

# **Dalmatian Traffick**

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A Hardy Durkin Travel Mystery

**By: Blurette Matthey**

Blue Shutter Publishing  
Dalmatian Traffick  
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Library of Congress control number on file with publisher.

ISBN-13-978-1-941611-10-4

Dedicated to the long-suffering Roma of Europe

Page from Hardy Durkin's Diary



## PROLOGUE

Hardy Durkin is working outside the box of travel outfitting when he heads to the Balkans on a surveillance assignment for the French Foreign Legion under the guise of sailing the Adriatic for some R & R. The mission becomes a rescue operation when he is joined by Colonel Alain Clotiers to find and save a fellow Legionnaire who has gone missing. Hardy becomes entangled in the dark world of sex trafficking, drug smuggling, and illegal arms sales while trying to find the killer of a Roma beauty in *Dalmatian Traffick*.



## CHAPTER 1

When Captain Luc Buvain left the Buza Bar and headed for the heights above Old Town Dubrovnik he knew he was being followed. It didn't bother him. He was a trained killing machine, and confident he could handle the situation. Overly confident, as it turned out.

He realized he was in trouble in Gradic Park when two dark figures in front of him started circling round with what were now two behind him, as well. Buvain fought like a bull when they closed in on him, but he was outnumbered and their combined strength took him down with little effort. A pneumatic inoculation gun shot a narcotic into his body, turning him into a heavy, dead weight.

"Why can't we just kill him and leave him here?" one of his attackers complained. "Carrying him to the van will be a bitch."

"Boss thinks he might be of value," came the reply. "Wants to know who sent him and why."

So Buvain had been manhandled down the hill to the parking lot, tossed in the side of the black Mercedes van with dark-tinted windows, and driven to he didn't know where. When he regained consciousness it had still been in the dark of night. He continued to feign being out of it, so his captors had to manhandle him on the other end of the trip, as well.

"I can't believe this bastard still hasn't come around," the Complainer complained. "How much of that shit did you give him?"

There was no answer for such a question, and none was forthcoming. The four darkly-dressed thugs hauled Buvain across a rough stone walkway. Buvain slit his eyes ever so slightly and saw a vast expanse of stars glimmering overhead in

a velvety night sky. The air was perceptibly colder and minus the salt-tang of the sea air around Dubrovnik.

Buvain was lugged up steps, the thugs struggling and gasping under his weight. Down a long corridor. There was a pause while one of his handlers shoved a heavy-sounding door open with his foot. Then on the unspoken count of three Buvain was heaved, heavily and unceremoniously, into a room with a really hard stone floor. He hit with a thud that took the breath out of him, audibly. The four thugs guffawed at the pain they were able to cause him.

“Sleep tight, you poor bastard,” one of them said, then the door closed with a loud click and a heavy bolt was thrown, securing it from without. Buvain heard their scuffling footsteps recede down the hallway, and he was left alone and in total darkness.

He did a body inventory and concluded he was in decent shape except for bruised ribs and a knot on the back of his head from being thrown onto the unforgiving floor. The point of the injection stung and throbbed. He rose and, with hands stretched in front of him, made his way forward until he reached a stone wall. Turning, he paced cautiously forward until he reached another wall, approximately eight feet away. He found a corner and paced the perpendicular direction to another wall. Also eight feet.

He stumbled over a bucket set in the last corner: a slops bucket. Then he found a narrow bed covered with a coarse wool blanket. Next, he explored the surface of the walls with his hands. The rough stone façade soon had his hands scraped and bleeding, but he found nothing of interest until he examined the wall opposite the bed. He traced the outline of the object, then did it again, to be sure. There was no mistaking the shape of the rough, wooden cross affixed to the wall. Buvain made his way to the bed and stretched out on it, deep in thought. He was imprisoned in a monk’s cell.

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## CHAPTER 2

The gentle swells of the gem-like Adriatic Sea propelled the sixty-foot, high-performance expedition yacht, averaging just over twelve knots, toward the island of Hvar, Croatia. Hardy Durkin, clad only in a 'Durkin Tours' tee shirt, cargo shorts, deck shoes, and sunglasses, stood forward on the bow of *Roland's Quest* on a clear Monday afternoon, enjoying the expanse of sea that stretched in all directions like a dream in blue. The slight sea breeze playfully lifted at his short, chestnut-brown hair. Even in repose his profile captured the strong chin, chiseled mouth, and not-too-prominent nose with a slight bump owing to a break suffered during a swim meet when he was twelve.

Two and a half hours sail from Split, Croatia, the *Quest* was approaching the western tip of Hvar after navigating Splitska Brata, the narrow channel on the west end of Brac's southern side between Brac and Solta islands. Splitska Brata is a busy shipping channel in the Croatian Adriatic, with many of the intra-island ferries plying its waters, so the *Quest* had clung to the shore of Brac as it made its passage, out of the deeper waters where the larger vessels sailed. Rounding the headland of Brac where the channel is narrowest the wind had suddenly begun to head badly so the *Quest* had fired up its four Yanmar turbo diesels to complete the sail on to Hvar.

Dusk was setting in. Hardy scanned the horizon as the sun settled lower on the surface of the sea. His bronzed, muscular, six-foot-four frame relaxed as he rested against the life rails in the bow. Last month, September, he'd been acting as owner and operator of his outfitter business, Durkin Tours, leading a hiking group in the Dolomites. This month, the beginning of the off-season for his tour company, he was sailing the Dalmatian Coast at the request of one Lieutenant-Colonel Alain Clotiers, a commander in the French Foreign Legion stationed at Calvi, Corsica. Alain had phoned Hardy earlier in the hiking season as he was

winding up a trek in the Black Forest, Germany, wanting to know if Hardy would be his 'eyes and ears' in the Adriatic.

Hardy and Clotiers had become close during an end-of-the-season R & R trip Hardy had taken to Corsica two years previously that had been anything but restful and relaxing. In his week on Corsica an attempt had been made on Hardy's life, he'd been kidnapped by Corsican gangsters, learned that his father, Edward Durkin, had been murdered on the island, participated in an illegal arms smuggling interdiction with the French Foreign Legion, solved the mystery of his dad's death, and saved Clotiers from the bullet of a Russian mobster. They'd been close friends ever since. So when Alain had rung Hardy asking him to go on a jaunt to the Adriatic Hardy had readily agreed, and here he was. Aboard a smallish luxury yacht captained by Tado Radić, a Croatian sailor in his mid-thirties, and son of an old friend of Ed Durkin.

At the time, Hardy had no idea what snooping around the Balkans would entail, but he soon found out. Alain Clotiers worked on the Task Force on Organized Crime in the Mediterranean. His area of concentration was the illegal arms that were constantly being smuggled into Europe from the formerly war-torn Balkan states. It was Alain's idea that Hardy could visit some of the ports in the Adriatic that were known contact points in the arms trade without attracting undue attention, always on the lookout for suspected activity or information.

Tado worked as a free-lance sail boat operator out of Split, Croatia. He had lost his father in the unprovoked attack on Dubrovnik in 1991 and, as a result, hated all Serbs, blaming them for his father's death, his anger on a constant slow boil. Though his formal education had stopped after high school, Tado had a natural intelligence and ability to fix all things mechanical and was one hell of a sailor. His slight frame supported a body with muscles strong as cable and he was as nimble as a goat on a boat. He was otherwise a shy man and a person of few words, especially around women. Plus, he wasn't particularly attractive, sporting a wispy beard, rather straggly pony tail, high forehead, and warm brown eyes that missed nothing.

A loud 'Ka-Boom' in the distance ahead forced Hardy's thoughts back to the present. His eyes skimmed swiftly over the sea's surface from left to right and riveted back to an area about three hundred yards away at eleven o'clock. The remains of a small-cabined fishing boat were sinking unceremoniously under the water, leaving debris scattered on the sea's surface in a roughly forty-foot radius. It sank so fast that whatever fire the explosion caused was put out before it had a chance to really ignite.

Tado had also seen the sinking boat and gunned the engines in response, hastening toward the field of wreckage floating on the water. When the *Quest* had covered about a third of the distance Hardy distinguished at least one body on the surface of the sea. He gave a “Man overboard!” shout and, acting as spotter, readied heave lines and life rings while keeping his eyes on the area where he’d seen the floating dead. A hundred yards out from the wreckage Hardy spotted an arm attempt a wave, twice, then nothing. Someone appeared to be clinging to a floating piece of the wreck.

“Tado! There’s someone approximately two hundred feet out, about one o’clock,” Hardy shouted. The *Quest* was equipped with a Jonbuoy Recovery Module for man overboard situations but Hardy didn’t know if the person hanging onto the debris was capable of using it, so he proceeded to use the standard method of rescue.

“Ay!” was the response. Tado turned the helm to put the *Quest* on a close reach to the victim and reduced the boat’s speed. Following Hardy’s verbal directions, Tado maneuvered the craft to within twenty feet of the survivor and Hardy heaved a life ring, which plopped down an arm’s length from the person. She lunged for the life ring and, once inside, Hardy threw out a life line that hit the water directly in front of the ring. When she’d taken the line in both hands Hardy effortlessly hauled in on the line until the young woman in the life ring was alongside the boat.

Even the terror gripping the young woman couldn’t hide the fact that she was a beauty. Hardy pulled her to the stern of the boat where she used the built-in steps and life line to come aboard. She was shivering so badly her teeth chattered against the mug of hot coffee Tado shoved into her hand. Hardy draped an insulated blanket around her thin shoulders and urged her to go below.

“You’d best get out of those wet clothes,” he told her. “I think a hot shower is in order,” he added, leading the way to the forward cabin. She padded obediently after him, leaving small puddles on the floor as she walked. He opened the door to the ensuite bathroom. “Shampoo and soap are in the shower. Here’s a towel. I’ll find something dry for you to put on.” He left her to it, wondered if she understood English, and went to find something for her to wear. Her wet clothes he threw in the *Quest*’s full-size wash machine and turned it on. He smiled, thinking of Clotiers and the luxury of the yacht. He’d expected a primitive sailboat for the expedition and, instead, been astonished by the level of comfort the *Quest* offered. It was the ultimate expedition cruising yacht.

Custom-designed, *Roland's Quest* was equipped with a hydraulic lifting keel so it could sail shallow cruising areas and sheltered harbors. The enclosed pilot house was heated, plus it had an exterior cockpit, hydraulic anchor storage system, and a garage for the dinghy. There were two very comfortable cabins with ensuite bathrooms, a gourmet galley that included a diesel cook top and oven with broiler, a microwave, a deep freezer, an upright twelve-cubic-foot refrigerator, trash compactor, two deep, stainless steel sinks, and Miele washer and dryer. All the dishes, glasses and utensils had custom-fitted storage. The entertainment system was complete with flat-screen TV, DVD/CD/MP3 Player, and separate volume controls throughout the areas of the yacht. There were doubles of all vital electronics: radars, VHF's, running lights, autopilots, GPS's, water pumps, refrigeration compressors ... It was a dream.

But the most unique feature of the *Quest* was its AeroRig sailing system made up of a mast, a main boom, and a foreboom, which allowed the decks of the yacht to stay clear of tackle and shrouds. Essentially self-tacking, the boat was extremely easy to sail, even by one person. Tado could handle the maneuvering of the boat by himself, which gave Hardy the decompression time he needed after his season of trekking with mid-level-and-up professionals who booked with Durkin Tours to hike off the beaten path in fascinating locales, eat great local cuisine, and sleep in a comfy bed at day's end.

Hardy had started Durkin Tours three years earlier after walking away from a short stint in a rabbit-warren job as tech guru for a New Hampshire company specializing in GPS applications. At the time, he was in his final year of Reserve Duty after being stationed with the 66<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Brigade in Wiesbaden, Germany. Proficient in five languages and computer skills, signals intelligence was a good fit for Hardy, and he enjoyed his time stationed in Germany.

The *Quest* made a thorough search of the debris area but found no other survivors. Tado had radioed a Mayday call and, as a result, the Croatian Coast Guard dispatched a patrol boat to the area. The young woman they'd rescued appeared on deck in dry clothes, her shivering abated.

"Što je vaše ime?" Tado said, asking her name in Croatian.

Her dark eyes flashed, briefly, and she looked from Tado to Hardy and back again. Then, eyes lowered, she said softly, "My name is Mirela...Mirela Culjandji."

"You speak English?" Hardy asked, surprise in his voice. It was more a statement than a question. She looked Hardy in the eye and gave one short nod. A look of

pride flitted over her face and was gone, the void in her face closing off any avenue as to her thoughts or emotions. He studied the young woman before him. She appeared to be in her late teens. Long, deep-brown hair, smooth olive complexion, dark, almond-shaped eyes. It was her eyes that held him: they were eyes that reflected pain, poverty, fear, death. But they also issued a challenge.

“So, Mirela,” Hardy began, “where are you from? Where were you going when your boat sank?”

The defiance in her eyes reared its head like a cobra preparing to strike. She said nothing.

Tado cleared his throat as if to speak but Hardy warned him off with his hand. “You’re obviously afraid of something, Mirela. But if you won’t talk to us we can’t help you. We’ll have to turn you over to the authorities in Hvar Town. Would you prefer that?”

She fought with herself, trying to maintain control, but the panic won out. Tears spilled from her eyes. She clenched her small fists against her chest. “Molim vas, ne!” she croaked, her face contorted in fear. Hardy got her message, loud and clear: “I beg you, no!” She cringed like a wounded animal; her helplessness made him ashamed he’d threatened her.

“For God’s sake, Hardy!” Tado scolded.

He apologized. “Mirela, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. You must realize, however, that ... “

“Take me to Montenegro!” she sobbed.

Tado gave a low whistle. “Montenegro?” Hardy repeated. “Is that where you’re from?” He passed her a box of tissues and she dried her eyes and blew her nose.

“Yes,” she nodded. “My family lives in Podgorica.”

“Do they know where you are? Did you run away?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t run away. I was stolen. By my uncle.”

Tado gave a low grunt and kept his eyes on the sea.

“I don’t get it,” Hardy said. “Your uncle stole you? How does that work?”

A pall settled over Mirela's features. She said nothing for several moments, then, "My uncle sells girls. Into sex. He was sending me to Italy to work in a club." She hung her head. The total wretchedness of her situation finally dawned on Hardy.

"My God!" was all he could say. The shock he felt soon turned to anger and he raged, inwardly, against an evil he could only imagine. She was barely more than a child, he thought. What monster could do such a thing? "We should go to the police," Hardy said.

But she shook her head violently. "No! Uncle has many friends in the police on Hvar." She looked at him, her clear eyes pleading. "Please. Take me to Montenegro. My parents are there."

"Where is your uncle?" Tado asked.

The defeat in her gaze was her answer. "Montenegro," she whispered. Tears breached the rims of her eyes, coursing their way down her youthful cheeks.

Hardy's SAT phone rang, startling him. Only Clotiers had the number to his Iridium 9575. "Alain?" he queried when he answered the call.

"Where are you, mon ami?" Clotiers asked.

Something in Clotiers' not-normally brusque manner put Hardy on alert. "About forty minutes from Hvar Town, Alain. Why? Is there a prob ... "

"Buvain has gone missing. He should have reported in twenty-four hours ago."

"That's not a very long time, Alain," Hardy began. "Perhaps ... "

"No, mon ami. You are wrong. For Buvain, a professional soldier, that is a very long time. You must find him, Hardy. This is now your first priority."

Hardy wisely decided not to mention Mirela and her being on board. Short of tossing her overboard, when a mission was at stake, Alain would order them to drop her at the nearest port, in this case, Hvar. "Where are we to look for him, Alain?"

"Buvain's last call came from Dubrovnik, Hardy. He was transmitting from Gradac Park, just north of Stari Grad, and the phone suddenly went dead. We have a drop in the park near the gold fish pond with the lotus flowers." Clotiers gave Hardy precise directions for finding the drop. "If there's no message at the drop you'll have to contact Božo at the Buza Bar in Old Town. Buvain will have checked in with him immediately on arriving in Dubrovnik." There was a pause

on the other end of the line. “Hardy, this is Buvain you’re after. No room for error, mon ami. Keep me informed at all times.” The line went dead.

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## CHAPTER 3

In his mid-thirties, Buvain was five-foot-ten and stocky, with a neck like a bull dog but the disposition of a pit bull. Short, light-brown curly hair. Normally clean-shaven. He exuded a raw intelligence. Buvain was a highly-trained soldier in the areas of intelligence gathering and small-team mobility missions. He was also a small-weapons specialist, including martial arts weapons like the bo, sai, and kama, and wore a fifth-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, but he preferred a good street fight.

Originally from Carcassonne, Buvain was divorced from Celia, his wife of eleven years. They'd had no children and the end of their marriage had come as no surprise to either of them. There'd been no acrimony or blame in the divorce. It had, rather, been like a whirlwind dance that had slowed gradually over the years until it came to a dead stop, much like a carousel winding down at the carnival. Celia worked as a travel agent in Narbonne, and they kept in touch on birthdays and holidays.

Captain Luc Buvain had served with Clotiers in the French Foreign Legion for almost nine years at Camp Rafalli in Corsica, with a stint on mainland France. Unlike Clotiers, who had attended École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, Buvain had slogged his way up through the ranks in the French Foreign Legion. He'd come to Clotiers' attention during Opération Daguet (Desert Storm). As a Caporal-chef, he'd headed an exfiltration team tasked with rescuing personnel left behind in the French ambassador's residence in Kuwait from Iraqi forces that had overrun the compound.

Clotiers recognized the leadership qualities Buvain displayed but, more than that, he recognized the sense of responsibility and loyalty Buvain had for the men under his command. These were qualities Clotiers valued in a soldier, qualities that couldn't be instilled but were a product of one's composite



character. He requested Buvain be re-assigned to his company. Thus began a relationship that over time evolved from one of superior-to-junior officer, to partnership and, eventually, an abiding friendship. It was this intimate perspective that mandated Clotiers would spare no effort in rescuing his comrade-in-arms.

Clotiers had sent Buvain to Dalmatia to investigate the route of illegal weapons being smuggled into Europe. The end of the Bosnian and Kosovo wars had naturally led to an excessive availability of cheap, light weaponry which steadily flooded Europe, Africa, and Asia. Former Yugoslavia became the main source of small arms and light weapons bootlegged into Europe. Secret assembly factories in Eastern Europe, particularly Bulgaria, and smaller workshops in Serbia and Croatia, turned out new weapons from assorted spare parts, recycling old weapons into new.

The armaments were hidden in truck bottoms or the sides of cars and driven into Austria or Germany via Slovenia. A second, southern route, controlled by Montenegrin and Albanian criminal organizations, funneled weapons from the Balkans across the Adriatic into Italy. This was the route Buvain had been directed to probe. His starting point had been Split, Croatia.

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Upon his arrival in Split, Captain Luc Buvain had checked into a room at the Hotel Peristil, located within the walls of Diocletian's Palace. The ancient palace, part of the historic center of Split, once belonged to Roman Emperor Diocletian; it is now a World Heritage Site in Europe. The Peristil is a charming boutique hotel. Some of its rooms have walls that are the original walls of the seventeen hundred-year-old palace. Buvain hadn't chosen the hotel for its amenities. It was rumored that the Peristil was frequently visited by a particular weapons smuggler Buvain hoped to cross paths with as a beginning to unraveling the intentionally tangled web of contraband proliferating in Europe via the Balkans.

It was a five-minute walk to Split's harbor; fifteen minutes to the train station. Buvain always wanted at least two good exit strategies. Satisfied with the room-search tactics he put in place before leaving his room, he decided to cruise through the partially ruined palace to get his bearings.

The palace is an enormous complex of some thirty thousand square meters and was used by Diocletian as his retirement home in the year 305, as well as housing a military garrison. Built of local limestone and marble, today the palace area is Split's Old Town, or Stari Grad, and the site of numerous cafes,

restaurants, shops, and apartments. Close to three thousand people make their home in the palace today.

It was Diocletian's fantasy that he would enter this new home directly from his ship. At the time of his arrival the lower tiers of the palace were naturally under sea water, so that his ship could pass between the marble columns on this level of the complex. The windows in this tier of the palace are located near the ceilings of the rooms, in case the sea level was to rise. Over time, the Adriatic Sea receded, leaving this level of the palace on dry land. The city of Split grew up around the palace.

Buvain strolled toward the labyrinth of pedestrian streets in the palace, passing an assortment of red glasses containing lighted candles arranged in a small semi-circle on the paved stone walk against the palace wall. Bouquets and individual flowers were strewn there, as well. An elderly woman stood next to the arrangement, her gaze fixed on the parapet of the wall, thirty feet up. Something in her eyes caused Buvain to stop a moment. She felt his presence and turned to face him, her eyes moist with tears. "Ona ubila, loša stvar," ("She killed herself, poor thing") she said to his questioning look.

He shrugged, not understanding.

She gave Buvain a derisive look for his ignorance, then cut her hand across her throat. "Suicidio," she tried, in Italian.

That he understood. He nodded, and moved on, wondering who would kill themselves in such a public place and why. He wandered the maze of narrow walking streets, admiring the many different building facades and arches and arched towers connecting them. He turned, suddenly, into a coffee bar and savored a macchiato as he stood half-facing the walkway outside. His pretense at people watching was really to get a look at the person who had been following him since he'd left his hotel.

He didn't have long to wait. A mean-looking, rat-faced scrawny guy wearing greasy black jeans and a well-worn Izod Lacoste polo shirt with the logo so worn it was formless approached the entrance to the coffee bar craning his neck to see inside but trying to look nonchalant while he did so. Buvain pretended to study a pocket map of the palace when he saw a pudgy, unwashed thug approach and speak to Ratface. Two of them ... The realization sent a chill through him. No one, other than Colonel Clotiers and his assistant at Camp Rafalli in Calvi, Corsica, knew Buvain had been sent to the Balkans. This was a bit of a game

changer. He finished his coffee and casually exited the coffee bar, heading deeper into the palace. He was curious to see where this game would end.

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“Why you following me?” Buvain asked, his voice deliberately soft, as he increased the pressure on Ratface’s left arm, which he was steadily twisting behind his back.

After strolling through the palace, over-acting his role as a tourist, Buvain had climbed a few steps off the Peristyle and ducked around a marble column, ostensibly to examine a jade-green granite sphinx over three thousand years old that had been imported from the tomb of Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III. ‘Stolen, more likely,’ Buvain thought. When the two goons following him came rushing the column Buvain had drop-kicked both of them in rapid succession. The fat, pimply-faced thug had been further rendered unconscious, and Buvain had saved Ratface for questioning.

When Ratface refused to answer, Buvain increased the pressure. Beads of sweat popped out on his captive’s weasel-like face and he grimaced in pain but still remained silent. A sudden twist from Buvain and the bone broke loudly. Ratface screamed in agony, his dangling arm a sickening sight. Buvain feigned a move to grab the damaged arm and the damaged gangster shrank back.

“The Albanian .... it was orders from the Albanian,” he said, his voice hoarse with pain. Buvain grabbed Ratface’s lapel with his right hand, pressing the knuckles of his fist against his neck. But the thug wouldn’t give a name. Reaching under the thug’s right arm Buvain grabbed his left lapel and, applying pressure, performed a carotid strangle that caused him to pass out, mercifully, within seconds.

Buvain left both hooligans lying where they dropped, re-tucked his shirt, checked that no one had seen what had happened, and resumed his walk across the Peristyle. He thought about contacting Clotiers but decided to wait until he’d made contact with his source in Dubrovnik. For now, he just wanted some down time and a decent night’s sleep before his early morning flight to Dubrovnik. He wondered if he should have killed his attackers ... he really was a tired old war horse. For now, his main question was, ‘Who the hell was the Albanian?’

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## CHAPTER 4

Alain Clotiers' Legionnaires had the highest esprit de corps of any company in the entire French Foreign Legion. He was a leader among men and among the men he led he was revered and loved. He was a soldier's soldier and always led by example, whether it involved underwater training, full-pack treks, hand-to-hand combat training, or calisthenics. He never turned down a challenge to pit himself against one of his men in a physical bout and though he might not always win, he never really lost.

Clotiers had signed up for a year of infantry training in Montpellier, France, after graduating from the military academy of Saint Cyr. Upon completion of infantry basics he'd decided on paratrooper training and joined the French Foreign Legion's elite 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Parachute Regiment. After Desert Storm came service in Afghanistan, then Bosnia, Chad, Zaire, and Rwanda. He received the Croix de Guerre for time served in Kosovo, spent four years as battle section chief, and was promoted to captain but returned to Camp Rafalli near Calvi, Corsica to command amphibious warfare. Several promotions later, after three years as Foreign Legion General Staff in Aubagne, Clotiers was awarded the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and returned to Calvi as Assistant Regiment Commander. His service record was spotless, and he was held in the highest esteem by his men and fellow officers.

Despite a physique that was chiseled and handsome, Clotiers never married. His family was the soldiers he commanded and served, his loyalty to the Legion unquestioned. His sole responsibility and calling in life was to develop, train, and discipline his troops, and nothing ... NOTHING ... interfered with this duty. He was a warrior, and all five-feet-eleven of his body was finely honed and muscular; his mental prowess acute.

For years he had battled a personal demon of guilt for what he thought was his responsibility for the death of his good friend, Ed Durkin, Hardy's dad, who had been murdered on Alain's watch while in Corsica assisting Alain on a task force for organized crime in the Mediterranean. He had worn the anguish like a painful cloak until Hardy had released him from his torment by making Clotiers realize that he wasn't to blame for his friend's death and he, Clotiers, was finally allowed to forgive himself. The healing balm of mercy had sealed off the chancre that had stolen his peace and Clotiers' admiration for the younger Durkin had grown to a fondness and then a true friendship.

During this same time frame Clotiers had renewed his acquaintance with Ed's widow, Lyvia Durkin, when she'd come to Corsica to care for Hardy in the hospital after he'd thrown himself out of a speeding car being driven by his father's killer on the dangerous coastal road in The Calanches. Lyvia Durkin was one lovely lady, and once Hardy had fully recovered from the near-fatal event a special relationship had developed between her and Alain. Lyvia brought out feelings of tenderness in Clotiers that were totally foreign to him, and somewhat scary for an old bachelor. He thought he did a good job of masking his emotions for Lyvia from himself, and was unaware that Hardy had picked up on Alain's intentions. Hardy had also noticed his mother's blush of pleasure when Alain rang her up on some flimsy pretext or other and was amused that they seemed to be the only two people who didn't know they were attracted to each other.

Clotiers' concern for his captain was not unfounded. The criminal elements running the illegal weapons trade in the Balkans were brutal, soul-less thugs for whom a human life was nothing ... a gnat on the nose to be swatted and terminated without mercy. If Buvain had fallen into their hands his life could easily be forfeit. The thought sickened him.

Almost worse was sending Hardy in after Buvain. Although trained as a soldier Hardy was not battle-hardened. His was more a formal education into the arts of war. Hardy had joined the Vermont National Guard and served during the four years he was attending Middlebury College. While at Middlebury he had trained for the modern pentathlon, excelling in swimming, small-arms, and cross-country running.

During his six months of active duty as a first lieutenant Hardy participated in the annually held military pentathlon sponsored by CIOR, Confédération Interalliée des Officiers de Réserve. The CIOR Military Competition is a team competition consisting of pistol and rifle shooting (both precision and rapid-fire), a 500 m obstacle course consisting of twenty demanding obstacles, a utility swim

course, and a 12-14 km military orientation march utilizing map reading skills, range estimation, grenade throwing, and requiring team work and leadership skills. Established in 1957, it is an internationally recognized competition that focuses on military skills which challenge the physical strength and endurance, as well as leadership abilities of reserve officers on a world-wide playing field. Hardy's team participated and placed in the military pentathlon held in Riga, Latvia in 2007. Hardy took an individual first in the shooting competition and a third in swimming.

Hardy had proven himself to be both courageous and resourceful on several occasions during his brief visit to Corsica, but he wasn't schooled for extended field operations and its attendant dangers and stress. Suddenly, the enormity of his bad decision to send Hardy to find Buvain hit Alain full force. My God! What had he done! If something happened to Hardy he'd never forgive himself! Neither would Lyvia ...

Clotiers grabbed his phone. "Duquesnes," he barked to his ever-vigilant aide. "Clear my schedule for a week starting tomorrow. Pack my bag for a field op ... yes, I said a field op, Duquesnes. And book me a seat on tomorrow's earliest flight into Dubrovnik." That done, he let out a long exhale. "Hold on, Buvain," he breathed. "I'm coming to get you."

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"The fastest route to Dubrovnik would be to sail to Sucuraj on the eastern end of Hvar and take the ferry to the mainland at Drvenik," Tado explained. "The last ferry leaves at 10:00 tonight. It's a thirty-five minute trip. My cousin can meet you at the ferry terminal in Drvenik and drive you to Dubrovnik. You should be there by two AM, at the latest."

"What will you do with the boat?" Hardy asked.

"I'll sail her to Dubrovnik and anchor out in the harbor at Stari Grad," he replied. Hardy nodded. It seemed the best route, given the circumstances.

"What about Mirela?" Hardy asked.

"She'll have to come with me," he replied. "If we take her to Hvar we'll get bogged down for hours answering questions because she has no papers. Days, even."

Hardy saw what Tado said was true, yet he sensed that the longer they kept Mirela with them without contacting the authorities the more involved it would be, in the end. But the urgency of locating Buvain trumped practicalities.

“Let’s do it, Tado,” he agreed.

“We’ll have to motor sail most of the way,” Tado said. “As the night air cools it rushes down the mountain slopes out over the water. Luckily, the weather is still mild for this time of year, but the narrow Hvar Channel acts somewhat like a wind tunnel with katabatic winds. We’d have to zig-zag almost the entire length of the channel under sail.”

“Will we make it to the ferry in time?” Hardy asked.

“Should do, but let’s not waste any time getting there.”

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They’d been underway for over an hour before Mirela joined them in the pilot house, which was enclosed by a surround of double-paned glass. Tado sat behind the wheel but, in truth, the boat almost sailed itself. The night air had cooled, so Tado turned the heat on low to take the chill out of the pilot house. It was comfortable and spacious, trimmed out in light teak and teal-green leather chairs and settees. The table top, inlaid with rosewood, ebony, and maple, could be adjusted to any angle to accommodate dining under sail. Tado’s captain’s chair swiveled for easy watch-keeping while under sail. Speakers in the pilot house carried a sultry Nina Simone tune from a CD loaded on the CD player in the galley. All the amenities on the yacht spoke of a much larger vessel than the sixty-one feet of *Roland’s Quest*.

“Where are we headed?” Mirela asked, tucking her feet up under her legs as she sat on the settee. Tado glanced quickly at Hardy, then back at his panel of instruments and gauges.

“The far end of Hvar,” he told her, “to catch a ferry to the mainland.”

“Am I coming?” she wanted to know. She held her breath, waiting for his response.

“No,” Hardy said. “Just me. You’ll stay on the boat with Tado and sail to Dubrovnik.”

She threw a quick look at Tado, who had put on headphones and was oblivious to their conversation. ‘He doesn’t look like a monster,’ she thought. Aloud, she said, “He’s ... uh ... Tado ... I’ll be OK with him, will I?” She looked Hardy straight in the eye, holding her breath again. She did that a lot, she noticed: held her breath. It was an outward sign of the dread she’d come to live with.

Instantly Hardy knew what she was asking and he sought to allay her fear. “Tado’s a good guy, Mirela,” he assured her. He wanted to reach out and pat her knee in comfort but was afraid his touch would be misunderstood.

“Will I see you again?” she wanted to know. She trusted him; felt safe with him.

“I’m sure you will. I’ll be in Dubrovnik before you get there and when I’m done running errands I’ll head back to the boat.” He added, “Mirela, we’ll have to turn you over to the authorities in Dubrovnik.” She started to protest. “We don’t have a choice. We could be charged with kidnapping, or something worse. Surely you understand.”

She didn’t answer. She leaned back in the deepening shadows, pursing her lips. ‘Oh, well,’ she thought. ‘That’s not for a day or so. I’ll deal with it later. For tonight, at least, I’m safe.’ She fell asleep soon after, stretching out on the cushioned seat. She only sensed the pillow Hardy placed under her head and the blanket he draped over her exhausted body.

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