


Defiance

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Reformation
Lightning



Reformation Lightning

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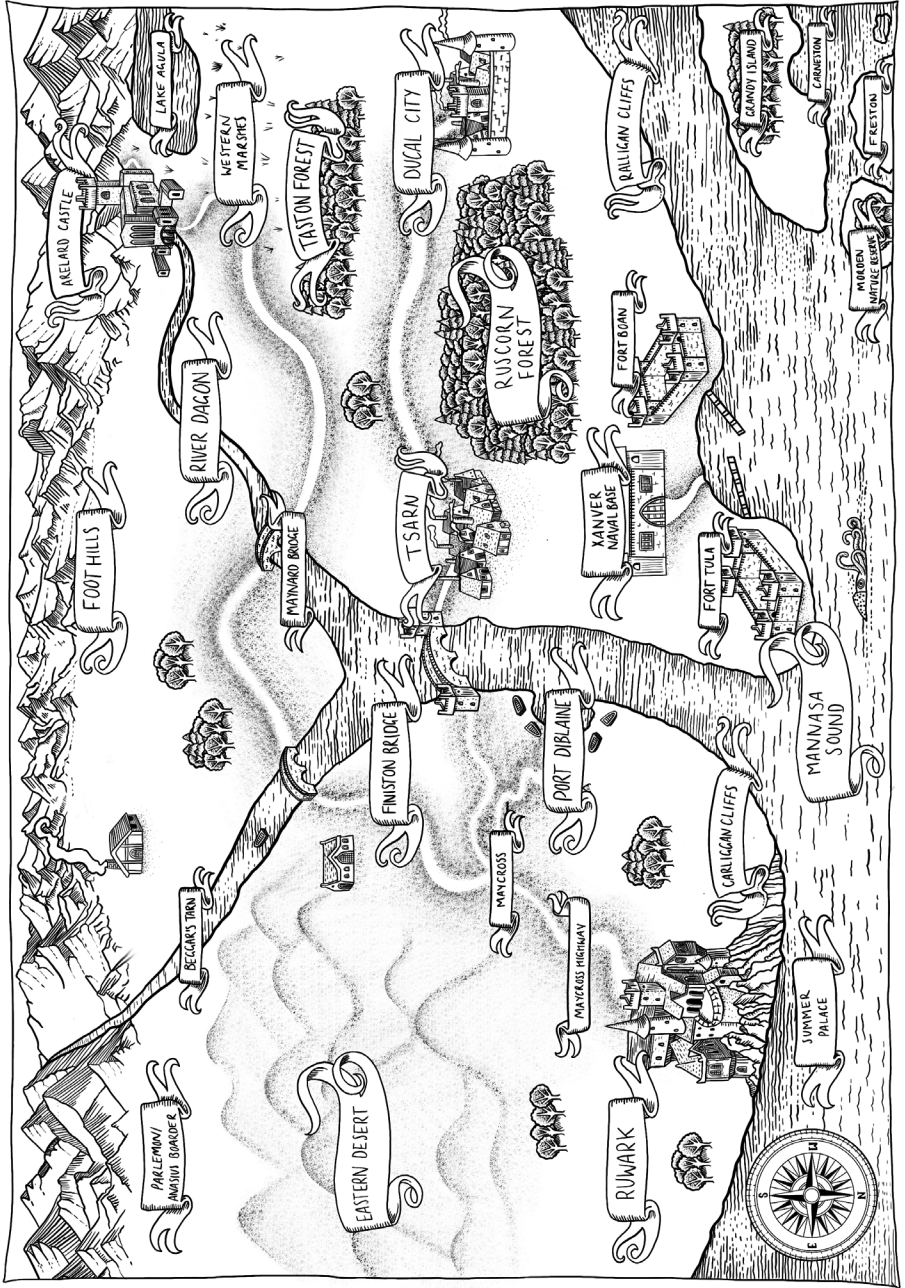
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Onslaught on the Summer Palace


The Summer Palace security guards should have been more suspicious of the man who arrived on foot with his maintenance bag in hand and security pass clipped neatly to his lapel. They should have noticed the slight differences in uniform. They should have insisted he remove his sun-cap and dark glasses. They should have done the usual retinal scan. But they were distracted by the volume of people coming and going in preparation for the spring festival.

So upon noting his uniform and security pass, they waived him through to the tradesman's door at the near end of the Palace wall. He seemed to know exactly where he was going and what he had come to do. The installation was completed in under twenty minutes. Then the maintenance man reappeared and sauntered along to a junction box which was attached to the wall at ground level. He spent a few more minutes there and

then took his leave via the security gates, just like all other maintenance personnel had done before him. It was three hours before the real maintenance guy came to replace one of the light fittings. By then the guards had changed and so, in the middle of the royals' busy and complex preparations for the tournament, no-one noticed that the carefully scheduled maintenance visit had, in fact, occurred twice.


Late that night, the guards concluded their usual four-hourly rotation. At 3am two new guards took over the guard-house, tired but comfortable with the quiet routine of the early-morning shift, they settled into their positions and began to discuss security for the tournament. Neither noticed the slight hiss coming from the skirting.

The new cable fitted inside the guard-house earlier that day appeared to run along the end wall, out of the corner wall, down the outside wall and into the junction box immediately outside. In actual fact, it ran from the corner of the junction box downwards into the soil, through four feet of bedrock and into a siding in one of the tunnels that formed part of the transport system under Anasius. The cable itself was made up of two parts, like two wires together in a plastic sheath. One wire carried sound from a miniature microphone in the guardroom down to an earpiece in the underground siding. The other wire was really a very thin tube which




ran alongside the wire, but ended in the small siding below not in an earpiece, but in a small canister.


Later on, a man, listening through the earpiece, heard the guardroom door close. The guard had just changed. He turned the tap on the gas-canister to the “on” position, giving his friends almost four hours to complete their mission. Pure nitrogen began filtering through the tube. Up in the guardroom, the new guards had their feet up and were surveying the vast array of live-feeds flicking between images from the cameras mounted around and inside the Summer Palace. As the nitrogen filled the room, both yawned, sank into a stupor and then, starved of oxygen, died within minutes. By then, the attack was well under way.



Whilst, rightly, the rebels have been criticised for their actions, one had to admit that they were fiendishly well organised. Shortly after the gas-canister began delivering its contents to the guardroom, three separate groups of men, dressed top-to-toe in black stood at the edge of the shadows beyond the floodlit grass that surrounded the Summer Palace. They were waiting. They were waiting because another of their number had earlier managed to place small charges by the electrical fuse-box, set to detonate at 3.02am.




A moment later, the floodlights flickered and went out briefly before the back-up power kicked in and restored them. But those twenty seconds were all the




men required to sprint across to the palace, throw their grappling hooks and begin a swift ascent to the roof. When the lights were restored, anyone staring at the upper walls for the palace would have seen a few men completing their climb and, along with their ropes, disappearing over the castellations and into the darkness beyond. But no-one was watching. Five minutes later, all twelve men were inside the palace. The royals did not have long to live.

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Harkness never slept well, and the faint clinking sound he heard four feet from his window was enough to wake him and get him out of bed. For a man of his height and weight, he could move with surprisingly little sound. He crossed to the thin, un-curtained panes, and listened intently. There was nothing unusual across the floodlit perimeter, but then he heard it again – a soft clink above his head.



“Daddy!” The voice of his daughter was urgent. “What is it, daddy?”



“Shhh,” Harkness responded. “Go back to sleep. I’m checking everything is okay.” He spoke into her ear so that the sound would not travel further. She lay back on her pillow as he stroked her hair.

He left the door slightly ajar so that the click of the




lock would not waken his wife, grabbed his coat and walked quickly down the corridor to the stairwell. His stockinged feet made no sound on the tiled floor. As he entered the stairwell, he did not notice his nine-year-old daughter emerge from their room barefoot, a dark cardigan thrown over her night-clothes. She was shadowing him almost perfectly, as he had taught her.

He ascended two flights of stairs to the top floor and eased the stairwell door open a fraction. He saw two men retreating down the corridor. They were obviously not security guards, moving at speed and almost silently. He watched with his heart in his mouth. As they reached a bedroom door, a knife appeared. The man disappeared inside for a few moments, and then reappeared, wiping the blade on his black trousers. Harkness had seen all he needed to.





He swung around to descend the stair and found Ella, staring at him in fear. He put his finger to his lips, picked her up as if she were no heavier than a bag of sugar and ran back down a flight of stairs to the floor below. Again, he eased open the stairwell door and scanned the corridor in both directions. All was quiet. He carried Ella to the bedroom door nearest to them and turned the handle softly. The door swung open and they entered. Ella stood just inside the door as her father strode to the bed and clasped his hand over the mouth of the woman who lay there. She awoke with a start and terrified, beginning to



fight, but with one hand over her mouth and his upper body weight on her chest, she had no chance of success.

Prevented from screaming, the nurse stared at him and then relaxed a little as she realised who it was. He gestured for silence and then crossed the room and opened the door to the adjoining room. Inside lay Prince Arlon, nine-years-old and eighth in line to the throne. Again, with a hand firmly clasped on Arlon's mouth, Harkness lifted Arlon bodily from his bed and carried him swiftly back to his nurse. In less than two minutes, Arlon, his nurse, Ella and Harkness were back at the door to the corridor. Harkness peered into the corridor but there was still no movement. He urged all four of them into the stairwell and down three flights of stairs to the servants' kitchen. Somehow his companions had got the message – silence was everything.



Whilst they could hear quiet noises from the ballroom on the other side of the wall, the kitchen was empty, as Harkness had hoped. They came to the fireplace. The fire had long died out, although the coals were still warm. Harkness pressed on a brick inside the fireplace at the back of the chimney. Peculiarly, the coals themselves swung aside to reveal steps which travelled downwards. The children's eyes were wide, but they all moved down the steps as he directed. He stepped down after them, pressed another brick and within moments the warm coals had returned to their original position. The two

adults and two children were now in total darkness.

A moment later, Harkness lit a match. The harsh sound of it broke the silence. They used its light to follow the steps that curved downwards for what seemed like forever. Suddenly, Ella, who was at the front, stopped.


“What is it?” Prince Arlon asked in a whisper. Harkness lit another match.

They were standing in front of a blank wall. Harkness grinned. He began to examine the smooth grey stones. It took three matches before he found what he had been looking for. He removed a black credit-card from his pocket and slipped it between two of the stones at the very bottom of the wall. There was a soft click. He pushed the wall and it swung outwards.



The light from the lamps in the tunnel beyond was almost blinding as the secret door opened. Checking both ways, Harkness led them out into a tunnel. He closed the door behind them and, once again, the door became invisible – just a smooth tunnel wall stretching for miles in both directions. The nurse was sobbing. The children were barefoot and cold. And the journey to safety had only just begun.

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Up in the Summer Palace, two teams of men continued their silent murderous rampage. Another twenty



minutes passed before someone managed to trigger the alarm. The third team had laid charges across the ground floor and were in the process of lighting fuses when the alarm sounded. The intruders made a swift exit. Guards from across Ruwark raced to the scene, but by the time they arrived it was too late. The guards stationed at the palace were all dead. Most of the palace aides were dead or seriously wounded. All members of the royal family had been slaughtered in their beds, and it was not long before the Summer Palace was well and truly alight. For something built predominantly of stone, it was amazing how well it burned, helped on its way by the accelerant the team had spread across the ground floor. Most of the intruders were out of the palace by the time law-enforcement arrived. Only three of the group were caught. The others melted into the darkness and were never apprehended.



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In the tunnel below, Harkness paused for a moment and looked at the three before him. Fear and incomprehension were etched on Ella's face as she noticed the ashen look of Prince Arlon's nurse. Prince Arlon himself, though also bewildered, was grim-faced. His royal training had taught him that one should never display fear. But if he had understood the true horror of what was happening