

THE BLACKSTONE THREAT



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THE BLACKSTONE THREAT

Novel

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To my wife Isabelle for her infinite patience and to my children: Alexandre, Valentin and Laura.
To Laetitia and Stephanie, who brought to us Anastasia and Daphne, two rays of sunshine which illuminate our lives.

Part One

Chaos Theory

1. SLEEPLESS NIGHT

Elysée Palace – Sunday, September 24th, 11.15pm

The French President managed to keep his head, even on bad days.

He might not have though, considering what had been happening over the last seventy-two hours. Almost three days of escalating violence that had resulted in suburbs being set ablaze and mass looting throughout city centers. The security forces were overwhelmed. In order to ensure the safety of the population, the President had no choice but to order a curfew and place the country on maximum security alert.

In the underground control room of the Élysée Palace, the Head of State was monitoring what was happening on the outside. The high-tech bunker was 80 m², windowless and had walls that alternated between wood veneer and raw concrete. A glass-topped oblong table with steel legs sat in the center of the room, around which were perfectly-aligned black leather chairs that awaited the heads of government.

A giant video screen dominated one end of the room. It was an open window to a world beset with doubt and violence

The atmosphere within the room was tense. It was full of red eyes and tired bodies. Paul Lavalette, the French President, and his Prime Minister, Henri du Plessis, were talking quietly. All of the other government members who were present in the bunker had faces that were sweating with worry. The Commander-in-Chief of the operation, General Lartigue, was reading sporadic communiqués that had been received and that he had ordered be promptly brought to him. He was alert and focused as he posed questions to the liaison officers before sending them away with their orders.

Once everybody had found a place around the table the President began to address the group. His voice which was usually very calm was not able to hide the state of tension under which he found himself:

— Ministers, General, advisers, I thank you all for being here. Earlier today I declared that this country was now under a state of emergency and demanded a curfew to be imposed from 6:00 p.m. I addressed the nation in an attempt to reassure the population. This is an exceptional situation and as such I've deployed our armed forces to contain the wave of attacks which have been getting worse over the last three days.

The president paused, observing the members of the crisis team, before continuing:

— They are armed and roaming the streets! The people from the suburbs may start to attack the population. The suburbs could turn against the rest of the country. The anger which they've held inside them for too long is about to be unleashed.

He turned towards the military man:

— General Lartigue, could you update us on the current situation?

— Mr President, Lartigue began as he stood up. Ladies and gentlemen, our forces have been mobilised.

He pushed a button on the control keyboard which was on the table. A map of Île-de-France appeared on the giant screen.

— The army has armored vehicles in the potentially vulnerable locations of Nanterre, Asnières, Trappes, Les Mureaux, Mantes-La-Jolie, Gennevilliers, St-Denis, Courneuve, Aulnay and Garges-Les-Gonesse, the General continued. The entrances to the city around the perimeter of Paris have all been secured. Our concern now is mainly protecting La Défense.

— What's the situation like in other cities? enquired one of the advisers. The last communiqué wasn't exactly encouraging!

— It's the same in both Lyon and Lille. It's very tense in the South of France, particularly to the northern parts of Marseille. Our intelligence services are convinced that attacks are imminent. Gentleman, the suburbs are ready to go to war!

— Thank you, General, Lavalette said as he resumed the lead. Gentlemen...

The President was interrupted.

An image filled the screen. It was of La Défense, captured in its entirety by a camera installed at Pont de Neuilly. A concrete landscape on a cold night in an Autumn that had arrived early.

The Novotel hotel, with its broken-line architecture, concealed parts of the *Tour AXA* in which only a few offices still had their lights on. Further left was the *Tour Initiale*, the stripped-down rectangle of a building whereupon light and shadow danced together to create a playful mosaic of black and yellow. Further in the background were more buildings, for the most part with their lights off and gathered together giving the impression of being one single entity. La Défense, which usually dazzled with a relentless clarity, seemed to want to hide itself. Down the promenade, hardly visible, stood the *Grande Arche*.

Located on the outskirts of city, La Défense, the business district of Paris, is by day populated by thousands of workers who emerge every morning from the RER train station like obedient little ants, before it turns into an enormous, silent and lifeless space at the end of the day. In total, 40% of France's GDP is generated in this location alone. All industrial and financial powerhouses have at least some presence there.

La Défense, the very symbol of French capitalism, needed to be protected.

It was up to the 1st Light Armored Brigade to undertake that mission. Equipped with brand new VBMR Griffon armored vehicles, Commander Blin and his men were ready. Seven thousand soldiers were sent to twenty different locations. Five hundred seasoned fighters positioned at strategic points within the business district. A column of 100 men had taken up position on the Pont de Neuilly. It was crucial that they were able to watch over and defend the passage into Paris and the Champs Élysées. The other main roads, the A14 entering from the west, the A86 which came from the north towards St Denis and then Charles de Gaulle airport, were also secured and closed to traffic.

The night was cold. The silence was oppressive. The curfew had meant that the city's noise, usually deafening in its ubiquity, had fallen silent. Time seemed to stand still, an open bracket towards an unknown future.

A head appeared in the center of the video:

- Commander Eric Blin, 1st armored Light Brigade, General!
- Go ahead Blin, replied Lartigue, eyes glued to the control screen.
- There's movement in Quatre Temps!

A violent explosion in the distance made the members of the crisis team jump. The video feed showed debris being blown high into the sky, illuminated by powerful flames. Night seemed to disappear, swallowed up by the intense glow of the conflagration. Two very strong

successive explosions rang out. The screen continued to show the flaming tongues of fire which began to get thicker and give off a dense white cloud of smoke, indicating that either one or more buildings had been attacked.

— It's Quatre Temps! They've blown up Quatre Temps, General! The pitch of commander Blin's voice was getting higher. They're informing me as we speak that attacks are taking place near the Grande Arche – they're arriving in waves from Puteaux, Nanterre and Courbevoie – it seems like it's a coordinated attack!

The General turned towards the President.

— Sir, what should we do? It looks like we're going to need to start engaging them in battle!

The soldier stopped for a moment. The question that he was about to ask would change how the world perceived France, the country renowned for the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Enlightenment. He took a deep breath.

— I ask for your authorization to engage the enemy, Mr President!

The Head of State turned towards Henri du Plessis, his friend and Prime Minister since the recent election in May. There we go Henri! There we go, his anxious look seemed to say. He stared at the Interior Minister, a longtime ally of the former President, and with a voice full of sarcasm he uttered:

— Minister, I fear that it will take much more than Karchers to clean up this circus!

— General, the enemy are getting closer, they're currently in the Iris district and they're quickly making ground! Blin regained his calm thanks to his experience as a soldier.

— Mr President? Lartigue asked again.

President Lavalette closed his eyes and lowered his head. His shoulders hunched over as if someone had just dropped a huge burden on them.

His right leg fidgeted with jerky, awkward movements that showed signs of the pressure he found himself under. He was learning how to be a politician. With a good mentor, a little courage and a keen sense of communication, he could even make a career of it. He always wondered what difference there was, besides words and posturing, between a politician and a statesman. He was about to find out.

He opened his eyes, composed himself, and gave a nodded approval to General Lartigue.

— Mr President, I need your verbal authorisation!

— I give you the order to engage, General! Lavalette exclaimed. Defend the country for me, we have a severe need for it.

— Ordering all units on the ground to engage! General Lartigue shouted, a little too loudly. I repeat: you are ordered to engage!

Perched on top of his armored vehicle, commander Blin took in the scene that was before him. The orange glow coming from the area of the Quatre Temps was increasing in intensity, indicating that the fire was spreading. Strong flames pierced a sky covered by dense clouds that then dispersed from the power of the wind. He could just about make out the Seine, whose black waters intermittently reflected the silver rays of the moon.

He took in a deep breath and ordered his troop to start moving towards the boulevard that encircled La Défense. Five other deployed vehicles were to stay on the bridge in order to prevent any attempts to cross the Seine and enter Neuilly, before moving in on Paris itself.

The last video image transmitted to the Élysée's control room was a convoy of armored vehicles beginning to move off, followed by heavily armed men.

In the distance, the first shots of automatic weapons being fired could be heard.

The civil war had begun