

One of our Bastards  
is Missing

Paul Cornell

To GET TO Earth from the edge of the solar system, depending on the time of year and the position of the planets, you need to pass through at least Poland, Prussia, and Turkey, and you'd probably get stamps in your passport from a few of the other great powers. Then as you get closer to the world, you arrive at a point, in the continually shifting carriage space over the countries, where this complexity has to give way or fail. And so you arrive in the blissful lubrication of neutral orbital territory. From there it's especially clear that no country is whole unto itself. There are yearning gaps between parts of each state, as they stretch across the solar system. There is no congruent territory. The countries continue in balance with each other like a fine but eccentric mechanism, pent up, all that political energy dealt with through eternal circular motion.

The maps that represent this can be displayed on a screen, but they're much more suited to mental contemplation. They're beautiful. They're made to be beautiful, doing their own small part to see that their beauty never ends. If you looked down on that world of countries, onto the pink of glorious old Greater Britain, that land of green squares and dark forest and carriage contrails, and then you naturally avoided looking directly at the golden splendor of London, your gaze might fall on the Thames valley. On the country houses and mansions and hunting estates that letter the river banks with the names of the great. On one particular estate: an enormous winged square of a house with its own grouse shooting horizons and mazes and herb gardens and markers that indicate it also sprawls into folded interior expanses. Today that estate, seen from such a height, would be adorned with informational banners that could be seen from orbit, and tall pleasure cruisers could be observed, docked beside military boats on the river, and carriages of all kinds would be cluttering the gravel of its circular drives and swarming in the sky overhead. A detachment of Horse Guards could be spotted, stood at ready at the perimeter. Today, you'd need much more than a passport to get inside that maze of information and privilege. Because today was a royal wedding. THAT VISION FROM the point of view of someone looking down upon him was what was at the back of Hamilton's mind.

But now he was watching the Princess.

Her chestnut hair had been knotted high on her head, baring her neck, a fashion which Hamilton appreciated for its defiance of the French, and at an official function too, though that gesture wouldn't have been Liz's alone, but would have been calculated in the warrens of Whitehall. She wore white, which had made a smile come to Hamilton's lips when he'd first seen it in the Cathedral this morning. In this gigantic function room with its high arched ceiling, in which massed dignitaries and ambassadors and dress uniforms orbited from table to table, she was the sun about which everything turned. Even the King, in the far distance, at a table on a rise with old men from the rest of Europe, was no competition for his daughter this afternoon. This the reception, where Elizabeth, escorted by members of the Corps of Heraldry, would carelessly and entirely precisely move from group to group, giving exactly the right amount of charm to every one of the great powers, briefed to keep the balance going as everyone like she and Hamilton did every day.

Everyone like the two of them. That was a useless thought and he cuffed it aside.

Her gaze had settled on Hamilton's table precisely once. A little smile and then away again. As not approved by Whitehall. He'd tried to stop watching her

after that. But his carefully random table, with diplomatic corps functionaries to his left and right, had left him cold. Hamilton had grown tired of pretending to be charming.

"It's a marriage of convenience," said a voice beside him.

It was Lord Carney. He was wearing open cuffs that bloomed from his silk sleeves, a big collar, and no tie. His long hair was unfastened. He had retained his rings.

Hamilton considered his reply for a moment, then opted for silence. He met Carney's gaze with a suggestion in his heart that surely his Lordship might find some other table to perch at, perhaps one where he had friends?

"What do you reckon?"

Hamilton stood, with the intention of walking away. But Carney stood too and stopped him just as they'd got out of earshot of the table. The man smelled like a Turkish sweet shop. He affected a mode of speech beneath his standing. "This is what I do. I probe, I provoke, I poke. And when I'm in the room, it's all too obvious when people are looking at someone else."

The broad grin stayed on his face.

Hamilton found a deserted table and sat down again, furious at himself. Carney settled beside him, and gestured away from Princess Elizabeth, toward her new husband, with his neat beard and his row of medals on the breast of his Svenska Adelsfanan uniform. He was talking with the Papal ambassador, doubtless discussing getting Liz to Rome as soon as possible, for a great show to be made of this match between the Protestant and the Papist. If Prince Bertil was also pretending to be charming, Hamilton admitted that he was making a better job of it.

"Yeah, jammy fucker, my thoughts exactly. Still, I'm on a promise with a couple of members of his staff, so it's swings and roundabouts." Carney clicked his tongue and wagged his finger as a Swedish serving maid ran past, and she curtsied a quick smile at him. "I do understand, you know. All our relationships are informed by the balance. And the horror of it is that we all can conceive of

a world where this isn't so."

Hamilton pursed his lips and chose his next words carefully. "Is that why you are how you are, your Lordship?"

"'Course it is. Maids, lady companions, youngest sisters, it's a catalog of incompleteness. I'm allowed to love only in ways that don't disrupt the balance. For me to commit myself, or, heaven forbid, to marry, would require such deep thought at the highest levels that by the time the Heralds had worked it through, well, I'd have tired of the lady. Story of us all, eh? Nowhere for the pressure to go. If only I could see an alternative."

Having shown the corner of his cards, the man had taken care to move back to the fringes of treason once more. It was part of his role as an agent provocateur. And Hamilton knew it. But that didn't mean he had to take this.

"Do you have any further point, your Lordship?"

"Oh, I'm just getting--"

The room gasped.

Hamilton was up out of his seat and had taken a step toward Elizabeth, his gun hand had grabbed into the air to his right where his .66mm Webley Corsair sat in a knot of space and had swung it ready to fire--

At nothing.

There stood the Princess, looking about herself in shock. Dress uniforms, bearded men all around her.

Left, right, up, down.

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Hamilton couldn't see anything for her to be shocked at.

And nothing near her, nothing around her.

She was already stepping back, her hands in the air, gesturing at a gap

What had been there? Everyone was looking there. What?

He looked to the others like him. Almost all of them were in the same sort of posture he was, balked at picking a target.

The Papal envoy stepped forward and cried out. "A man was standing there! And he has vanished!"

HAVOC. EVERYBODY WAS shouting. A weapon, a weapon! But there was no weapon that Hamilton knew of that could have done that, made a man, whoever it had been, blink out of existence. Groups of bodyguards in dress uniforms or diplomatic black tie leapt up, encircling their charges. Ladies started screaming. A nightmare of the balance collapsing all around them. That hysteria when everyone was in the same place and things didn't go exactly as all these vast powers expected.

A Bavarian princeling bellowed he needed no such protection and made to rush to the Princess's side

Hamilton stepped into his way and accidentally shouldered him to the floor as he put himself right up beside Elizabeth and her husband. "We're walking to that door," he said. "Now."

Bertil and Elizabeth nodded and marched with fixed smiles on their faces, Bertil turning and holding back with a gesture the Swedish forces that were moving in from all directions. Hamilton's fellows fell in all around them, and swept the party across the hall, through that door, and down a servants' corridor as Life Guards came bundling into the room behind them, causing more noise and more reactions and damn it, Hamilton hoped he wouldn't suddenly hear the discharge of some hidden

He did not. The door was closed and barred behind them. Another good guy doing the right thing.

Hamilton sometimes distantly wished for an organization to guard those who needed it. But for that the world would have to be different in ways beyond even Carney's artificial speculations. He and his brother officers would have their independence cropped if that were so. And he lived through his independence. It was the root of the duty that meant he would place himself in harm's way for Elizabeth's husband. He had no more thoughts on the subject.

"I know very little," said Elizabeth as she walked, her voice careful as always, except when it hadn't been. "I think the man was with one of the groups of foreign dignitaries—"

"He looked Prussian," said Bertil, "we were talking to Prussians."

"He just vanished into thin air right in front of me."

"Into a fold?" said Bertil.

"It can't have been," she said. "The room will have been mapped and mapped." She looked to Hamilton for confirmation. He nodded.

They got to the library. Hamilton marched in and secured it. They put the happy couple at the center of it, locked it up, and called everything in to the embroidery.

The embroideries were busy, swiftly prioritizing, but no, nothing was happening in the great chamber they'd left, the panic had swelled and then subsided into shouts, exhibitionist faintings (because who these days wore a corset that didn't have hidden depths), glasses crashing, yelled demands. No one else had vanished. No Spanish infantrymen had materialized out of thin air.

Bertil walked to the shelves, folded his hands behind his back, and began bravely and ostentatiously browsing. Elizabeth sat down and fanned herself and smiled for all Hamilton's fellows, and finally, quickly for Hamilton himself.

They waited.

The embroidery told them they had a visitor coming.

A wall of books slid aside, and in walked a figure that made all of them turn and salute. The Queen Mother, still in mourning black, her train racing to catch up with her.

She came straight to Hamilton and the others all turned to listen, and from now on thanks to this obvious favor, they would regard Hamilton as the ranking officer. He was glad of it. "We will continue," she said. "We will not regard this as an embarrassment and therefore it will not be. The ballroom was prepared for the dance, we are moving there early, Elizabeth, Bertil, off you

go, you two gentlemen in front of them, the rest of you behind. You will be laughing as you enter the ballroom as if this were the most enormous joke, a silly and typically English eccentric misunderstanding."

Elizabeth nodded, took Bertil by the arm.

The Queen Mother intercepted Hamilton as he moved to join them. "No. Major Hamilton, you will go and talk to technical, you will find another explanation for what happened."

"Another explanation, your Royal Highness?" "Indeed," she said. "It must not be what they are saying it is."

"HERE WE ARE, sir," Lieutenant Matthew Parkes was with the Technical Corps of Hamilton's own regiment, the 4th Dragoons. He and his men were, incongruously, in the dark of the pantry that had been set aside for their equipment, also in their dress uniforms. From here they were in charge of the sensor net that blanketed the house and grounds down to Newtonian units of space, reaching out for miles in every direction. Parkes's people had been the first to arrive here, days ago, and would be the last to leave. He was pointing at a screen, on which was frozen the intelligent image of a burly man in black tie, Princess Elizabeth almost entirely obscured behind him. "Know who he is?" Hamilton had placed the guest list in his mental index and had checked it as each group had entered the hall. He was relieved to recognize the man. He was as down to earth as it was possible to be. "He was in the Prussian party, not announced, one of six diplomat placings on their list. Built like his muscles have been grown for security and that's how he moved round the room. Didn't let anyone chat to him. He nods when his embroidery talks to him. Which'd mean he's new at this, only..." Only the man had a look about him that Hamilton recognized. "No. He's just very confident. Ostentatious, even. So you're sure he didn't walk into some sort of fold?"

"Here's the contour map." Parkes flipped up an overlay on the image that showed the tortured underpinnings of space-time in the room. There were little sinks and bundles all over the place, where various Britons had weapons stowed, and various foreigners would have had them stowed had they wished to create a diplomatic incident. The corner where Elizabeth had been standing showed only the force of gravity under her dear feet. "We do take care you know, sir."

"I'm sure you do, Matty. Let's see it, then." Parkes flipped back to the clear screen. He touched it and the image changed.

Hamilton watched as the man vanished. One moment he was there. Then he was not, and Elizabeth was reacting, a sudden jerk of her posture.

Hamilton often struggled with technical matters. "What's the frame rate on this thing?"

"There is none, sir. It's a continual taking of real image, right down to single Newton intervals of time. That's as far as physics goes. Sir, we've been listening in to what everyone's saying, all afternoon--"

"And what are they saying, Matty?"

"That what's happened is Gracefully Impossible."

GRACEFULLY. IMPOSSIBLE. THE first thing that had come into Hamilton's mind when the Queen Mother had mentioned the possibility was the memory of a political cartoon. It was the Prime Minister from a few years ago, standing at the

dispatch box, staring in shock at his empty hand, which should presumably have contained some papers. The caption had read:

Say what you like about Mr. Patel,  
He carries himself correct for his title.  
He's about to present just his graceful apologies,  
For the impossible loss of all his policies.

Every child knew that Newton had coined the phrase "gracefully impossible" after he'd spent the day in his garden observing the progress of a very small worm across the surface of an apple. It referred to what, according to the

great man's thinking about the very small, could, and presumably did, sometimes happen: things popping in and out of existence, when God, for some unfathomable reason, started or stopped looking at them. Some Frenchman had insisted that it was actually about whether people were looking, but that was the French for you. Through the centuries, there had been a few documented cases that seemed to fit the bill. Hamilton had always been distantly entertained to read about such in the inside page of his newspaper plate. He'd always assumed it could happen. But here? Now? During a state occasion? HAMILTON WENT BACK into the great hall, now empty of all but a group of Life Guards and those like him, individuals taken from several different regiments, all of whom had responsibilities similar to his, and a few of whom he'd worked with in the field. He checked in with them. They had all noted the Prussian, indeed, with the ruthless air the man had had about him, and the bulk of his musculature, he had been at the forefront of many of their internal indices of threat.

Hamilton found the place where the vanishing had happened, moved aside a couple of boffins, and against their protestations, went to stand in the exact spot, which felt like anywhere else did, and which set off none of his internal alarms, real or intuitive. He looked to where Liz had been standing, in the corner behind the Prussian. His expression darkened. The man who'd vanished had effectively been shielding the Princess from the room. Between her and every line of sight. He'd been where a bodyguard would have been if he'd become aware of someone taking a shot.

But that was ridiculous. The Prussian hadn't rushed in to save her. He'd been standing there, looking around. And anyone in that hall with some strange new weapon concealed on their person wouldn't have taken the shot then, they'd have waited for him to move.

Hamilton shook his head, angry with himself. There was a gap here. Something that went beyond the obvious. He let the boffins get back to their work and headed for the ballroom.

THE BAND HAD started the music, and the vast chamber was packed with people, the dance floor a whirl of waltzing figures. They were deliberate in their courses. The only laughter was forced laughter. No matter that some half-miracle might have occurred, dance cards had been circulated among the minds of the great powers, dances would be danced, and minor royalty matchetched, and whispers exchanged in precise confidentiality, because everyone was brave and everyone was determined and would be seen to be so. And so the balance went on. But the tension had increased a notch. The weight of the balance odd be felt in this room, on the surface now, on every brow. The Queen Mother sat at a high table with courtiers to her left and right, receiving visitors with a grand blessing smile on her face, Oaring everyone to regard the last hour as anything but a dream.

Hamilton walked the room, looking around like he was looking at a battle, like it was happening rather than perhaps waiting to happen, whatever it was. He watched his opposite numbers from all the great powers waltzing slowly around their own people, and spiraling off from time to time to orbit his own. The ratio of uniformed to the sort of embassy thug it was difficult to imagine fitting in the diplomatic bag was about three to one for all the nations bar two. The French had of course sent Commissars, who all dressed the same when outsiders were present, but followed a Byzantine internal rank system. And the Vatican's people were all men and women of the cloth and their assistants. As he made his way through that particular party, which was scattering, intercepting, and colliding with all the other nationalities, as if in the explosion of a shaped charge, he started to hear it. The conversations were all about what had happened. The Vatican representatives were talking about a sacred presence. The details were already spiraling. There had been a light and a

great voice, had nobody else heard? And people were agreeing.

Hamilton wasn't a diplomat, and he knew better than to take on trouble not in his own line. But he didn't like what he was hearing. The Catholics had only

come to terms with Impossible Grace a couple of decades ago, when a Papal bull went out announcing that John XXVI thought that the concept had merit, but that further scientific study was required. But now they'd got behind it, as in all things, they were behind it. So what would this say to them, that the divine had looked down on this wedding, approved of it, and plucked someone away from it?

No, not just someone. Prussian military. A Protestant from a nation that had sometimes protested that various Swedish territories would be far better off within their own jurisdiction.

Hamilton stopped himself speculating. Guessing at such things would only make him hesitate if his guesses turned out to be untrue.

Hamilton had a vague but certain grasp of what his God was like. He thought it was possible that He might decide to give the nod to a marriage at court. But in a way that might upset the balance between nations that was divinely ordained, that was the center of all good works?

No. Hamilton was certain now. The divine be damned. This wasn't the numinous at play. This was enemy action.

He circled the room until he found the Prussians. They were raging, an ambassador poking at a British courtier, demanding something, probably that an investigation be launched immediately.

And beside that Prussian stood several more, diplomatic and military, all convincingly fright, lied and furious, certain this was a British plot. Rut behind them there, in the social place where Hamilton habitually looked, there were some of the vanished man's fellow big lads. The other five from that diplomatic pouch. The Prussians, uniquely in Europe, kept up an actual organization for the sort of thing Hamilton and his ilk did on the never-never. The Garde Du Corps had begun as a regiment similar to the Life Guards, but these days it was said they weren't even issued with uniforms. They wouldn't be on anyone's dance cards. They weren't stalking the room now, and all right, that was understandable, they were hanging back to protect their men. But they weren't doing much of that either. They didn't look angry, or worried for their comrade, or for their own skins.

Hamilton took a step back to let pretty noble couples desperately waltz between him and the Prussians, wanting to keep his position as a privileged observer.

They looked like they were waiting. On edge. They just wanted to get out of here. Was the Garde really that callous? They'd lost a man in mysterious circumstances, and they weren't themselves agitating to get back into that room and yell his name, but were just waiting to move on?

He looked for another moment, remembering the faces, then moved on himself. He found another table of Prussians. The good sort, not Order of the Black Eagle, but Hussars. They were in uniform, and had been drinking, and were furiously declaring in Hohenzollern German that if they weren't allowed access to the records of what had happened, well then it must be—they didn't like to say what it must be!

Hamilton plucked a glass from a table and wandered over to join them, careful to take a wide and unsteady course around a lady whose train had developed some sort of fault and wasn't moving fast enough to keep pace with her feet. He flopped down in a chair next to one of the Prussians, a captain by his lapels, which were virtual in the way the Prussians liked, to implicitly suggest that they had been in combat more recently than the other great powers, and so had a swift turnover of brevet ranks, decided by merit.

"Hullo!" he said.

The group fell silent and bristled at him.

Hamilton blinked at them. "Where's Humph?"

"Humph? Wassay th'gd Major?" the Hussar Captain spoke North Sea pidgin, but with a clear accent: Hamilton would be able to understand him.

He didn't want to reveal that he spoke perfect German, albeit with a Bavarian accent. "Big chap. Big big chap. Say go." He carefully swore in Dutch, shaking his head, not understanding. "Which you settle fim?"

"Settle?!" They looked among each other, and Hamilton could feel the affront. A couple of them even put their good hands to their waists, where the space was folded that no longer contained their pistols and thin swords. But the captain glared at them and they relented. A burst of Hohenzollern German about this so-called mystery of their mate vanishing, and how, being in the Garde, he had obviously been abducted for his secrets.

Hamilton waved his hands. "No swords! Good chap! No name. He won! Three times to me at behind the backshee." His raised his voice a notch. "Behind the backshee! Excellent chap! He won!" He stuck out his ring finger, offering the winnings in credit, to be passed from skin to skin. He mentally retracted the other options of what could be detailed there, and blanked it. He could always make a drunken show of trying to find it. "Seek to settle. For such a good chap."

They didn't believe him or trust him. Nobody reached out to touch his finger. But he learnt a great deal in their German conversation in the ten minutes that followed, while he loudly struggled to communicate with the increasingly annoyed captain, who couldn't bring himself to directly insult a member of the British military by asking him to go away. The vanished man's name was Helmuth Sandels. The name suggested Swedish origins to his family. But that was typical continental back and forth. He might have been a good man now he'd gone, but he hadn't been liked. Sandels had had a look in his eye when he'd walked past stout fellows who'd actually fought battles. He'd spoken up in anger when valiant Hussars had expressed the military's traditional views concerning those running the government, the country, and the world. Hamilton found himself sharing the soldiers' expressions of distaste: this had been someone who assumed that loyalty was an opinion.

He raised a hand in pax, gave up trying with the captain, and left the table. Walking away, he heard the Hussars moving on with their conversation, starting to express some crude opinions about the Princess. He didn't break stride. Into his mind, unbidden, came the memories. Of what had been a small miracle of a kind, but one that only he and she had been witness to.

HAMILTON HAD BEEN at home on leave, having been abroad for a few weeks, serving out of uniform. As always, at times like that, when he should have been at rest, he'd been fired up for no good reason, unable to sleep, miserable, prone to tears in secret when a favorite song had come on the theatricals in his muse flat. It always took three days for him, once he was home, to find out what direction he was meant to be pointing. Then he would set off that way, and pop back to barracks one night for half a pint, and then he'd be fine. He could enjoy day four and onwards, and was known to be something approximating human from there on in.

Three-day leaves were hell. He tried not to use them as leaves, but would find himself some task, hopefully an official one if one of the handful of officers who brokered his services could be so entreated. Those officers were sensitive to such requests now.

But that leave, three years ago, had been two weeks off. He'd come home a day before. So he was no use to anyone. He'd taken a broom, and was pushing accumulated gray goo out of the carriage park alongside his apartment and into the drains.

She'd appeared in a sound of crashing and collapse, as her horse staggered sideways and hit the wall of the mews, then fell. Her two friends were galloping after her, their horses healthy, and someone built like Hamilton was running to help.

But none of them were going to be in time to catch her--  
And he was.

IT HAD TURNED out that the horse had missed an inoculation against minuscule poisoning. Its body was a terrible mess, random mechanisms developing out of its flanks and dying, with that terrifying smell, in the moments when Hamilton had held her in his arms, and had had to round on the man running in, and had imposed his authority with a look, and had not been thrown down and away. Instead, she'd raised her hands and called that she was all right, and had

insisted on looking to and at the horse, pulling off her glove and putting her hand to its neck and trying to fight the bloody things directly. But even with her command of information, it had been too late, and the horse had died in a mess. She'd been bloody angry. And then at the emergency scene that had started to develop around Hamilton's front door, with police carriages swooping in and the sound of running boots until she'd waved it all away and declared that it had been her favorite horse, a wonderful horse, her great friend since childhood, but it was just a bloody horse, and all she needed was a sit down and if this kind military gentleman would oblige--  
And he had.

HE'D OBLIGED HER again when they'd met in Denmark, and they'd danced at a ball held on an ice floe, a carpet of mechanism wood reacting every moment to the weight of their feet and the forces underlying them, and the aurora had shone in the sky.

It was all right in Denmark for Elizabeth to have one dance with a commoner.

Hamilton had got back to the table where his regiment were dining, and had silenced the laughter and the calls, and thus saved them for barracks. He had

drunk too much. His batman at the time had prevented him from going to see Elizabeth as she was escorted from the floor at the end of her dance card

by a boy who was somewhere in line for the Danish throne.

But she had seen Hamilton the next night, in private, a Privacy that would have taken great effort on her part, and after they had talked for several hours

and shared some more wine she had shown him great favor.

"SO. IS GOD in the details?" Someone was walking beside Hamilton. It was a Jesuit. Mid thirties. Dark hair, kept over her collar. She had a scar down one

side of her face and an odd eye as a result. Minuscule blade, by the look. A member of the Society of Jesus would never allow her face to be restructured. That would be vanity. But she was beautiful.

Hamilton straightened up, giving this woman's musculature and bearing and all the history those things suggested the respect they deserved. "Or the devil."

"Yes, interesting the saying goes both ways, isn't it?"

My name is Mother Valentine. I'm part of the Society's campaign for Effective Love."

Well," Hamilton raised an eyebrow, "I'm in favor of love being--"

"Don't waste our time. You know what I am."

"Yes, I do. And you know I'm the same. And I was waiting until we were out of earshot--"

"Which we now are--"

"To have this conversation."

They stopped together. Valentine moved her mouth close to Hamilton's ear

. "I've just been told that the Holy Father is eager to declare what happened here to

he a potential miracle. Certain parties are sure that our Black Eagle man will be found magically transplanted to distant parts, perhaps Berlin, as a sign against Prussian meddling."

"If he is, the Kaiser will have him gently shot and we'll never hear."

"You're probably right."

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't think miracles happen near our kind."

Hamilton realized he was looking absurdly hurt at her. And that she could see it. And was quietly absorbing that information for use in a couple of decades, if ever.



He was glad when a message came over the embroidery, asking him to attend to the Queen Mother in the pantry. And to bring his new friend.

THE QUEEN MOTHER stood in the pantry, her not taking a chair having obviously made Parkes and his people even more nervous than they would have been. She nodded to Valentine. "Monsignor. I must inform you, we've had an official approach from the Holy See. They regard the hall here as a possible site of miraculous apparition."

"Then my opinion on the subject is irrelevant. You should be addressing—" "The ambassador. Indeed. But here you are. You are aware of what was asked of us?"

"I suspect the Cardinals will have sought a complete record of the moment of the apparition, or in this case, the vanishing. That would only be the work of a moment in the case of such an... observed... chamber."

"It would. But it's what happens next that concerns me."

"The procedure is that the chamber must then be sealed, and left unobserved until the Cardinals can see for themselves, to minimize any effect human observers may have on the process of divine revelation."

Hamilton frowned. "Are we likely to?"

"God is communicating using a physical method, so we may," said Valentine.

"Depending on one's credulity concerning minuscule physics."

"Or one's credulity concerning international politics," said the Queen Mother.

"Monsignor, it is always our first and most powerful inclination, when another nation asks us for something, to say no. All nations feel that way. All nations know the others do. But now here is a request, one that concerns matters right at the heart of the balance, that is, in the end, about deactivating security. It could be said to come not from another nation, but from God. It is therefore difficult to deny this request. We find ourselves distrusting that difficulty. It makes us want to deny it all the more."

"You speak for His Royal Highness?"

The Queen Mother gave a cough that might have been a laugh. "Just as you speak for Our Lord."

Valentine smiled and inclined her head. "I would have thought, your Royal Highness, that it would be obvious to any of the great powers that, given the celebrations, tahtt would take you a long time to gather the Prime Minister and those many other courtiers with whom you would want to consult on such a difficult mnatter."

"Correct. Good. It will take three hours. You may go."

Valentine walked out with Hamilton. "I'm going to go and mix with my own for a while," she said, "listen to who's saying what."

"I'm surprised you wear your hair long."

She looked sharply at him. "Why?"

"You enjoy putting your head on the block." She giggled.

Which surprised Hamilton and for just a moment made him wish he was Lord Carney. But then there was a certain small darkness about another priest he knew.

"I'm just betting," she said in a whisper, "that by the end of the day this will all be over. And someone will be dead."

HAMILTON WENT BACK into the ballroom. He found he had a picture in his head now. Something had swum up from somewhere inside him, from a place he had learned to trust and never interrogate as to its reasons. That jerking motion Elizabeth had made at the moment Sandels had vanished. He had an emotional feeling about that image. What was it?

It had been like seeing her shot.

A motion that looked like it had come from beyond her muscles. Something Elizabeth had not been in control of. It wasn't like her to not be in control. It felt... dangerous.

Would anyone else see it that way? He doubted it.

So was he about to do the sudden terrible thing that his body was taking him

in the direction of doing?

He killed the thought and just did it. He went to the herald who carried the tablet with dance cards on it, and leaned on him with the Queen Mother's favor, which had popped up on his ring finger the moment he'd thought of it. The herald considered the sensation of the fingertip on the back of his hand for a moment, then handed Hamilton the tablet.

Hamilton realized that he had no clue of the havoc he was about to cause. So he glanced at the list of Elizabeth's forthcoming dances and struck off a random Frenchman.

He scrawled his own signature with a touch, then handed the plate back. The herald looked at him like the breath of death had passed under his nose. HAMILTON HAD TO wait three dances before his name came up. A Balaclava, an entrée grave (that choice must have taken a while, unless some herald had been waiting all his life for a chance at the French), a hornpipe for the sailors, including Bertil, to much applause, and then, thank the Deus, a straightforward waltz.

Elizabeth had been waiting out those last three, so he met her at her table. Maidservants kept their expressions stoic. A couple of Liz's companions looked positively scared. Hamilton knew how they felt. He could feel every important eye looking in his direction.

Elizabeth took his arm and gave it a little squeeze. "What's grandma up to, Johnny?"

"It's what I'm up to."

She looked alarmed. They formed up with the other dancers.

Hamilton was very aware of her gloves. The mechanism fabric that covered her left hand held off the urgent demand of his hand, his own need to touch her. But no, that wouldn't tell him anything. That was just his certainty that to know her had been to know her. That was not where he would find the truth here.

The band started up. The dance began. Hamilton didn't access any guidelines in his mind. He let his feet move where they would. He was outside orders, acting on a hunch. He was like a man dancing around the edge of a volcano.

"Do you remember the day we met?" he asked when he was certain they couldn't be heard; at least, not by the other dancers.

"Of course I do. My poor San Andreas, your flat in Hood Mews--"

"Do you remember what I said to you that day, when nobody else was with us? What you agreed to? Those passionate words that could bring this whole charade crashing down?" He kept his expression light, his tone so gentle and wry that Liz would always play along and fling a little stone back at him, knowing he meant nothing more than he could mean. That he was letting off steam through a joke.

All they had been was based on the certainty expressed in that.

It was an entirely British way to do things. It was, as Carney had said, about lives shaped entirely by the balance.

But this woman, with the room revolving around the two of them, was suddenly appalled, insulted, her face a picture of what she was absolutely certain she should feel. "I don't know what you mean! Or even if I did, I don't think--!" Hamilton's nostrils flared. He was lost now, if he was wrong. He had one tiny ledge for Liz to grasp if he was, but he would fall.

For duty, then.

He took his hand from Princess Elizabeth's waist, and grabbed her chin, his fingers digging up into flesh.

The whole room cried out in horror.

He had a moment before they would shoot him. Yes, he felt it! Or he thought he did! He thought he did enough--

He grabbed the flaw and ripped with all his might.

Princess Elizabeth's face burst off and landed on the floor.

Blood flew.

He drew his gun and pumped two shots into the mass of flesh and mechanism, as it twitched and blew a stream of defensive acid that discolored the marble.

He spun back to find the woman without a face lunging at him, her eyes white in the mass of red muscle, mechanism pus billowing into the gaps. She was aiming a hair knife at his throat, doubtless with enough mechanism to bring instant death or something worse.

Hamilton thought of Liz as he broke her arm. He enjoyed the scream.

He wanted to bellow for where the real Liz was as he slammed the impostor down onto the floor, and he was dragged from her in one motion as a dozen men grabbed them.

He caught a glimpse of Bertil, horrified, but not at Hamilton. It was a terror they shared. For her safety.

Hamilton suddenly felt like a traitor again.

He yelled out the words he'd had in mind since he'd put his name down for the dance. "They replaced her years ago! Years ago! At the mews!"

There were screams, cries that we were all undone.

There came the sound of two shots from the direction of the Vatican group, and Hamilton looked over to see Valentine standing over the corpse of a junior official.

Their gaze met. She understood why he'd shouted that.

Another man leapt up at a Vatican table behind her and turned to run and she turned and shot him twice in the chest, his body spinning backward over a table.

HAMILTON RAN WITH the rout. He used the crowds of dignitaries and their retinues, all roaring and competing and stampeding for safety, to hide himself. He made himself look like a man lost, agony on his face, his eyes closed. He was ignoring all the urgent cries from the embroidery.

He covertly acknowledged something directly from the Queen Mother.

He stumbled through the door of the pantry. Parkes looked round. "Thank God you're here, we've been trying to call, the Queen Mother's office are urgently asking you to come in--"

"Never mind that now, come with me, on Her Royal Highness's orders."

Parkes grabbed the pods from his ears and got up. "What on Earth--?"

Hamilton shot him through the right knee. Parkes screamed and fell. Every technician in the room leapt up. Hamilton bellowed at them to sit down or they'd get the same.

He shoved his foot into the back of Parkes's injured leg. "Listen here, Matty. You know how hard it's going to get. You're not the sort to think your duty's worth it. How much did they pay you? For how long?"

He was still yelling at the man on the ground as the Life Guards burst in and put a gun to everyone's head, his own included.

The Queen Mother entered a minute later, and changed that situation to the extent of letting Hamilton go free. She looked carefully at Parkes, who was still screaming for pity, and aimed a precise little kick into his disintegrated kneecap.

Then she turned to the technicians. "Your minds will be stripped down and rebuilt, if you're lucky, to see who was in on it." She looked back to Hamilton as they started to be led from the room. "What you said in the ballroom obviously isn't the case."

"No. When you take him apart," Hamilton nodded at Parkes, "you'll find he tampered with the contour map. They used Sandels as the cover for ..substituting Her Royal Highness. They knew she was going to move around the room in a predetermined way. With Parkes's help, they set up an open-ended fold in that corner--"

"The expense is staggering. The energy required--"

"There'll be no Christmas tree for the Kaiser this year. Sandels deliberately stepped into the fold and vanished, in a very public way. And at that moment they made the switch, took Her Royal Highness into the fold too, covered by the visual disturbance of Sandels's progress. And by old-fashioned sleight of hand."

"Propped up by the Prussians' people in the Vatican. Instead of a British bride influencing the Swedish court, there'd be a cuckoo from Berlin. Well

played, Wilhelm. Worth that Christmas tree."

"I'll wager the unit are still in the fold, not knowing anything about the outside world, waiting for the room to be sealed off with pious care, so they can climb out and extract themselves. They probably have supplies for several days."

"Do you think my granddaughter is still alive?"

Hamilton pursed his lips. "There are Prussian yachts on the river. They're staying on for the season. I think they'd want the bonus of taking the Princess back for interrogation."

"That's the plan!" Parkes yelled. "Please—!"

"Get him some anesthetic," said the Queen Mother. Then she turned back to Hamilton. "The balance will be kept. To give him his due, cousin Wilhelm was acting within it. There will be no diplomatic incident. The Prussians will be able to write off Sandels and any others as rogues. We will of course cooperate. The Black Eagle traditionally carry only that knowledge they need for their mission, and will order themselves to die before giving us orders of battle or any other strategic information. But the intelligence from Parkes and any others will give us some small power of potential shame over the Prussians in future months. The Vatican will be bending over backwards for us for some time to come." She took his hand, and he felt the favor on his ring finger impressed with some notes that probably flattered him. He'd read them later. "Major, we will have the fold opened. You will enter it. Save Elizabeth. Kill them all."

THEY GOT HIM a squad of fellow officers, four of them. They met in a trophy room, and sorted out how they'd go and what the rules of engagement would be once they got there. Substitutes for Parkes and his crew had been found from the few sappers present. Parkes had told them that those inside the fold had left a minuscule aerial trailing, but that messages were only to be passed down it in emergencies. No such communications had been sent. They were not aware of the world outside their bolt hole.

Hamilton felt nothing but disgust for a bought man, but he knew that such men told the truth under pressure, especially when they knew the fine detail of what could be done to them.

The false Liz had begun to be picked apart. Her real name would take a long time to discover. She had a maze of intersecting selves inside her head. She must have been as big an investment as the fold. The court physicians who had examined her had been as horrified by what had been done to her as by what she was.

That baffled Hamilton. People like the duplicate held the power to be who they liked. But that power was bought at the cost of damage to the balance of their own souls. What were nations, after all, but a lot of souls who knew who they were and how they liked to live? To be as uncertain as the substitute Liz was to be lost and to endanger others. It went beyond treachery. It was living mixed metaphor. It was as if she had insinuated herself into the cogs of the balance, her puppet strings wrapping around the arteries which supplied hearts and minds.

They gathered in the empty dining room in their dress uniforms. The dinner things had not been cleared away. Nothing had been done. The party had been well and truly crashed. The representatives of the great powers would have vanished back to their embassies and yachts. Mother Valentine would be rooting out the details of who had been paid what inside her party. Excommunications post mortem would be issued, and those traitors would burn in hell.

He thought of Liz, and took his gun from the air beside him.

One of the sappers put a device in the floor, set a timer, saluted and withdrew.

"Up the Green Jackets," said one of the men behind him, and a couple of the others mentioned their own regiments.

Hamilton felt a swell of fear and emotion.

The counter clicked to zero and the hole in the world opened in front of them, and they ran into it.

THERE WAS NOBODY immediately inside. A floor and curved ceiling of universal boundary material. It wrapped light around it in rainbows that always gave tunnels like this a slightly pantomime feel. It was like the entrance to Saint Nicholas's cave. Or, of course, the vortex sighted upon death, the ladder to the hereafter. Hamilton got that familiar taste in his mouth, a pure adrenal jolt of fear, not the restlessness of combat deferred, but that sensation one got in other universes, of being too far from home, cut off from the godhead. There was gravity. The Prussians certainly had spent some money.

The party made their way forward. They stepped gently on the edge of the universe. From around the corner of the short tunnel there were sounds. The other four looked to Hamilton. He took a couple of gentle steps forward, grateful for the softness of his dress uniform shoes. He could hear Elizabeth's voice. Not her words, not from here. She was angry, but engaged. Not defiant in the face of torture. Reasoning with them. A smile passed his lips for a moment. They'd have had a lot of that.

It told him there was no alert, not yet. It was almost impossible to set sensors close to the edge of a fold. This lot must have stood on guard for a couple of hours, heard no alarm from their friends outside, and then relaxed. They'd have been on the clock, waiting for the time when they would poke their heads out. Hamilton bet there was a nan meant to be on guard, but that Liz had pulled him into the conversation too. He could imagine her face, just round that corner, one eye always toward the exit, maybe a couple of buttons undone, claiming it was the heat and excitement. She had a hair knife too, but it would do her no good to use it on just one of them.

He estimated the distance. He counted the other voices, three... four, there was a deeper tone, in German, not the pidgin the other three had been speaking. That would be him. Sandels. He didn't sound like he was part of that conversation. He was angry, ordering, perhaps just back from sleep, wondering what the hell—!

Hamilton stopped all thoughts of Liz. He looked to the others, and they understood they were going to go and go now, trip the alarms and use the emergency against the enemy.

He nodded.

They leapt around the corner, ready for targets. They expected the blaring horn. They rode it, finding their targets surprised, bodies reacting,, reaching for weapons that were in a couple of cases a reach away among a kitchen, crates, tinned foods

Hamilton had made himself know he was going to see Liz, so he didn't react to her, he looked past her

He ducked, cried out, as an automatic set off by the alarm chopped up the man who had been running beside him, the Green Jacket, gone in a burst of red. Meat all over the cave.

Hamilton reeled, stayed up, tried to pin a target. To left and right ahead, men were falling, flying, two shots in each body, and he was moving too slowly, stumbling, vulnerable

One man got off a shot, into the ceiling, and then fell, pinned twice, exploding

Every one of the Prussians gone but

He found his target.

Sandels. With Elizabeth right in front of him. Covering every bit of his body. He had a gun pushed into her neck. He wasn't looking at his three dead comrades.

The three men who were with Hamilton moved forward, slowly, their gun hands visible, their weapons pointing down.

They were looking to Hamilton again.

He hadn't lowered his gun. He had his target. He was aiming right at Sandels and the Princess. There was silence.

Liz made eye contact. She had indeed undone those two buttons. She was calm.

"Well," she began, "this is very—"

Sandels muttered something and she was quiet again.

Silence.

Sandels laughed, not unpleasantly. Soulful eyes were looking at them from that square face of his, a smile turning the corner of his mouth. He shared the irony that Hamilton had often found in people of their profession.

This was not the awkward absurdity that the soldiers had described. Hamilton realized that he was looking at an alternative. This man was a professional at the same things Hamilton did in the margins of his life. It was the strangeness of the alternative that had alienated the military men. Hamilton was fascinated by him.

"I don't know why I did this," said Sandels, Elizabeth with a sway of the head.

Hamilton nodded to him. They each knew all the other did. "Perhaps you needed a moment."

"She's a very pretty girl to be wasted on a Swede."

Hamilton could feel Liz not looking at him. "It's lot a waste," he said gently. "And you'll refer to Her Royal Highness by her title."

"No offense meant."

"And none taken. But we're in the presence, not in barracks."

"I wish we were."

"I think we all agree there."

"I won't lay down my weapon."

Hamilton didn't do his fellows the disservice of looking to them for confirmation. "This isn't an execution."

Sandels looked satisfied. "Seal this tunnel afterwards, that should be all we require for passage."

"Not to Berlin, I presume."

"No," said Sandels, "to entirely the opposite." Hamilton nodded.

"Well, then." Sandels stepped aside from Elizabeth.

Hamilton lowered his weapon and the others readied theirs. It wouldn't be done to aim straight at Sandels. He had his own weapon at hip height. He would bring it up and they would cut him down as he moved.

But Elizabeth hadn't moved. She was pushing back her hair, as if wanting to say something to him before leaving, but lost for the right words.

Hamilton, suddenly aware of how unlikely that was, started to say something.

But Liz had put a hand to Sandels's cheek. Hamilton saw the fine silver between her fingers. Sandels fell to the ground thrashing, hoarsely yelling as he deliberately and precisely, as his nervous system was ordering him to, bit off his own tongue. Then the mechanism from the hair knife let him die.

The Princess looked at Hamilton. "It's not a waste," she said.

THEY SEALED THE fold as Sandels had asked them to, after the sappers had made an inspection. Hamilton left them to it. He regarded his duty as done. And no message came to him to say otherwise.

Recklessly, he tried to find Mother Valentine. But she was gone with the rest of the Vatican party, and there weren't even bloodstains left to mark where her feet had trod this evening.

He sat at a table, and tried to pour himself some champagne. He found that the bottle was empty. His glass was filled by Lord Carney, who sat down next to him. Together, they watched as Elizabeth was joyfully reunited with Bertil. They swung each other round and round, oblivious to all around them.

Elizabeth's grandmother smiled at them and looked nowhere else.

"We are watching," said Carney, "the balance incarnate. Or perhaps they'll incarnate it tonight. As I said: if only there were an alternative."

Hamilton drained his glass. "If only," he said, "there" weren't."

And he left before Carney could say anything.