round burst, there is still a lead group that has broken free. Éde-line, an idea?

— Yes, Captain, got it. I'm widening my auxiliary fuel tank above them, just lock it, and put a MICA missile in it. Always dreaming to see if it could work.

— Amazing! Let's try that.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

*At the same time,
Departmental road D751,
Near Rilly sur Loire*

Panic. Fright. Bettina's driver, in his lead car, drives into the small road parallel to the Loire River. Only the first three vehicles, the fifty or so Darwinians who had crossed the bridge before the fire broke out, are now spinning on the damaged asphalt of this tiny road. Bettina puts her head out of the car and screams:

— Let's go on! Let's keep going! We are more than 1 kilometer away from Sandwill! We drop nothing! People of...

Bettina spots the deafening din of a plane in ap-proximity.

She understands. She opens her door, jumps on the side of the plane, rolls, gets up and plunges into the Loire River just next to it. Just enough time to catch a glimpse of a flash of light before falling into the icy waters.

An explosion sets the sky ablaze.

2,000 liters of burning fuel falls on what was left of the Darwinians.

*Twenty seconds later,
Tuffeau Clinic.*

This is war.

I am afraid.

Afraid to die. Scared that I won't even have time to realize that it's happening.

There have been terrible detonations. You can hear the planes going by. It was far away, and now it's very close. They're getting closer, it's obvious.

I'm rolling in a ball.

And then, all of a sudden, outside the clinic, the parking lot burns up. A line of explosions unleashes an apocalyptic fire, raises the asphalt and ends up in the forest. The noise is staggering.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

ALM, Sandwill, and I throw ourselves to the ground.
The silence that follows and falls is as terrifying as the noise.

I don't know what I am going to see.

After a few seconds, Margaret starts shooting.

— Okay, they're getting away, the crazy ones! Wait, don't waste good ammunition like that. Yeah! Bang! One less nutcase on earth!

Silvio's voice, debonair, as usual.

— Piano, Margaret, piano! Hey, everybody, you've seen what they're saying on my phone, it's a fiesta!

At last.

Here they come.

Satellite images show that our attackers are fleeing. The hunters have made a last pass to rout the Darwinians who were surrounding us, and above all, we see Presidents Théron and Thomasson, slumping into their fau-teuils, and exchanging a salute with their hands.

It is Poizat, dripping with sweat, who announces the good news to us:

— Gentlemen, ladies... two transport helicopters will arrive on you in 20 minutes. Stay safe, but... I think we've won.

