

16. Destabilized!

Major Gil Jones and Suzanne Sebonne left the car that they had been using at an OSA safe house outside of Avignon. Jones showered and changed into civilian clothes, relieved to finally shed his Bishop's robes. Suzanne took a bath and emerged from one of the bedrooms wearing a pretty print dress. The two of them were then spirited away by a chauffeur-driven OSA military staff car that dropped them at the Marseilles airport, from where they were intending to catch a connecting flight to Paris.

They had a little over an hour to kill. Suzanne dragged a reluctant Jones into a busy fish restaurant in the airport concourse that touted its bouillabaisse, intending, before boarding, to make the most of her brief passage through Marseilles. As the waiter, a young boy in a white apron soiled with food stains, carried over a heavy crockery terrine filled with the port city's world famous murky, strong smelling broth, bobbling with fish heads, fish skeletal matter, viscera, and other, hard to identify fish parts, Suzanne noted Jones' distress and was delighted that she finally had the opportunity to witness her worldly companion encountering something beyond his ken.

"Never been to Marseilles before, I gather?" asked Suzanne. "It's even more famous for this soup than for heroin trafficking. Don't look so upset! It won't bite you!"

"Are you sure about that?" asked Jones, spying a fish head, apparently looking back at him, its mouth agape, floating in the healthy portion that she ladled into his bowl.

Jones said that he liked the flavor. But Suzanne didn't think he ever quite became comfortable with the presentation.

"I'm not much of an epicure," confessed Jones, dabbing his mouth with his cotton serviette and taking a drink of sparkling water from his tumbler. "I guess I still pretty much stick

to the kind of food I grew up with. To someone like you, with a background of continental dining, that must seem pretty boring.”

“You make me sound like a graduate of the Cordon Bleu!” laughed Suzanne. “Just because I learned to like bouillabaisse when I was a teenager, doesn’t mean that I’m a sophisticated gourmet. So, tell me,” she added, savoring her soup, “what do you like?”

“I like a lot of things,” answered Jones. “But, mostly, pretty plain things. Not usually things with fancy sauces and unusual ingredients, if you know what I mean,” he added, eyeing his bowl of bouillabaisse. “I like New York cut steaks and lamb chops. I also like venison. And I like fish, all kinds of fish. But just broiled or breaded. And served with the heads removed. Now that’s something I didn’t really grow up with. The Midwest isn’t big on fresh fish! It’s frozen fish sticks, all the way, out there. I learned about fish when I joined the army. And, of course, in Cambridge, where I live now, you can get all the fresh fish you want!”

The hour flew by as they talked, and they found themselves with just enough time to pay the check, grab their bags, and make a dash for the departure gate. Jones had left his arms at the safe house, to save him the necessity of arranging to pass the metal detectors. His OSA credentials gave him the authority to travel at will through the airport check points of most of the countries in the world, without any examination of his person or his baggage. But he preferred to keep a low profile when making a routine trip; which, in this case, meant traveling without weapons and signing out new ones when he arrived in the United States.

The short shuttle run to Paris passed without incident and, before they even had a chance to get settled, they were walking down the concourse to board a scheduled commercial flight to Washington, D.C.

“You might have mentioned,” said Suzanne, settling into her comfortable first class seat by the window, as the plane, having taxied down the runway, was making its light, buoyant leap from the asphalt and into the air, “that we were going to Washington, not New York, as you’d told me originally.”

“But we are going to New York,” Jones answered. “We’re just making a side trip to OSA headquarters in Virginia, first. General Ratwell has been supervising a crash investigation into some materials related to the Baconian rejuvenation process that came into our hands. I want to see what he’s been up to, first hand.”

“All right, Major Jones,” said Suzanne, shaking out her shining black hair and crossing her arms beneath her breasts, “is all this secrecy really necessary? Or do you just enjoy playing the strong, silent type?”

Jones looked at Suzanne with refreshed recollection of why he had found her so hard to resist that night they had parked together in the field outside Avignon. It was not only that she was a voluptuous, young woman. When she was in the kind of puckish mood she was in now, her black eyes sparkled with a cold light that seemed to challenge him—to provoke him to take her and make love to her on the spot!

“It’s a habit,” Jones told her, laughing, “talking as little as possible, and not a bad one! But I can tell you more. You remember that O’Malley was training birds to carry messages to the Palace at Avignon? One of those birds was used to carry a message. That bird and that message were taken back to Virginia for examination. The reason I’m so interested is that the message was sent by the people who stole the Baconian manuscript and the Oxford stem cell research materials.”

“I see,” said Suzanne, pressing the button and reclining in her chair. “Thank you. I hope that wasn’t too difficult.”

“No,” answered Jones, putting his seat back to match hers. “It was almost painless.”

“Nice to be up here together,” she said, dreamily. “Peaceful. All you can hear is that sound of the engines purring. And everything is so gentle and comfortable.” She sat straight up and looked around her, before falling back into her seat again and adding, “We even have almost the whole first class section to ourselves!”

At that moment the flight attendant, a pretty, petite blonde in a red uniform, brought them rolled up, hot, moistened hand cloths and offered them pillows and blankets and drinks and snacks. They turned down everything except a glass of red wine for each of them.

The attendant returned with their ruby colored burgundy in plastic wine glasses and lowered their trays for them, and they adjusted their seats once again, raising them to a very slight incline that was perfect for drinking.

“To saving the world!” said Suzanne, pulling her shapely legs up on her seat, turning her slender body to face Jones, and raising her glass. “Let’s hope we can do it!”

Jones, turning to face her as best he could, touched her glass with his. They drank the toast, peering into each other’s eyes.

“So what did you do,” asked Jones, falling back in his seat, “before you got mixed up with the OSA?”

“I was a high school history teacher,” Suzanne told him. “in a small town, just outside of Paris.”

“Is that so?” said Jones. “I thought your family moved to the United States when you were a teenager?”

“They did,” Suzanne acknowledged. “But, when I grew up, I decided I should go back to France. I’m still not sure why. Well, OK, I do know why! I had some crazy idea I was going to be a painter. But that didn’t last long. So I wound up in what, for me, was the most boring job in the world, in the most boring place in the world. The OSA advertised in the newspapers for candidates—not under their own name, of course! But they ran a cover ad, offering travel, adventure, service to your country, and so on. The thing that caught my eye was that you had to be a U.S. citizen to apply, even though they were advertising in a Paris newspaper. I had double citizenship, because of my mother. So, I thought, why not see what it’s all about?”

Jones knew how selective the OSA screening process was. He took for granted, for example, that Suzanne scored in the upper 1% on tests of general intelligence. What caught his attention, though, was something about Suzanne’s style. Suzanne was just a beginner, but she had signs of what the Italians in the Renaissance called the “sprezzatura,” the easy mastery, of the virtuoso. It was a power displayed by all great artists, to make the most difficult turn look easy, “a moment’s thought,” as Yeats had expressed it. In Jones opinion, there was art in their undercover intelligence work, art that demanded cunning and creativity, insight, courage, and, sometimes, daring and even abandoned flights of imagination.

“You’re cute,” said Jones. “and it clouds my judgment. But I think you have potential.”

“Well, thanks,” answered Suzanne. “I think.”

“You know how,” continued Jones, “when you go out on a job, and you’re in deep cover, you can really get lost? You know what I’m talking about?”

Suzanne had to admit that she didn’t.

“I mean,” Jones explained, “you can’t talk to your headquarters. You’re on your own. Things start to happen fast. And they start to diverge from your plans. No matter how good

your plans, things always start to go wrong in some way! Then you're like a boxer, or a dancer, reacting to another fighter, or to a dancing partner, when you never really know which way he's going to move. What I'm trying to say is—it isn't all logic, it isn't all thinking! Sometimes you just have to act and act fast. Sometimes you even have to kill fast. Only certain people have the temperament for work like that. I say, it's an artistic temperament. And I say, you have it!"

"So, I couldn't make it as a painter," Suzanne said, "but maybe now I'll become a—what?—Zen artist of action," she tapped her temple with her crooked forefinger, "acting from an empty mind?"

"An empty mind?" asked Jones. "Ah, yes! The Zen locution for acting without preconceived notions, prejudices, or ideas of any sort. Well, Eastern mysticism has never been my strongest suit. Maybe you're kidding, but Zen does have some application here. In Zen archery, you raise the bow, draw the bowstring, and shoot, without taking aim. In Zen swordplay, you parry and thrust, without calculating expectations for the interplay. You're supposed to rally your whole mind into its state of highest energy and clarity and then act, in one clean stroke that carries with it the full force of your physical, mental, and emotional insight and power."

"That's what they say," agreed Suzanne. "I went through a phase in college when I was convinced that the Zen masters could show us befuddled Westerners the path to Enlightenment!"

"I wonder why that happens to so many people?" Jones asked, rhetorically. "I mean, flirting with the wisdom of the East when they're young? It's almost like a rite of passage for impressionable, teenage intellectuals, to start affecting Buddhism of one sort or another. Don't you think that's strange?"

"I gather you never went through that stage?" said Suzanne.

“No,” Jones told her. “I’m a practical sort of a guy. You can love it, you can hate it; but the West is the only game in town, as far as I can tell. The nations of the world have only two alternatives: Become like the Western nations or serve the Western nations. That’s it. So, for example, Japan mastered Western forms of government, education, economic and industrial structures, and, as a result, it became a world power—and one to be reckoned with! And that’s exactly what’s happening in China, right now. In contrast, countries like India, or the Middle Eastern kingdoms, or the African states, remain mired in their traditional political, economic, and social forms. And, because of that, they face a future that will be dominated by other powers.”

“So you think Eastern ‘wisdom’ is a waste of time?” asked Suzanne.

“I didn’t say that,” Jones explained. “I’m not smart enough to hand down final judgments on the Buddhist deconstruction of metaphysics, for example. I’m just saying that when undergraduates start meditating and repeating slogans from Buddha’s Diamond Sutra or Heart Sutra, under the misguided impression that they’ve found the high road to a better life, I think they’re making a silly mistake.”

“Well, perhaps it’s just as well for our future association, then,” Suzanne answered, “that I outgrew my interest in Zen, even before I outgrew my enthusiasm for socialism. You have an annoyingly brash way of expressing it, but I basically agree with what you’re saying. The West is the best hope for the world. It’s the only hope for the world! And I think we should be pretty proud of what we’ve done. After thousands of years of almost universal poverty and constant warfare, the West has created countries in which wealth has dramatically increased and been widely distributed—in which, for the first time in history, most people are not poor—and established the Pax Americana, which seems to have abolished major wars for good.”

Pax Americana, “the American peace,” Jones recognized, was a play on Pax Romana, “the Roman peace” that had continued for decades and even hundreds of years, while Rome exercised hegemony—and imposed harmony—across the extensive borders that encompassed what had previously been dozens of sovereign states, often at each other’s throats.

“So, now we have different problems,” Jones commented. “Terrorism is the big, ugly monster of the twenty-first century.”

“Is that what we’re fighting now?” asked Suzanne.

“That’s right,” said Jones. “I’d say these are terrorists of a new species.”

“A new species?” Suzanne echoed.

“I don’t think they’re the old sort of terrorists,” Jones explained, “holed up in caves, camped in jungles, or hiding out in small villages. They’re almost certainly running their operation from major cities, very possibly in the United States. And I’d say they’re well-educated, sophisticated, and well-funded. But, if I had my guess, they have some pretty revolutionary plans. Oddly enough, though, one thing they have in common with many of terrorists of recent decades is that there seems to be a reactionary religious slant to their campaign. And—and this is what really qualifies them as terrorists, of course—they’re perfectly willing to commit murder on a mass scale to achieve their goals!”

Suzanne looked out the window, listening to the engines throbbing.

“Were you ever married, Gil?” she turned suddenly to Jones and asked.

“Me?” said Jones. “No. I’ve never been married.”

The question stirred memories of a day, nearly twenty years ago, when he and Lila Hampton, the girl who was soon to become his fiancée, had been watching the ducks on the pond on her aunt’s little Pennsylvania farm. They must have been almost hypnotized by the

tranquility and enraptured by their shared company; for they were taken by surprise when, looking up, they found the skies filled with dark clouds that spread lightening from one side of the sky to the other and then, abruptly, loosed a steady, warm, heavy shower of August rain over the entire countryside.

They ran for cover to a half-ruined gazebo about fifty feet away, arriving thoroughly soaked and breathing hard. The funny thing was that, almost as soon as they took shelter, the rain had stopped, as suddenly as it had begun, and the sun even shone through the clouds again.

“Just enough to soak us through!” Jones had said, pushing back his wet hair.

Then Jones had looked at Lila. Her yellow hair lay straight and wet to her shoulders, and her face glistened with the sun on the rainwater on her skin and shining in her lucid blue eyes. Her blouse, half unbuttoned, was sopping wet and clinging to her breasts.

It was impossible to resist.

He took her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth.

That kiss had been the beginning of everything.

They fell in love, spent the rest of the summer together on the farm, became engaged, and planned to live together for the rest of their lives. That part of his life seemed strange and alien, now that it was over and had been over for so long. Just before Jones and Lila had become engaged, Jones had joined Special Services. It was more than a job. It gave him an entirely new life. Starting that fall, Jones began going away for weeks at a time. He couldn't stay in touch during these assignments, and he couldn't talk about them after he returned. When he was wounded in a gun fight and nearly killed, Lila couldn't take it any longer. She'd offered him a choice between the Service and their future together.

Jones loved Lila, and he didn't resent being given her ultimatum. Like him, Lila had been brought up in farm country, bred for a quiet life. She had ambitions, it was true, to study architecture, relocate to an Eastern city, and rear a family. But it wasn't fair to leave her at home while he ran off around the world, risking his life. Because he loved her, he couldn't understand why he had decided he had to say good-bye.

"Hello, there, Gil?" said Suzanne, trying to rouse Jones from his reverie of remembrance. "Thinking of someone in particular?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," answered Jones. "The girl who got away, you might say."

"She must have been something special," commented Suzanne.

"She was," Jones agreed. "And we had something special. You know, when everything just 'clicks' with someone? When you feel as if you've always been together, and you can't imagine not being together?"

"I've heard about that," acknowledged Suzanne. "But, so far, it doesn't exactly describe my experiences with the opposite sex!"

"Well, now," said Jones, shaking off his melancholy, "this sounds interesting! I mean, your many exploits, with the opposite sex, as you put it!"

"My many exploits?" Suzanne snapped, swatting his right hand that lay on the arm rest next to her. "I'm actually just an innocent young girl, waiting for a big, strong man to take control of me." She turned to look at him, her eyes wide, leaning slightly toward his face, and licked her lips, "You don't know of any big, strong men in the vicinity, by any chance, do you?"

"You make me feel a little weak," answered Jones, looking back into her eyes. "I'm not sure I qualify."

"I think you just make it," said Suzanne. "And I'm sure you're big enough to qualify!"

“Listen, young lady,” said Jones, leaning over, putting his right hand behind her head, pulling her face against his, and kissing her on the mouth, “you’re starting to destabilize me!” Jones wrapped both arms around her and kissed her again, deeply and for a long time. Then they settled back in their chairs, Jones’ right arm wound tightly around Suzanne’s shoulder.

“I like you when you’re destabilized!” whispered Suzanne, her eyes closed, snuggling closer to Jones.

“You’re a bit of a terrorist yourself, you know,” murmured Jones. “Trying to undermine authority! I am your boss, you know!”

“Yes, sir!” agreed Suzanne. “You are my boss. And I guess you know,” she added, resting her head on his shoulder, then slipping it down to his chest and starting to drift into sleep, “I’m entirely at your disposal!”

Feeling the softness of Suzanne’s cheek and the warmth of her body as she pressed against him, his right arm wrapped around her and holding her close, Jones closed his eyes as well and nestled his head in her fragrant hair, almost forgetting Bacon’s stolen manuscripts, Professor Kinmore’s stolen embryonic stem cell research, the Oxford murders and kidnapping, the messenger dove, the mysterious Cardinal in Avignon, and the sinister implications of a conspiracy revolving around the private use of rejuvenation technology. Such was the magic in a woman’s body, Jones thought, that even the prospect of its enjoyment drives all other concerns, all thoughts, all worries, all problems, no matter how serious they may be, away from the mind. Yet, strong feelings, which so often attended desire, Jones was aware, were awakening in him for Suzanne and, with them, fears. This was a dangerous mission they were on, Jones knew. Had he made the right decision in bringing her along? In risking her life? The thought of her lying dead made it difficult for him to be sure.