The man who wasn't there

by Gregory Benford

 Illustration by Dan Blomberg

Years from now, the war on terror will be as high-tech as it is merciless.

Sentinels of Islam in a suburb of Paris. Around the firefly buzz hung a weekday midnight silence.

"*Merde du jour*," he muttered. The Islamic Front could afford the butterflies. They fed on endless money from the Saudis, part of the campaign to restore Islam to Europe after the "regrettable" Christian Era.

Not restored by the sword, of course - they were hopeless on a battlefield. But now, in softened consumerist Europe, their shopworn push-pull strategies of terror and political demand still worked. Islamic Front had plenty of followers in the immigrant masses. Their code of strict secrecy - talk and you die, unpleasantly - made them potent. Against them the French government deployed lawyers. Thinking of them, he spat on the floor of the apartment he had rented.

"Ready, Ajax?" He got a coded blip in answer - OK.

Time to move. Nobody knew where the Front would strike next with bombs, kidnappings, violent protests. Plus the usual rhetoric about being repressed. Very effective.

They had made such claims back in Lyon, after a street brawl on Montclair Boulevard. That was years ago, just as the Front started to use advanced technologies. All cameras, videos, and other recording systems near Montclair Boulevard had been blank, so the Front could claim that the fighting and the car bomb that followed were the work of others. So it had gone now for years, an arms race of technologies.

Unless, of course, the plans of the Islamic Front could be tapped. But that meant getting in fast, silent, deadly. Tonight.

Inside the shadowy compound ahead, the Head was at work. Under the shield of the looming mosque, he sent agents forth. He hid behind some holy title, but French Intelligence had pinpointed the Head's movements, and now was the time to strike. Remembering Montclair Boulevard.

Jean said softly, "Take out the microwaves."

Silently, the side teams did.

The details registered in his left eye, fed from his wearable computer. The Front was using the minarets at the square's corners to mount their detectors. Jean could see their snouts peeking out of the corbelled designs that wrapped around each artfully curved dome atop the minarets. The surveillance cameras were the usual IR motion-sensing type. But they were all connected to a central security centre - the usual control-freak arrangement. They could be defeated by intersecting their microwave links, saturating them, blowing the electronics down the line.

The security 'bots zoomed around the looming mosque like supersonic fireflies it the cold air. Jean watched them with his infrared eyes as their tiny plumes darted over the bare zone, blazing high-tech fireflies. They patrolled silently over the wide plaza, watching for movement up and down the spectral bands.

Jean ordered the teams to open up. Soundless beams lanced instantly into the broad square of the

compound. They were aimed at receivers, jamming the link back to the security centre that squatted down on the mosque's roof.

Simple, really - flood them with a high-power noise-spectrum signal. Their cameras looked in all directions, their sensors wide open in the winter dark - so they could be attacked from any direction, jammed from any angle. Thank God - whichever version you liked, Jean thought - the Front hadn't thought to use laser links: easier to find, but far harder to block or saturate.

"Their links are cut," came a whispered comm message from a nearby apartment, diagonally across the square.

"Now the security 'bots."

Microwave pulses transfixed each of the fireflies darting around the mosque square. Short bursts of microwaves flooded their diodes. The butterflies abruptly tumbled to the cobblestones.

He rasped in a short breath and beeped Ajax into action. "Send in the silver," Jean said. His buddy Ajax was in a "silver" suit, though why it got that name Jean never knew.

He switched to another spectrum, far beyond the visible, and searched for Ajax. Silver suits were layers of optical fibres and sensors, ever-watchful in all directions. "*There …*"

Ajax was a shifting blob of shimmering blue light in Jean's UV goggles, well beyond what ordinary cameras could capture. Each square centimetre of the silver suit took incoming light and routed it through chips, moving the image - say, of a wall - around the body, on its way to the directly opposite side of the suit. There another optical fibre emitted the same image in the same direction. It was as though the ray had passed through Ajax's body. Any guard looking toward the suit saw only the wall, as though nothing stood between them.

The silver suit gave Ajax invisibility. Jean watched as the blob flexed and moved across the Islamic Front's broad open plaza, toward the shadowy, looming mosque. He reached the first barrier, a cluster of concrete blocks, and just walked around them. Up in the minarets Jean could see shifting shadows. The guards had noticed that their gear was down.

"Here comes the glare," he sent on comm.

Searing light swept the compound. Spotlights on the minarets and the main mosque sent blaring beams into every corner.

Good coverage, Jean noted. Not that it would do them any good.

Because Ajax was inside by now. "*I got it ,*" Ajax's voice whispered in his ears.

Meaning that he had used the tap-and-read gear strapped to his wrist. It sent an electrically charged wave through a lock and used the rebound signal to figure out the lock's codes. The information was buried in the door, so it had to be user-reachable. Almost like a dog waiting for the right signal from its master to go fetch a ball.

Well, Jean thought, the ball was in play now. "Follow on," he sent, and two more silver suits started across the compound's square. They came in from the sides. He could see them moving fast, wrinkled UV ghosts.

The guards up in the minarets had their hands full, scanning the square and seeing nothing. Not even their motion-sensing cameras could see anything through the smoky frequencies.

Shouts echoed across the square. Getting the reserve house guard up from their beds.

Time to get serious. "Blow their electrical."

Microwave bursts curled through the chill air. They were vectored in on the mosque's power source, where their standard external current hook-up met their in-house generator. Throw the diodes there into confusion, blowing most of them with 30 kilowatts of bursty microwaves, and kiss your amperes goodbye.

The spotlight glare vanished. The minor mosque lamps went too. Louder shouts.

Jean was already running out of the apartment building. His IR took in the sputtering of random gunfire from the minarets. They were shooting blind, chunking rounds into the cobblestones. It was easy to avoid their sweeps.

But that gave his side all the excuse they needed. Snipers in nearby buildings took out the men in the minarets within seconds.

Halfway to the mosque, all fell silent. It was so still he could hear his own whooshing breath.

The main gate was still locked but the side door yawned. He went through into utter blackness, dark even to him in IR.

In his left eye he received Ajax's map of the interior. It was made by a satellite, integrating the GPS feedback from Ajax and figuring out the implied mosque geometry.

Here - down a corridor and around a small high-roofed room like a chapel. Two men moved aimlessly around the room, shouting to each other. One fumbled to turn on a flashlight and Jean punched a button on his right wrist. It sent a *skreeee* he heard in the microwave spectrum. That caused flash-over of the filaments in flashlight bulbs. Sure enough, the tall, swarthy man could not get the flash to light up. Jean slipped by him.

They were saying something in French but Jean didn't bother to figure out their panicked sentences as they flung their arms about. He skirted around them and down a hallway. More men there, armed but blind. The place reeked of sour sweat and fear.

Ajax had left bootprints that showed up in crimson in his high-UV spectrum. He followed them through a room crammed with computers, all dead, and down a long corridor lined with AK-47s in steel wall racks.

Jean had his automatic out in his right hand but didn't intend to use it. The flash would give the enemy momentary light.

"Found the Head," Ajax sent.

"How is he?"

"Holed up in a safe room, looks like."

"Blow it."

"Already set up to. Punched a hole through at the top, wide enough for the percussion grenade."

"Go."

The boom rocked down the hallway and slapped Jean in the face. As he ran up to it he could see the massive door was skewed on its hinges. Ajax was a shimmer in Jean's goggles, planting a second charge. They wedged it into place at the top hinge.

Angry shouts came from behind them. Another silversuit came up, firing backward with a silenced pistol. The shouts stopped.

They all trotted down the corridor and Ajax hit his hand-held trigger. The blast was deafening. Fragments slammed into his carbon-fibre body armour.

Jean stepped through the yawning frame, a smell of something burnt curling up into his nostrils. Six bodies were slammed against the walls, clad in kaftans. Blood trickled from their ears. He had to check three before he was sure that they had the Head. The leathery face was contorted, grey foam oozed at the mouth, and Jean reflected that this did not look like someone who had ordered the deaths of thousands. Now it was just a shrivelled little man.

The third silversuit was a surgeon, his ID patch glowing in the UV. Jean pointed and the surgeon knelt beside the Head.

"Pretty bad," the surgeon said.

"Dead?"

"Not yet, but he may have injected himself." Up came the sleeves of the kaftan and there was a plain needle mark. "Damn."

"How long have we got?" Jean asked.

"Maybe ten minutes."

Out came the tool kit and quick hands started to work.

It took only five minutes. Jean stared at the Head's face and thought about Montclair Boulevard. Then they started out, carrying the body in a sling.

There was fighting outside but it died down. He monitored the operation on a screen in his left eye lens, watching the support troops come in from all sides. Green motes circled and lit on the mosque grounds - choppers and ultralights. Some automatic-weapons fire rose to greet them. The return fire lanced down, computer-directed by robot guns in mini-aircraft.

It had been easy enough to take out the Islamic Front guards. Just attacking was simple, but experience showed that you got very little information that way. Jean had learned from Lyon, where the Front had many tendrils. Yet they had few ways to trace the Byzantine network that decades of immigrant communities had established.

The Front had learned that they could keep no database without risking its loss, so the only systematic memory was carried around in a few leader's heads, encoded and rote memorised. So there was only one way to get it.

They hauled the body out on a stretcher. Halfway out the one thing they could not defend against struck Ajax - low tech.

Ajax had the lead. A small bomb cut through him. It may have been triggered to his passage, armed sometime in the last few minutes.

Jean could see Ajax was gone. He used hand signs to get them moving again. He put Ajax out of his mind for now, a habit he had learned since his brother's death.

Army troops were securing the rest of the mosque, small arms rattling far down the hallways. There were still no lights and everyone worked in the IR, moving carefully.

The chopper waited just outside, squatting on the square with its ultra-rotors purring. Jean went with the surgeon. There was a lot of medical gear in the chopper bay and the specialists got the body into it while they lifted off. Jean looked out across the square at the maze of running men and bodies, the scene moving in an eerie hush except for the working machines.

Half an hour later he got to see the results. They had the entire top floor of a hospital. Jean went into the bare white clean room wearing surgical scrubs and stood at the end of the operating theatre. They were all quiet here, too.

The Head was talking, in its way. The body lay spread out, heart machine chugging, the lungs heaving to the steady stroke of a breather-driver. The Head was certainly dead but the cowl of leads blossoming from his shaved skull was working. There were subtle ways to drive synapses, forcing memory to make its connections.

On the screens around the operating theatre the data flowed like syrup. Images, faces, cross-correlations like thickets of yellow-green vines. The entire Islamic Front was there, layered and bunched in cords and streams.

"This guy was a real savant," a specialist said nearby. "Look how his memory was organised - like a multilayered filing cabinet."

"Too bad he used it to store such *merde,*" Jean said. He saw, in a flicker across the screen, a scene retrieved from the Head's recollections, of the farmers' market in Lyon. Off to the left were the maple trees of Montclair Boulevard, where Jean's brother had been torn to shreds by the car bomb.

Swimming up from cloudy, static-filled memory came the scene before the explosion, too, frozen in dead memory. The car, moving forward into the crowd, seconds before the detonation. The point of view swivelled and there in the room were the faces of the plotters, three bearded ones.

Jean memorised them in a moment. He turned and walked out, getting ready for the next attack, knowing now who to look for and thinking again of Montclair Boulevard.

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