

Dragon Drill

by Tom Purdom

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Ecrasez l'infame, the king had said with a smile. *Crush the infamous thing*.

Fritz had been echoing Voltaire's famous outcry against the Roman church, of course. But he had obviously chosen the phrase because he thought its associations were appropriate. A dragon was the embodiment of superstition -- a creature from the world of dreams, snorting and rampaging in a time when the disputes of philosophers were argued with wit and mathematics, and the disputes of kings were settled by disciplined masses equipped with muskets and artillery.

It had been, in almost every respect, a typical visit to the court of the most enlightened monarch of the age. The king's blue uniform had been untidy, as always. His hands and the lace on the cuffs of his shirt sleeves had been grimy and inkstained. The grenadiers in the halls had hopped to attention with all their customary smartness. General von Wogenfer had even attended the afternoon concert and listened with some pleasure as Fritz and the court musicians worked their way through one of Quantz's flute concertos. (He was impressed, once again, with Quantz's ability to write a showy, emotional flute part without taxing Frederick's abilities. When all else failed, an ingenious bit of orchestral accompaniment could make the flute solo sound more exciting than it really was.) The king had exchanged bows and French epigrams with a pair of visiting literati. For every minute of the entire morning and afternoon, General von Wogenfer had been surrounded by all the realities that proved he was still immersed in the day to day life of the modern world.

And somewhere in Silesia, a creature out of fairy tales -- a huge, fire-breathing flying monster, just like the dragons in the legends -- was threatening to desolate an entire province if it wasn't offered a genuine Hapsburg princess as a sacrifice.

"It is absurd that such a creature should influence the destiny of a modern state," Fritz said, shaping his French with great care, as if he thought his sentences were being written down. "I have spent most of my reign fighting for Silesia. Am I to lose it because of a superstition? Because of a fantasy from an imaginary world in which single warriors righted wrongs with the strokes of magic swords?"

Von Wogenfer had sat in the king's private study, with his long legs stretched in front of him, and hidden his feelings behind pinches of snuff. Von Wogenfer was a Junker -- with a pedigree that would have cowed a French *duc* -- but he was, like King Frederick himself, a gentleman who belonged, mind and heart, to the great society that was bestowing enlightenment and reason on all Europe. He could calculate the trajectory of an artillery shell, play the harpsichord and the violin with genuine taste, discuss Tacitus and Plutarch like a scholar, and captivate the most demanding of French ladies with sallies delivered in their own language. His coats hung on his tall frame with an elegance that had sometimes misled young officers, who had mistakenly assumed he owed his military prominence to the king's amorous proclivities. Was he supposed to suddenly believe Newton and Voltaire had never existed, and the fantasies of the priests were, after all, an accurate description of the world?

"I have made some attempt to inspect the records," Frederick said. "In 1719, a Hapsburg princess did apparently die for reasons that seem to have been deliberately obscured -- as if she had committed one of the traditional indiscretions. The officer who arrested Costanze Adelaide when she tried to slip across the border insists that she relates her story with the utmost calm. The reports I've received from eyewitnesses in the area include verifications from people who know I would have them hanged if they

deceived me in such a matter."

The first twenty-three years of Frederick's reign had been, for all practical purposes, a struggle for Silesia. In 1740, his soldiers had crossed a border for the first time and seized the province from the young heir to the Hapsburg domains, Maria-Theresa. Between 1740 and 1747, he had fought two wars in defense of his conquest. Between 1756 and 1763, he had fought for it again, in a grinding seven year struggle that had nearly destroyed his house. And all the while, the Hapsburgs had known that this thing came out of the east once every fifty years. Three times in their history a member of their family had saved the province from destruction. Before that, the firebreather had been appeased with the daughters of the local princes and barons.

Frederick flicked his sleeve at the third man in the room -- the plump boy-in-an-officer's-uniform he had introduced as Dietrich Jacob Alsten. "Monsieur Alsten has prepared a memorandum on the characteristics of these creatures, based on the reports that have survived as legends. I am preparing a carriage equipped with sleeping accommodations. You will leave tonight -- after we've shared some refreshment and entertainment. Your detachment will consist of two battalions of infantry, one battalion of grenadiers, several squadrons of hussars and cuirassiers, and whatever artillery we can muster."

The King's sleeve flicked again. "I think you can understand the difficulties we will face if the people of our new province feel they have been rescued by a Hapsburg who offered herself as a sacrifice. You must show them that Prussian discipline -- and Prussian firepower -- are a better defense than the skirts of a Hapsburg princess."

* * *

They had been camping on the little hill for two days when the lone hussar rode toward them with his sword raised above his head -- the agreed-upon signal that the "Polish animal" was drawing near. The major who had the watch shouted the first orders. Drums took up the beat. Infantry trotted to their rows of neatly stacked muskets and began assembling in formation.

Von Wogenfer descended from his carriage at a deliberate, calculated pace. On his left, Princess Costanze Adelaide had already been standing by her own carriage. Two grenadiers grabbed her shoulders as he turned their way. The captain who was in charge of her guard snapped an order and the grenadiers hustled her toward the stake planted halfway down the slope. A bayonet had been lashed to the top of the stake. Just below the bayonet, a small regimental flag quivered in the early summer breeze.

Costanze Adelaide was a small, pleasantly round woman in her late twenties. The two grenadiers were men who had been chosen for their size and fighting ability -- like all the soldiers in the grenadier battalions. Their tall, pointed hats deliberately magnified the effect of their stature. The princess looked like a child between them.

Von Wogenfer lifted his hat and bowed to her back. "Good luck, mademoiselle. My apologies."

The princess halted her guards with a toss of her hands that proved she was, without doubt, a Hapsburg. "I shall pray for your soul, general."

The king would have noted the long hours she spent in churches and dismissed her as a religious fanatic. Von Wogenfer had discovered she was a theologian who had absorbed the most sophisticated instruction the Roman priests could offer. The logic that guided her behavior had been as lucid as a mathematical proof.

He bowed again. "And I shall do my best to keep you alive, your highness."

She stared at him for a long moment. "If that is your primary concern, general, you can save yourself -- and your sovereign -- a great deal of trouble."

His horse appeared at von Wogenfer's side. His body servant handed him a clean pair of white gloves and he systematically inspected both sides of each glove -- as he always did -- before he slipped them over his hands. He didn't place his boot in the stirrup until he was certain every soldier within thirty paces had seen him run his eyes over every detail of the saddle and the leopard skin saddle cloth.

The troops had fallen in and started tramping to their positions. Snare drums were tapping the cadence. The standards of the regiments and the halberds of the sergeants swayed above the bayonets of

the common soldiers. As Frederick had promised, von Wogenfer had been given two battalions of line infantry and one battalion of grenadiers--two thousand foot soldiers altogether.

The two line battalions belonged to a regiment that "faced" its blue Prussian coats with yellow. Their cuffs, their lapels, and the turnbacks on their coat-tails had been dyed with the sunniest yellow the cloth factories could produce. Their hats were the standard three-cornered affairs that topped the heads of the line infantry fielded by every modern army. The grenadiers were dressed in the same blue coats and white waistcoats, but their uniforms were faced with green. The ornate insignias on the front of their hats glittered and flashed as they marched.

Von Wogenfer had drilled the entire detachment relentlessly throughout the last two days. By now it took them less than two minutes to arrange themselves in the battle formation he had chosen.

The stake had been planted in a small hollow his sappers had dug in the hillside. Only the upper half of Costanze Adelaide's body rose above ground level. She arranged herself so she was facing down the hill and Captain Kreutzen accepted a length of rope from a sapper.

A grenadier company marched down the hill as soon as Kreutzen signaled the princess's hands were securely tied. The company flowed around Costanze Adelaide and halted when it was placed so the stake was positioned in the exact middle of the formation. Von Wogenfer could still see the bayonet and the flag, but the princess herself was lost in the forest formed by the shoulders, hats, and muskets of two hundred elite troops.

The grenadier company was the heart of the formation he had worked out with young Alsten, who had acted as his counselor and admiring audience. They were his final defense against the special threat that had preoccupied him from the moment Frederick had dumped this affair on his shoulders. They would be surrounded by the two battalions of line infantry, who would form a protective square around the grenadier company -- as if the line infantry were executing the standard defense against ordinary cavalry.

The entire plan had been diagrammed in pencil on a piece of paper he had stuffed into his left coat pocket. On the diagram, von Wogenfer's own position was marked with a cross near the top of the slope, about seventy-five paces from the square. His cavalry squadrons were supposed to form up on both sides of his position. Directly in front of him, a second company of grenadiers would be posted where he could employ it as a reserve.

Now the mortal, all-too-vulnerable human bodies represented on the sketch were moving into position. The second company of grenadiers was parading into the open ground in front of him. The breastplates of the cuirassiers gleamed in the sun when he glanced to his right.

On his left, the officers of the hussar squadrons lounged in their saddles with the studied insouciance cultivated by light cavalry. Hussars wore one of the most dashing uniforms the military imagination had conceived and these particular specimens belonged to a regiment that adorned itself with one of the more spectacular examples. Crimson plumes rose from their fur caps. Gold frogging and white fur garnished their sky blue jackets.

The commander of the grenadier battalion, Lt. Colonel Basel-Derhof, was riding beside the second grenadier company. His eyes were flicking over every detail of the company's uniforms and deportment. They came to a halt with the snap and precision that were supposed to be one of the distinctive marks of grenadiers and von Wogenfer nodded his approval.

At the bottom of the slope, a stream ran along the edge of a typical stretch of prosperous Silesian farmland. It was a clear, beautifully sunny day -- a morning when bayonets flashed like mirrors.

A horseman fell in on von Wogenfer's left. Von Wogenfer turned his head and his youthful adviser offered him a curt nod.

Von Wogenfer smiled. By nature, young Alsten seemed to be brash -- even bubbly. There had been times during the last few days when he had babbled for an hour straight. Then he would suddenly decide he should be more soldierly and his garrulousness would be replaced by a caricature of military brusqueness.

It was easy to understand why the boy had come to Frederick's attention. Forty years ago, young Frederick had been a flute playing intellectual who was destined to be the leader of an aristocracy that had only one purpose in life: the preservation of a state which possessed no natural defensive boundaries.

His father's brutal attempts to transform Fritz into a soldier had become one of the great scandals of the European courts. When he had tried to escape his father's torments at the age of eighteen, the prince had been imprisoned for a year and forced to watch when his best friend was beheaded.

Alsten was clearly a scholar by nature. He gushed with enthusiasm when he described the wonders he had discovered in libraries and the specimens he had carried home from his sojourns in the mountains. He had been planted, however, in a family in which duty and discipline were the only virtues the father could understand.

"Well, my young friend," von Wogenfer said, "soon you, too, will have a few tales of death and daring you can parade in front of the recruits."

Alsten smiled stiffly. Von Wogenfer noted the flicker of anxiety in his eyes and pointed at the pencil case and writing board the young man had arranged across his saddle horn.

"Make sure you get it all down," von Wogenfer said. "Be ready to give me your best advice the moment I ask for it."

He turned his head to the right, to inspect the cannon he had placed on that flank, and wondered if Alsten would someday realize his commander's brusqueness had been meant as a kindness. The first time von Wogenfer had advanced with his regiment, he had nearly been overwhelmed by fear and confusion. The only thing that had kept him moving was the knowledge he had a specific task. He was there to oversee his platoon, the forty men marching in front of him. If they marched and fired and arrived at their goal, then he had done all anyone asked of him.

As usual, the roads had delayed the equipment he needed the most. His artillery consisted of exactly three pieces -- two six-pounders and a single horse-drawn gun. He had deployed one six-pounder at each end of the cavalry line, so the two gun crews could cover every spot on the hillside. The horse gun had been posted near his own place in the line, where he could transmit his orders to its officer, Captain Hoff, without dispatching a messenger.

The crews of the two six-pounders had lit their portfires -- the slow-burning fuses, attached to long rods, that the gunners would apply to their touch holes when they received the order to fire. Behind each six-pounder, about ten steps behind the trail of the gun carriage, a full company of grenadiers had fallen into formation. Both companies snapped to attention when their captains realized their general was looking them over.

Three young lieutenants were sitting their horses behind him, ready to act as couriers. He gave them a polite, carefully measured nod and they straightened up and did their best to look businesslike.

Alsten coughed discreetly. A stir passed through the ranks. Von Wogenfer looked to the front, knowing what the stir must mean, and saw the thing for the first time.

For a moment, it looked like a large bird that happened to be holding some kind of wiggling, still-living prey suspended from its claws. Then he noted its relationship to the horizon and realized how far away it really was. The shape it appeared to be carrying was its own body, hanging from slowly flapping wings.

He murmured a command and the sergeant standing beside his horse handed him his telescope. By the time the tube had been extended and focused, the creature was so close he had to run the glass along its sides as if he was studying the walls of a fortress.

Sunlight bounced off scales that looked as if they could have been employed as cuirasses. He moved the instrument to the left and the center of an immense red eye filled the field.

He lowered the telescope and watched it approach. In the formation massed around the stake, sergeants were already ordering their men to stand fast. A young grenadier lieutenant looked back at him and he automatically gave the poor fool a frown that returned him to his proper interests.

A shadow swept across the hill. Horses neighed. Voices barked commands. Von Wogenfer passed the telescope to his sergeant and steadied his horse with both hands.

The thing let out a strange, quavering shriek. It turned in a great arc and von Wogenfer felt the first chill of superstitious fear spread through his body.

How could a thing like that fly? Its body was slender and snakelike but it would have filled the inside of most of the larger churches he had visited in his travels. No one had yet unraveled the secrets of the mechanism that held birds aloft, but it was obvious there was no relationship between the size of the

creature's wings and the mass of its anatomy.

He was still living, after all, in a world in which every physical object was ruled by the majestic beauty of Newton's mathematics. The Earth was pulling on that long, writhing body with the same force it exerted on every creature that lived on its surface. If those wings could keep that mass aloft, then clearly he was looking at something that was not subject to natural law...

To Costanze Adelaide, he was engaging in an act of blasphemy. *If this creature is truly evil, she had argued, if it really is a manifestation of some ancient and ungodly Presence -- then it is supposed to be confronted with the power of virtue and unselfish sacrifice. If a thing like this exists, it must have been spawned in some realm beyond the rule of Reason. How can you defeat it with weapons based on the laws of Reason?*

The dragon settled onto the hill about a hundred paces in front of his troops. It pointed its head at the sky -- it could have looked down on every building in Berlin -- and a massive red flare rose toward the clouds.

Sergeants repeated the order to stand fast. Two officers pointed their pistols at the backs of soldiers who had indicated they might be responding to the thing's presence with normal human emotions.

The dragon lowered its head. It focused its huge eyes on the men massed in front of it and von Wogenfer wondered if it was assessing the situation or merely pausing before its instincts told it what it should do next. By now a mob of peasants and merchants would have reacted to its displays by turning their backs and scattering like a flock of sparrows. Instead, it was faced with the same stolid ranks that had stymied the armies of Austria, Russia, and France -- the armies of the Three Harpies, as the king had dubbed Maria Theresa, the Czarina Elizabeth, and Louis XV's meddling mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Was this the first time it had faced disciplined infantry?

The flare had been approximately a hundred paces long and eight paces wide. The creature would probably have to come within seventy-five paces of the line if it wanted to achieve the maximum effect...

He realized his brain was working again and turned to the cannon on his left. The officer was watching him expectantly.

Von Wogenfer lifted his hand and gave the artillery officer a wave that was as casual and offhand as he could make it. If there was one dictum Fritz liked to repeat to the point of boredom, it was the idea that the common soldier should fear his officers more than he feared the enemy. The soldier stood his ground because he knew his lieutenant was standing behind him. The lieutenant stood because he knew his captain and his colonel were standing behind him. And over it all, keeping them all in their places, loomed the gallant, lighthearted, heroically unruffled figure of the General -- who stayed where he was because the king would have him hanged if he didn't.

Screams jerked von Wogenfer's attention back to the front of the formation. The animal had lurched forward and released another flare. Half a dozen blackened bodies were crumpling to the ground. A soldier was falling out of line with his clothes flaming around him. The guttural orders of the sergeants were rising once again. The soldiers on the right and left of the charred bodies were already repeating the terrible ritual that was the infantry's traditional response to artillery fire. Knees high, feet stamping, eyes fixed on their front, they were sidestepping to close the gap.

The gun on the left crashed. The artillery sergeant chanted the first orders of the reloading drill and the rammer shoved his sponge into the barrel. Their officer eyed the fall of the shot.

The dragon turned its head toward the source of smoke and noise. Von Wogenfer pulled out his pocket watch and noted the position of the second hand. Twenty-five seconds after the first shot, the gun thundered for the second tune. The artillery captain had taken a few extra seconds and adjusted his aim.

The animal sank into a crouch. Its wings rose above its spine. It leaped, screaming, and hurled itself at the gun. More German commands rang out. The platoons directly under the dragon's path dropped to one knee with their musket butts braced against the ground and the muzzles pointed at the sky. Their faces stared straight ahead, as if they were standing at attention on the parade ground. Officers barked the command to fire as the dragon passed over their platoons.

Hundreds of muskets cracked. The dragon screamed and veered away from the formation. It banked like a big, awkward bird and settled to earth a few steps from the position it had just left.

Von Wogenfer signaled to the cannon on his right. Both guns fired simultaneously. A long red line appeared on the dragon's side, just in front of its right wing -- the mark of a cannon ball that had raked it like an invisible file.

"It's hit!" Alsten blurted. "We can hurt it! It turned away from the musket fire, too. The musket balls may not penetrate its armor but they must sting! If they can't kill it -- at least they can keep it away. It's even possible they can herd it! If they could drive it... like cows..."

Von Wogenfer waved him to silence. The infantry who had dropped to one knee had already stood up and completed their reloading drill.

The whole concept of attack from the air had given him the feeling he had stepped into a world in which nothing he knew could help him. You could arrange your forces in solid ranks, with every approach blocked by masses of disciplined infantry -- and your enemy could still descend on you, like the sun or the rain, in spite of all your preparations.

Some of the men had looked puzzled when he had made them spend hours dropping to the ground and firing into the air. Now they understood.

* * *

An infantry battalion was a maneuverable concentration of fire power. Its tactics were determined by the limitations of its basic weapon -- the smoothbore, muzzle loading musket. There were soldiers in the world who were trained to use rifled weapons, but they were specialists, and it took them a minute to load and fire each shot. Prussian troops could load and fire three times a minute in the face of the enemy. There was, however, no guarantee that any particular shot would actually hit something. Musket balls could be loaded with such efficiency because they were a hair smaller than the musket barrel. They jiggled ever so slightly as they were propelled toward the muzzle. Air resistance added other inaccuracies. One hundred paces was considered an extreme range. If two battalions exchanged volleys at fifty paces, most of the soldiers in both units would still be standing when the smoke cleared.

Soldiers fought in massed ranks partly because it was an efficient way to move them around the battlefield and partly because it was their primary defense against cavalry. If you tried to oppose horsemen with firearms, your initial volley would topple a few riders -- but the rest would smash into the line while the infantry were still reloading. Only the bayonet could frustrate a charge. Horses halted as soon as they found themselves faced with a hedge of bayonets. But it had to be a hedge -- an unbroken line formed by men standing shoulder to shoulder, two and three ranks deep. If you cut even the smallest hole in that line, if anyone wavered or ran, a few horsemen would slip through, swords would hack at the line from the rear, more cavalry would pour through, the formation would disintegrate, and the impregnable human wall would be transformed into a field of isolated foot soldiers futilely thrusting their bayonets at mounted furies who rode at them from every direction.

The dragons of legend had faced craftsmen -- swordsmen and archers who spent their lives studying the subtleties of their art. This creature was challenging the army of a modern, rationally organized kingdom -- a monarchy in which ordinary, untalented louts could defeat the greatest heroes of antiquity by performing simple, repetitive acts.

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They had decided they would have to think of the animal as a kind of moving fortress. They would have to batter it until something gave way. In the myths, Alsten had noted, it had usually been killed by puncture weapons, such as lances. There was even a legend that the elephant was its natural enemy. It was reasonable to think, therefore, that it might avoid the bayonet. Cannon balls and musket balls might penetrate its armor if they landed on a weak spot, but that would be a matter of luck.

Now, watching the creature stagger under a second hit from a cannon, von Wogenfer wondered if anything that size could be clubbed to death. Could you really hammer at its sides the way you weakened the walls of a fortress, shot by shot?

The dragon crouched and leaped again. This time it swerved to von Wogenfer's right and slowly gained altitude. It banked, like some monstrous hawk, and von Wogenfer heard Alsten gasp.

"It's going to swoop," Alsten murmured.

Von Wogenfer's stomach tightened. He had stood with his men as they watched enemy cannon being trained on their ranks, but this was something else. An enormous mass was falling on them out of the sky, in a long sweep that would carry it directly over the grenadiers stationed around the stake.

He threw back his head and bellowed a command in his native tongue -- a language he used for almost no other purpose. "Grenadiers. Bajonette -- *auf*."

The grenadiers raised their muskets above their heads without dropping to one knee. The thin, high shriek of the predator ripped at the air. Wings beat like thunder as the long, scaly body swept across the grenadier company. Claws reached for the princess through the massed bayonets. Human screams mingled with the noise of the monster. Some of the more enterprising grenadiers rose up on tiptoe and tried to slash at the white underbelly flowing past their points.

The animal was already climbing when it cleared the edge of the formation. The officers in the grenadier company were ordering their men to close ranks. The tall hats bobbed in a familiar pattern as the grenadiers filled in the gaps and let the walking wounded make their way through the formation. The dragon had been reaching for Costanze Adelaide but its claws had struck at some of the men massed around the stake. Somewhere in that blue-coated crowd, a corpse was probably being trampled by feet that were mechanically obeying orders.

Why would the thing want a human female? Did it need some special nutrient? Now its irrational objective was just one more sign he was faced with something that existed outside the laws of nature.

The thing had already executed an arc that carried it far above the farmland in front of the formation. It had gained so much height it looked as if it was roughly the size of a cow -- but who had ever seen a cow equipped with wings? It pointed itself at the front of the formation and fell toward its quarry as if it was sliding down an invisible ramp in the sky.

This time it ignored Costanze Adelaide and attacked the grenadiers themselves. Its great claws reached through the upraised bayonets for the faces and bodies of the men holding them.

Its head was pointed directly at von Wogenfer as it swept across the formation. He was looking at it eye to eye as its feet mangled the troops he had placed in its path. Half the cavalymen on both sides of him were leaning over their horses' heads and stroking their faces.

The long tube of the creature's body slid directly over von Wogenfer's head. The tips of its bloody, dripping claws were just a sword length from the top of his hat. A terrible retching odor permeated the air like a fog.

The corporal holding von Wogenfer's horse grabbed the bridle with both hands and opposed its straining muscles with the full weight of his body. Von Wogenfer ignored the struggle taking place beneath his thighs and concentrated on the scene he was supposed to be controlling.

Grenadiers were falling out of formation with their faces covered with blood. Fragments of blue coats flapped over glimpses of shredded upper bodies. Sergeants were beating the survivors into formation with their halberds. Behind him, the three lieutenants had drawn their swords and turned in their saddles as they followed the dragon's flight.

"Sheathe your swords!" von Wogenfer bellowed. "Keep your eyes on me! I'll tell you where to look!"

He had chosen a small dip near the top of the hill as a parking place for the wounded. The sergeants who had been chosen to deal with the casualties were shepherding the walking wounded up the slope. The men who couldn't walk were being dragged along the ground by their belts -- if they still had belts.

The grenadier company had lost half a dozen men in the first strike, another thirty in the second. From what he could see of the men left in the ranks, at least ten of the wounded were still standing in the formation.

* * *

The thing struck at the center two more times. By the end of the fourth attack, the grenadier company

had lost almost half its men -- including a third of its sergeants and two officers.

Von Wogenfer gestured at Colonel Basel-Derhof while the tail of the monster was still thrashing above his head. "I believe it's time we sent in the reserve company, *mon ami*. If you will give the orders..."

Basel-Derhof spurred his horse forward. His big, unforgettable voice rang across the formations. The grenadiers massed around the princess jerked to attention. They about faced in response to their captain's orders and snapped into a march.

It was one of the most difficult maneuvers an army could perform. A battered, limping unit had to vacate its position at top speed without yielding to fear and turning a retreat into a panic. The infantry forming one face of the square had to open a gap they could pass through. A second unit had to march, without hesitation, into the very place where men had been killed and crippled while it watched.

Von Wogenfer straightened in the saddle as he watched them step through the drill. Their erect heads and vertical muskets would have been an impressive sight if you had watched them execute the maneuver on the parade ground -- but here they were doing it in the face of the enemy... as a thing that killed and slashed climbed into the sky and positioned itself for another descent.

He caught a brief glimpse of Costanze Adelaide as the monster approached the top of its climb. She was leaning forward, with her full weight on the stake, and methodically moving her wrists up and down as she rubbed her bonds against the wood. Then the blue mass closed around her. And the bolt began its fall.

He pulled his snuff box out of his pocket and turned back to Alsten. "Do you see why your father values discipline so much?"

The boy's eyes were locked on the dragon's approach. He looked confused -- as if he had been jolted from a dream -- and von Wogenfer turned away from him without waiting for an answer.

Von Wogenfer had shared many intimacies with his fellow officers, but there was one thought he had never revealed. He had developed an irrational respect for the soldiers he commanded. They were the worst, he knew. They were recruited from the leavings of the civilian population: from the lazy, the criminal, the unemployable. Most of them would be stealing and raping -- or begging in the public squares -- if they hadn't been bludgeoned or connived into putting on uniforms. Half of them would have been running like peasants by now if they hadn't known they were maneuvering under the eyes of officers who would shoot them down before they had finished the first step. But none of that seemed to matter when you saw them execute the kind of maneuver he had just witnessed.

The act sanctified itself. The motivation was irrelevant.

The monster released another scream as it closed with the formation but this time it seemed to him he could detect a different quality in the sound. A hundred shaken men had surrounded the stake when it had finished its last strike. Now two hundred straight, unwounded grenadiers stood there again.

The great claws struck. The long underbelly blocked out the sun for the fourth time and he noted the bloody lines marked by the bayonet points. Here and there he could even see bruises and round, red patches where musket-balls had struck home.

His heart jumped when he realized it was turning away without rising. It landed about a hundred and fifty paces in front of the formation and stared at its adversaries with its wings draped along the ground.

"It's tiring!" Alsten said. "We're wearing it down! We may not be hurting it, but we're wearing it down."

The two guns crashed as soon as the artillery officers realized they had a steady target. A shriek of pain -- or was it rage? -- clawed at the air. The animal twisted on itself, like a dog biting at a flea. It pointed its head at the sky, still screaming, and von Wogenfer stood up in the stirrups and peered at its thrashing body. It had obviously taken a cannon ball on its left side, but it had reacted by turning that side away from him. There was no way he could determine the extent of the damage.

The gunnery sergeants were chanting the gunnery drill on both sides. The dragon lowered its head and stared at the gun on the right -- the gun that had probably fired the shot that had struck home. It stopped thrashing and eased its body around as if it was favoring its left side. Its wings rose above its back.

The grenadier companies posted behind each gun were an important component of von Wogenfer's battle plan. If the dragon attacked either piece, they were supposed to step forward and protect the gun

in the same way the central grenadier company was protecting Costanze Adelaide. The company stationed behind the gun on the left was commanded by one of the best captains in the brigade -- a middle-aged officer who would have been a full colonel if he had possessed the right connections. The company on the right -- the company deployed behind the gun the dragon was eyeing -- was commanded by a young man whose chief claim to preferment seemed to be the fact that he was Colonel Basel-Derhof's grandson. Von Wogenfer had tried to convince Basel-Derhof the grandson should be assigned to his staff. The colonel had insisted the company would be more reliable if it was commanded by "the leader it is accustomed to follow."

Now, as the animal readied itself, von Wogenfer watched the company for some sign the "leader it is accustomed to" had understood the situation. Colonel Basel-Derhof was a stolid, reliable officer, and his grandson seemed to be cut from the same thick, serviceable blue cloth. If you pointed either of them at the enemy and told them to advance, they would keep going as long as they had two men left to command. Unfortunately, the situation called for a company commander who could anticipate the enemy's movements and react without waiting for a direct order....

The dragon leaped. Its wings thrashed downward in a single, powerful stroke. It sailed toward the gun with a gracefulness that would have made von Wogenfer gape in awe if he had been a detached observer.

Basel-Derhof's grandson had been waiting for the gun crew to finish reloading. The thing had already covered half the distance to the gun before he realized it was going to reach its target before the crew could light the touchhole. His startled voice floated across the hillside. His grenadiers pointed their bayonets at the sky and advanced at the quick step.

The gunners threw themselves flat. The animal's claws closed around the wheels of the gun. It struggled upward, like a hawk burdened with an over-sized rabbit. The bottoms of the wheels rose off the ground.

The grenadiers had continued to advance, as ordered. The animal was still struggling to gain altitude when the gun carriage collided with the front ranks.

The men in the first three ranks toppled like ninepins. There was a moment when the entire gun assembly hung over the hats and upraised muskets of the company. Then the barrel slipped out of the carriage. Several hundred pounds of brass fell on the men massed beneath the monster's body.

It was a situation Basel-Derhof's grandson could understand. He screamed an immediate right face. His company changed face without a break in the rhythm of its march and uncovered the men who had been downed by the gun. Broken bodies writhed on the grass. A hatless soldier rose to his knees and held up his arms as if he thought another blow was falling from the sky.

Von Wogenfer raised his eyes from the wreckage. The dragon had lifted itself to church steeple height. It rose a little higher and shrieked as it let the gun carriage fall. It dropped to the ground with another shriek and launched a red flare at the useless mass of splintered wood.

Von Wogenfer gestured at Alsten. "How intelligent should we assume our adversary is, *monsieur savant*? Does it realize it can rove that flank at will, now that it's removed the gun?"

Alsten spread his hands like a Frenchman. "I can't say. So far it's acted like a beast. It launched itself directly at the princess without taking anything else into account. It didn't attack the gun until it was hit. This is probably the first time it's encountered artillery. It may not have realized there was more to the gun than fire. Now that it's been hit... now that it knows the gun is firing missiles..."

The dragon was eyeing the formation over the smoldering remains of the gun carriage. This time it was positioned so von Wogenfer could see the place where the cannonball had struck its side. There were no holes, but it had acquired a large black blotch forward of its rear leg. One of its scales seemed to be dangling from a flap of skin.

If he had been the dragon, he would have eliminated the guns first. Then he would have burned his way through the infantry at his leisure. As Alsten had said, it could have acted like a mindless beast merely because it wasn't familiar with artillery.

Why shouldn't it be intelligent? It was a thing that shouldn't exist at all. Why shouldn't it be as cunning as Fritz himself?

He twisted in the saddle and gestured at the commander of the horse artillery team. "Captain Hoff -- load with canister. Close with the enemy on my order. Maintain contact for as long as humanly possible. Try for a face shot if it gives you the opportunity."

He looked back and jabbed his forefinger at the lieutenant on the right. "Advise Major von Laun his men are to draw their swords. Two squadrons will advance behind me-with Major von Laun in command -- if I signal with my sword at the vertical. He should maintain twenty lengths behind my position. He should be prepared to charge on command."

The dragon rose. It hauled its bruised body through the air and landed a short thirty paces from the men holding the right face of the square -- in a position where it no longer had to fear a blow from a cannon. Its eyes glared down at the ranks standing before it.

Everything had to be timed with care. So far, it had stopped to take in air every time it had breathed fire....

The animal's sides began to heave. It trained its open mouth on a soldier who had become as rigid as a statue. Von Wogenfer turned his head and raised his hat with the best imitation of a courtly gesture he could produce. "Now, Captain Hoff. If you please."

* * *

Mobile, horse-drawn guns were an important part of Frederick's tactical system. Frederick had borrowed the idea from the Russians but it was a concept that suited his talent for surprise and maneuver. A gunner was already sitting on the lead horse in the team that pulled the gun. His spurs bit as soon as Captain Hoff bellowed an order. The gun clattered down the hill with the artillery crew riding beside it.

Fire shot from the dragon's mouth. A red cloud engulfed a dozen human bodies.

Captain Hoff's horses swung into a turn as they approached the dragon's flank. They came to a halt with the muzzle of the gun fifteen paces from its target. The crew leaped from their saddles with the silent, intent speed of men who were performing acts they had executed thousands of times.

The dragon turned its head away from the carnage it had just created. Its eyes studied the artillery crew. The horse gun crashed before it could pull its bulk out of the line of fire. Hundreds of balls smashed into its side at point blank range. Von Wogenfer had already spurred his horse forward and started trotting down the hill. He pointed his sword at the sky without looking back and Major von Laun gave his cuirassiers the appropriate order.

This time there was no doubt the creature was shrieking in pain. It threw its injured flank away from the cannon and von Wogenfer felt his heart bounce when he realized part of its left wing was flopping like a broken limb. Hoff had chosen his target with intelligence. If the thing could no longer attack from the air....

Von Wogenfer spurred his horse into a canter. The sponger was already pushing his rod, with its water-soaked sponge, into the muzzle of the horse gun.

The dragon swung itself around -- how could anything so big move so fast! -- and focused its eyes on the gun. Its sides swelled as it sucked in air.

"Take your time," Captain Hoff was saying. "You wouldn't want the general to think I don't know how to run a gun crew, would you?"

The sponger smiled politely as he concentrated on his drill. Behind his back -- twenty paces from where he was working -- soldiers were sidestepping into the gap created by the dragon's last flame. Charred hulks were lying on the ground. Screaming, pain-maddened men were rolling on the grass.

Von Wogenfer halted his mount near the left wheel of the horse gun -- at a point that would put him well within reach of the flame if the dragon aimed directly at the gunners. He tipped his hat to Captain Hoff and eyed the positions of the crew as if he was making sure their wigs were properly powdered.

Von Wogenfer had never fully understood the theory that explained the mysteries of combustion. He had always felt, in fact, that there was something fundamentally confusing about the phlogiston hypothesis attributed to Herr Schleier. Still, if the theory was correct, it would mean there was some logic to the long, slow breaths the monster was inhaling as it prepared itself for its next flare. If its body contained a source

of phlogiston, then it was possible it was mixing the phlogiston with a proper quantity of air. They were, in a sense, engaged in a scientific experiment. Could a fire breather prepare a mouthful of flame before a Prussian gun crew could load and fire a horse gun?

The sponger pulled his rod out of the muzzle and stood to attention. If there was one job in the army that had to be done properly, it was the sponging of a cannon. A single grain of smoldering waste could set off the next load of powder while it was still being rammed into place.

A gunner stepped up to the muzzle and dumped a pre-packaged sack of powder down the barrel. A second gunner followed with the canvas tube that contained several pounds of tightly packed shot. The sponger reversed his rod and pushed everything firmly into place with the ram end.

Captain Hoff had been watching the monster's head as his men worked. The creature was crouching about twenty paces from the muzzle of the gun. Its neck was bent in a curve -- like a striking snake. Its head was poised at about the height three good grenadiers might achieve, if they stood on each others' shoulders.

"Two degrees below maximum elevation," Captain Hoff ordered. "We'll go for the head. Don't fire until I give the command."

Von Wogenfer dribbled a line of snuff on his sleeve. It was the quietest battlefield he had ever fought on. He could even hear the clinking of the minor gear carried by the cavalry who were poised twenty paces behind him. The only sounds of any importance were the cries of the wounded and the huge sighs pouring down the dragon's throat as it sucked in more air.

He had posted himself beside the gun because he had thought his presence would help Captain Hoff steady his men. Now, watching them work, he knew they would have run through their drill if their general had been a league away. The only sign of anxiety was the way the eyes of the gun crew kept sliding toward the thing looming over them.

The dragon's sides stopped moving. The tip of its tongue curled into a trough and trained itself on the gun...

"FIRE!"

There were times in battle when all your sensations seemed to be altered by the emotions that were battering at your reason. This time the bark of the command sounded louder than the roar of the cannon.

The flame shooting out of the animal's mouth painted everything around him with a red glow. There was a frightening, vivid moment when the gunners seemed to be working in the light and heat of a blacksmith's furnace. A huge shriek tore at his ears.

The moment passed. He raised his head and realized the flame had billowed over him. The dragon was backing away with its muzzle pointed upward -- as if it had flinched when the gun had fired. Captain Hoff was already cracking orders. The sponger was stepping up to the muzzle.

He glanced back and verified that Major von Laun and his cuirassiers were unharmed. The major was a solid, decent man -- a *bonhomme* in the best sense of the word -- and von Wogenfer thought he saw a flash of sympathy in his eyes.

The animal had lowered its head. Its left eye was coated with blood. Streaks and patches of blood covered most of the left side of its face. It twisted its head to one side and glared at the gun with its right eye.

"Good shooting, Captain Hoff," von Wogenfer said. "Let's see how he likes another dose."

He turned in the saddle and cupped his mouth with his hands. "Major von Laun. If you'll be good enough to charge this thing. Keep it occupied."

Normally a general coordinated his troops by dispatching messages to his subordinate commanders. It was a ponderous system, but the enemy commander operated under the same limitation. Von Wogenfer's discussions with Alsten had made it clear he couldn't deal with this assignment by commanding through couriers. His enemy might not be intelligent but its "lines of communication" ran from its brain to the rest of its body. The fact that he had never fought such a thing had to be taken into account, too. He would have to make up some of his tactics on the spot. Every officer in the brigade had been advised, therefore, that he should be prepared to take direct orders from the general himself.

The animal still hadn't used one of its most formidable weapons -- its massive bulk. It might be dazed

and half blinded, but it could destroy the horse gun merely by blundering forward before the crew could fire another round. Should he be prudent and order the gun to withdraw? Or should he try to pin the thing down and get in another shot?

Later -- if he lived -- he would be able to explain his reasoning at length. He could probably fill three sheets of paper with a description of all the elements of the situation he was taking into account. Now he merely knew what the elements were. Now, his left hand was holding his sword and pointing it at the infantry platoons that were facing the creature's flank.

"By platoons -- fire!"

It was an order they all understood -- a call for the relentless rolling volleys of trained Prussian infantry. In the platoon closest to him, the men in the front line dropped to one knee and trained their muskets on the dragons flank. The second line crouched and brought their muskets to their shoulders. The third line remained standing and leveled their weapons over the hats of the men in the second line. The platoon lieutenant shouted the order to fire, the muskets crashed, and the next platoon in the line fired as the men in the first platoon started reloading. By the time the platoon in front of the tail had fired, the first platoon had finished loading and assumed the firing position. A mist of white smoke covered the animal's side. Von Wogenfer saw a soldier fall out of line and realized he had been hit by a ball that had ricocheted off the dragon's hide.

Von Laun had led his cuirassiers in a sweep around the gun and swung them into a knee-to-knee onslaught on the animal's other flank. Their swords were extended stiffly in front of them, in the regulation position for a charge. They were charging a solid wall, not a mass of men, but they came on as if they thought their horses could drive through the dragon's side in the same way they might ride through the flank of an infantry regiment.

The dragon screamed. Its head swung from side to side as it tried to understand what was happening. A hot musket ball smoked in the grass two steps from the front left hoof of von Wogenfer's horse. On his right, Captain Hoff was once again directing the elevation of the gun....

* * *

"*Ecrasez l'infame*," Frederick said. "You have fulfilled your orders with commendable thoroughness, gentlemen. I hope your report on the creature's anatomical peculiarities won't fill more than six volumes, my young *philosophe*. Did the Hapsburg woman have anything interesting to say when she saw the results of your labors?"

"I'll prepare a summary just for you," Alsten blurted. "It really is an anomaly. When you calculate the nourishment a creature that size should consume in a single day, it becomes obvious it could gobble up the resources of a province in six months. Yet no one sees it for fifty years at a stretch. And when it does make an appearance -- it vanishes as soon as it's presented with a sacrifice that serves no utilitarian function. I told the princess that and she said it wasn't *supposed* to make sense -- that it was a creature out of myth."

Von Wogenfer turned to a servant who was standing near his shoulder. He removed a glass of wine from a tray and returned his attention to his sovereign. "She was praying for the souls of the men who had died in the engagement when I approached her afterward. She pointed out that her family had only sacrificed one princess every fifty years."

Frederick smiled. "A touching observation. Did you point out, in return, that this time the dragon was dead?"

"I did."

"And what did she say to that?"

"She said her family had sacrificed one superfluous young woman every fifty years to save a province it had acquired by inheritance. We had sacrificed over one hundred soldiers to retain a province our king had stolen by force."

Frederick smiled again. His bright, cynical eyes regarded von Wogenfer over his glass.

"It's too bad you're already married, eh? You could have carried her back to her mother and claimed

the traditional reward."

Von Wogenfer shrugged. In his mind, he could see the tableau Costanze Adelaide had created when she rose from her knees after he interrupted her prayers. She had stepped away from the stake, her crucifix in her hand, and made the sign of the cross as she surveyed the bodies still lying on the field. The words she had muttered had been taken from the Requiem Mass of the Roman church.

Lux perpetua luceat eis, Domine... Let perpetual light shine upon them, O Lord.

"She is a woman of some spirit," von Wogenfer said. "Captain Kreutzen said she spent most of the battle trying to break free, so the animal could reach her."

Alsten flicked his cuff and put on a face that was obviously intended as an imitation of Frederick's world-weary disdain. "She asked me how we would deal with the monsters of Reason now that we had probably slain the last monster of legend."

"And you told her Reason doesn't produce monsters?" Frederick said.

Alsten's wine sloshed in his glass. His face reddened. "As a matter of fact... yes."

The king waved his glass at his guests. "To what shall we drink, gentlemen? To success? To the hope that the monsters of Reason provide as much entertainment for future generations as the monsters of legend have provided for the past?"

"I think I would like to salute the fallen," von Wogenfer said.

Frederick regarded him again. The expression on his face changed.

* * *

Von Wogenfer had commanded a battalion at Rossbach. Afterward, a staff officer had told him about the incident that had become part of Frederick's legend. Frederick had been sitting on his horse watching two redcoated enemy regiments as they maintained their position under a savage battering from the Prussian artillery. He had asked who they were, the story went, and he had removed his hat and raised it in silent tribute when he had been told they were the Swiss regiments Planta and Diesbach -- foreign soldiers serving in the army of Louis XV.

It was easy to forget who you were talking to, von Wogenfer had often reflected, when you visited the king in his palace. You watched this little Frenchified intellectual play his flute with his court musicians. You heard him making mocking comments to his guests. If Frederick's father could return from the dead, he would observe the court life of Sans Souci and conclude his worst fears had been confirmed. He would be dumbfounded when he learned his strange son was a soldier who had participated in more battles than any king since Alexander of Macedon. He would have decided you were a lunatic if you had told him young Fritz was now called -- like Alexander -- the Great.

Frederick had continued to kill the Swiss, of course. But that wasn't the point of the story.

* * *

"To those who did their duty," Frederick said.

Von Wogenfer extended his arm. The three glasses glittered in the light from the French windows.

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