

TELEMACHE

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*In memory of Jimmy Clark
a Thames Lighterman*

Telemachus:

*The name of Odysseus' son. In mythology he struggles to prevent Ithaca being taken
from his family by his mother's ambitious suitors. But it is also the name of a 5th
Century saint martyred when trying to prevent a gladiatorial combat.*

*The name means 'Far Warrior'. **Telemache** is the feminine version of the name.*

CHAPTER 1

BRUSSELS NEW CITY STATE, A.D. 2112

‘Is that on alright?’

‘Fine.’ Lise had grimaced because her back ached; nothing to do with the resistance suit she’d just donned, though spending the next few hours in it surely wouldn’t help. The suit was not comfortable, but then you had to be aware of it for it to work. She knew it would feel better once it was operational; at least, it had during testing. But it had never been comfortable, not at any stage in the prototyping. That was not why Rik looked anxious though.

He wanted to be in the suit. He would much rather he was the Factor on this particular job. The bombs had hit the Tervuren sector, mainly family apartments and related services like schools and nurseries. Part of her wished she could pass this job to him; but it was her turn, however unpleasant it was going to be, and not something she was prepared to hand over. Intel suggested it would be a ‘live’ recovery, her first one. Rik’d been through live recovery twice, through the luck of the shifts, and he was not one to dramatise things, so she wasn’t expecting to enjoy this.

‘It’s ok,’ she repeated. ‘Pass my lenses.’ She could have done it herself; the resistance suit was not bulky but it was stiff, due to the strips of sensor fibres and microhydraulics running through it, which would feed back movements and sensations from the remote environment. But it was a tradition that they always did this for each other, and Rik had already reached into her kit bag to get them out before she spoke.

He set the lens case in her hands after she settled into the chair, and he moved off to the console where Sophie and the backup technician stood. She took a deep breath and defied the inflexible suit to get the lenses in, one then the other, knowing

not to try to make sense of the halfway point where one eye saw the remote display and the other the world around her. They settled properly on her corneas, and she looked on the world around the remote, viewed through its mini-cam eyes. That world was not pretty.

What she saw in front of her had been apartment blocks, a few hours ago; now it was a folded heap of living units, a few units intact at the back but the rest all concertinaed together or spilled across the road. This was an improvement on the area just bordering on the remote's field of vision, where a bomb must have hit. Nothing but twisted molten metal recognisable there.

She hid the shudder from the others by putting the gloves on, connected its sensor links by sealing the wrists, and settled back in the chair. The act of sealing the suit also powered it up, picking up the signal from the implants in the motor and aural areas of her brain. She heard that faint background hum that the system made as her connections to and from the remote became fully operational, allowing her, the Factor, to think its movements and give it her voice and experience the world it moved in...

She spoke her name, Lise Marat, and counted to five out loud. The aural implant pipped once, three times more, acknowledging her voice patterns. On the third pip, remote sound cut in. If anyone made a noise where her body was now, she would not know it; the system controlled the auditory areas of her brain entirely. But that was all right; she was past the halfway stage and now she *was* the remote. It was the half-world, the limbo where she was both here and there, that she hated.

The noise level at the bomb site was not too bad. The crunch of feet on the debris told her someone was nearby. She thought the movement of head and eyes, and the boots and fatigues of an engineer came into view. As the remote, she stood and

looked up. The engineer looked down into the mini-cam eyes as if he was looking at a person, used to the conventions of remotes and their Factors, eyebrows cocked as he waited for her to introduce herself.

‘I’m Lise Marat.’ She extended a remote arm, which amused him although dozens of Factors must have made the same jest; he reached down and shook it. ‘Martin Guerand, Rescue Remote Engineer,’ he replied. She did not recognise the type of arm her remote had. ‘What model am I?’ she asked him. ‘You’re a 790D, Lise. D for detachable. Nice voice; shame about the body.’

Another old joke engineers always used on Factors. Lightening each other up before they got down to the grim business. She wished she could take it lightly too; but so far everything suggested this would be a bad job. A 790, a light model, so as not to disturb unsound debris; but detachable limbs too, as though subsidence was expected. ‘Are they sure there are people in there?’ she asked him, and he shrugged: ‘Got a heat source, 90% probability,’ was all he would say. He went serious and beckoned her to follow him.

‘Where do I go in?’ The place he was leading her to looked like solid rubble, with another engineer on top of it holding a heat imager. ‘Up, then in,’ he told her, and started to climb the rubble, making sure she saw the foot- and handholds as he went. ‘It’s not at all stable,’ he pointed out, being careful to distribute his weight as he gingerly made his way up. The blast had taken out maybe eight floors. Everything was in the height of no more than three now. Far above, living units that had survived the blast hung out over nothing. Probably safe, since they’d brought in expensive salvage equipment down here – but no guarantee.

The other man eyed her remote when she got to the top, not the same look as she had got from Martin. This man must be new to the work, so he was not used to the

eerie approximation of human movement that he saw, but it was a wary, resentful look too. That probably meant he was rated 40-plus, a true telepath, conscripted to this work. They were fighting this war against telepath dominated city states, and telepaths in Brussels who escaped the pogroms and the forcible repatriation got all the lousy jobs - telepaths, and conscientious objectors like her and doubtless Martin. But at least she did not have to stand on this deathtrap, except as part of virtual reality. 'Good afternoon, Sir,' she said, politeness the best she could do to make up for a situation not of her making. He nodded, which was something.

Martin was down on hands and knees now, by a slab of concrete that partially roofed a small hollow. She knelt too, stuck her remote's head down and turned on her lights. 'Dear God,' she murmured. The gap was about twelve inches high, and barely any wider. Through the dust though, she could see that it widened further in.

The heat source is about twelve feet down, in the back corner,' The second engineer told her. 'It's small. It may be a child.'

It did not help to know that, not in the least. 'OK. Can I ask you guys to stay this side of things, and not walk on the back unless you have to?'

'You're running the show now,' Martin told her. He handed her a small box, which she clipped to the remote's shoulder. She did not have to ask: hypos with painkiller and sedative, and compact oxygen if the dust in the air was too much for a survivor. It was not much, but it was better than nothing. Martin clipped a deflated resistance tunnel to the waist of the remote, so she could drag it after her. It worked on similar principles to the resistance suit, using mini-hydraulics to inflate the tunnel walls and then altering the chemical structure of the tunnel fabric to make it rigid, so that rescue workers could follow her down in greater safety. Once it was attached, she did not wait. She slithered into the hole head first.

This is our life now, she thought. All of us, crawling through crumbling cities - crumbling morally as well as physically. It's not just Brussels; it's everywhere. It just feels worse in a place like Brussels. There were enough people alive still who remembered the old days, when this city had been the hub of Europe, with a welcome for everyone. Even when world environmental problems became severe, and Brussels became a concentrated City State and most of Europe was farmed or re-forested as world economics demanded, still that sense of welcome was there. An exceptional number of Brussels citizens had been accepted into the Half-Light space colonisation scheme, not surprisingly; they generally had multiple languages, they knew how to get on with folk of all creeds and at all levels of society. The three colony ships had gone and despite the cost, feelings were buoyant; it seemed that the great problems of the world were on the turn, and her team's work with remotes held such promise for fixing many of those problems.

And then scientists discovered the trigger to telepathy. That was when, slowly, it all started to fall apart.

Before the war, when the remotes had been a project that they saw coming into use in five or ten year's time, she had been a biosoftware specialist. It was a small project team, Rik in charge, her on the bio input-output systems, Sophie the remote hardware expert, and Dan, the sensor specialist, creating the interface between Factors and remotes. When war was declared, they had all got together at Rik's and drunk too much as they speculated on how their work would be misused; then they sobered up and agreed on a pact to refuse to work on military applications. The company had backed them, got it all made legally binding; even when the company found itself obliged to turn over their work to the mil, they themselves continued to refuse to apply their skills directly, and got away with it. They cut down on development,

deliberately, began to hone the system they had, testing it themselves until each of them had factoring skills the mil envied, enough to pressure them continuously to change their minds.

And Dan had. He had gone to join the mil.

That had been a defection that hurt, in more ways than one; Dan had been a lover, one of very few in her twenty-five years. A man called Ton Van Eylen had lured him away, Van Eylen who to Lise stood for everything red-necked and gung-ho in Brussels State administration, everything she most loathed. Van Eylen still called her, periodically; trying to get her to join up too. The man ought to realise how much she disliked him. Not much up top and totally numb from the neck down – no heart, no gut telling him how wrong he was. Like most of the State administration, she guessed. She had hung up on him every time.

She felt pressure on her shoulder, the remote's sensors passing their data to the resistance suit. She had been factoring so long that moving the remote was as natural as moving her own body, to the point of not actively thinking about it. She retreated a little, felt the pressure fade and saw the obstruction; a metal stanchion. She could get past it; the pressure tunnel would be more of a problem. She regretted that they had never implemented stress sensors on the remotes; she could have checked if this obstruction was load-bearing and, if not, try taking it out. No built-in cutting gear either; in fact damn all, with their budgets. While doubtless the mil...

Doubtless they were overfunded, busy causing this kind of mayhem in some other city while rescue workers as underfunded as her team struggled to save lives. What do you do? Sell out? Stop whimpering, she ordered herself, and get on.

Through daydreaming she had lost her reckoning of distance, but once past the obstruction she decided to stop and try a contact. She called out, twice, then listened.

There was something. Very muffled, and some way ahead. The way looked blocked. She pushed right up to it, found a section of it that yielded, shoved it aside and moved on. Something stuck out in her path, and she tried to move that. It was hard to make out what it was; the sensors in her gloves were telling her it was firm, but gave slightly. Padded arm of a chair?

God. It was a human arm, from the elbow down. The rest of it was under the debris she had just come past.

The sound came again, nearer now, and clearly a voice. Someone was alive, just ahead. She forced herself on, her own skin crawling as the suit sensed the remote's passage over the dead person's arm.

'Keep talking. I'm trying to trace you.'

'I can see your light. Over here, over here!' It was a child's voice, not very strong but she had the direction now. There were more obstructions in the way, mostly kitchen things and pieces of wall and ceiling panel.

I'm coming. I'm Lise. Talk to me, tell me who you are.' God, it was getting narrower and narrower, even with the stuff that would move out of the way. The load above her creaked ominously. The child, excited to hear another person, did not seem to notice.

'I'm Sam. Your voice sounds funny.'

'That's because I'm speaking through a remote. You'll see it in a minute, a little metal man. I'm controlling it. Now it's found you, I can tell the people outside just where you are.'

'I saw a program at school about remotes. So you're not here, then?' A wistful voice, scared; wanting a real person nearby. 'My leg hurts, real bad.'

‘That’s OK, Sam. It’s the same as if I was there. I can see and feel everything, and I’ve got some medicine to stop your leg hurting.’ She pulled away a piece of ceiling panel, and Sam said ‘Ow!’ because her lights shone in his eyes. She turned them down a little, and a grubby, frightened face stared at her, about two feet ahead.

‘Hello, Sam.’ Sam was studying the remote, which was much the same size as him. He lay mostly face down in a wedge-shaped space, roofed by the kitchen table. He must have got under it when he heard the sirens. The wedge came down to an angle behind him, where his leg must be trapped. She unclipped the little medical box, took out the painkiller hypo and dialed it down to a child’s dose. ‘Sam, can you stretch your hand out to me?’ He did. ‘This’ll be like a little tap on the back of your hand,’ she warned him, but the hypo did not bother him. The remote hands were too fascinating to him; he watched them as she took his pulse. It was racing but steady and strong, with no sign of shock. If his leg was severed, the pressure on it was preventing blood loss.

‘It’s got fingers,’ he grinned. She put the spent hypo away, and wiggled the fingers at him. He wiggled his back.

‘OK Sam, your leg should feel a lot better in a minute. I’m going to move back a little now, and tell the people outside where we are.’ She shuffled back far enough to be out of his hearing. ‘Control, can I talk to one of the engineers up on top?’

‘Lise?’ came Martin’s voice after a moment.

‘Refresh my memory, will you? I know the tunnel will take ten tonnes p.s.m. rigid; what will it take while inflating?’

‘A lot less. Point five max, I’d guess. You badly unstable down there?’

That’s it, I don’t know. The load’s creaking all over the place. I’ve got several obstructions that the tunnel will have to break down if you guys and the medics are

going to get in, but I don't know if they're load-bearing. I've got one dead adult, one live child down here. The child's trapped by one leg, but awake; I've administered painkiller.' She ought to administer the sedative too; it would be fairer to him. She was horribly afraid that they would not get him out of here.

'Lise, here's an alternative suggestion: partial inflation, just enough to haul cutting gear down - you have the tow line built inside the tunnel to do that. You cut the kid free. You got room to bring the kid back yourself if you do that?'

'Just,' she estimated. 'But I'm no cutter. I wouldn't know what to do. And what do I do for the leg, if the pressure's off it and he's losing blood?'

'Get him out fast, I guess. You took under six minutes going in. Or - one of the medics here says we can send pressure bandages down with the cutting gear. We have your sensor display up here too, remember. We can talk you through the cutting and check the pressure bandage is doing its job. Happy for me to talk you through cutting?'

'You'd be perfect, Martin.' She was almost in tears with gratitude at being given some hope. 'I'll move back nearer the kid and let you know when I'm ready for the gear.'

When she crawled back, Sam listened as she explained what was going to happen. His grubby face was solemn.

'Lise,' he said when she had finished, 'Mama was here when the roof fell down. I called for her, but she didn't say anything. Do you think she's dead?'

'I don't know, Sweetheart,' she lied, and busied herself with the tunnel. 'I'll have a look for her when we're done with this.'

She tucked her remote self in beside him while the tunnel inflated, listening to the tune of creaks and groans from the rubble and trying to detect any change that

suggested the tunnel was disrupting what little stability there was. The noise had no pattern she could make out; she gave up, and checked Sam's vital signs again. The delicate fingertip sensors told her the blood flow was all wrong in his trapped leg, though overall his pressure was still good. He'd lose the leg, she was sure.

The screech of metal on metal, well down the tunnel, was followed an instant later by the roof of their section tipping slowly but inexorably down upon them. She heard Sam scream, felt the pressure suit tighten all down her right leg and then pulse, mid-thigh, telling her sensors below that point were inoperable on the remote. Then it was quiet, except for Martin yelling in her ear down the open link.

‘Sam! Sam, are you all right?’ Her voice silenced Martin but set Sam off crying, quiet sobs of real fear. She turned her lights up and through the dusty beams she saw him, the gap above him much less now. She touched him with the remote arm.

‘Sam, are you trapped anywhere else?’ He still sobbed quietly. ‘Come on, Sam!’

‘No.’

‘And your leg?’

‘Still stuck. I want Mama...’

She left him to cry. A verbal command detached the crushed limb of the remote, and she crawled into the space the partly inflated tunnel gave her. The dust was in here too, and the tunnel bent so she could not see if there was a path through.

‘Martin?’

‘Here Lise. You OK?’

‘Short of a remote leg. The kid seems scared, rather than any more hurt. Is the tunnel intact?’

A long silence. 'We've got readings showing a breach, about three metres back from where you are, where that stanchion was. Was there an alternative path around that area?'

'Not really.' And little chance now of there being any. 'What do I do?' she asked.

A roar of noise made her instinctively turn back towards Sam. The world seemed to tip: more dust flew up and her light was knocked awry, and the roaring seemed to go on and on and then, abruptly, it stopped. Pressure was everywhere except her head and her right arm; even the torso of the remote was trapped now.

'Sam!'

No reply. The light was on, but would not direct to her thought commands; the right arm was working, so she made it turn the light to where Sam had lain.

The wall of rubble was solid. 'Sam!' A chunk of cement rolled out of the dust cloud and came to a stop in front of her. 'Martin, can you still pick up my remote's location?'

'You're still registering, Lise. Jesus!'

'Have I moved? Have I gone through to another floor?'

'No, you're much where you were before. - Jan! Thank God. - that idiot 40-plusser; he insisted on staying up on top for you. I thought he'd gone, that time.'

'I've lost the kid.' The sound of her own voice breaking gave her the key she needed to shut emotion down; she started to go through the routines.

'Nil life at this site. The remote's too damaged for me to recover it for you. I'm closing it down; you can send the regular team in. Sorry I broke your remote, Martin. Signing off.'

She spoke the order that powered the remote down and used her right hand to tear the rigid left glove off. The whole suit instantly went flabby. She had braced for the sound of the real world hitting her like a pile driver, as usual, but now the control room noise was very subdued. She could hear Rik and Sophie nearby quietly talking through some point. The last image of the site persisted, the contacts still holding enough power to retain it. She wanted it gone.

Her friends cut their discussion off when she sat up and took the contacts out of her eyes. She was too fierce about it; her eyes watered at her roughness.

‘Damn.’ She had dropped the lens case earlier. She could not see where. Sophie came over, picked it off the floor and put it in her hand. Somehow she got the lenses in their compartments.

‘Come on.’ Sophie, getting her out of the chair; Sophie being gentle with her, which she knew she did not have to do with Lise. She tore the sealing strip apart on the front panel and helped her step out of the suit, and the cooler air got straight into Lise's damp T-shirt and trousers and made her shiver.

The comms in the room clicked into life. The rescue coordinator stood at the window in the control room, looking down on them.

‘Bad luck, Marat. C team, I'm ending your shift early; I'd like to get you in for a meeting tomorrow at ten to review this, see what we can learn from it. Marat, you up to that?’

‘I'll be there.’ Lise could not say any more; the woman's voice irritated her, because she could not decide if she was sympathising or patronising, and she did not care for either. She rolled the suit up, careful with it even though she was coming to hate it, for it was made to measure, valuable and rare, one of maybe two dozen in the

whole of Brussels State. Rik and Sophie each had one, and the people in A and B teams; the rest were with the mil.

Damn. They'd landed A team with a longer shift. She hated to do that. But she did not want to stay here a second longer than necessary. She needed a drink.

Rik set a hand on her shoulder at the door and passed her kit bag. She crouched, and packed the suit and everything else into it, shut away out of sight. Rik's hand was back when she rose.

'You did your best.' He rarely made such gestures to her. Few people did: she did not have the looks or the personality to encourage it. But it was not the way he would have treated Sophie in the same situation, not a man-to-woman kind of sympathy but man-to-man. Damn stupid, that she should resent such treatment when she had fought so long to get it.

'My best wasn't good enough though, was it?'

Rik's hand squeezed; come on, now. 'You're the best of us. I couldn't have done any more,' he assured her: 'No,' she said, and slipped out from under his hand. That was probably true, but it didn't help.



The team had a vehicle from the pool; a rare privilege in these days when fuel was so scarce that most travel was restricted to the public transit systems. Lise insisted on driving. In the back, Rik and Sophie talked quietly for a while, but inevitably conversation came round to the rescue. They argued the pros and cons of alternative tunnel types, of reducing cutting gear size and even building it into a light remote.

And stress sensors, and the thousand and one other things that they had thought vital and been working on before the war, Lise thought.

‘My solution's still the same as ever,’ she remarked: ‘get the bastards who started this in one place and give them first hand experience of their mil achievements.’

Rik's hand on her shoulder again. ‘Sorry Lise. You want to stay the night at our place?’

‘No. You two want to discuss this - and someone needs to have some coherent points for this meeting tomorrow. I don't want to talk about it. Not tonight. Thanks, Rik.’

She dropped them off at their flat, and sat in the car and waited until she saw their light go on. It went out again almost straight away.

Very different people; Rik serious, introverted, barely the right side of the notorious forty rating on the telepath scale; Sophie bubbly, sure of herself, and Clean, a zero on the telepath scale like sixty-four per cent of the Brussels population. Rate under forty, and you were considered little or no threat by the telephobic State authorities; over forty, and you were persona non grata. Most Clean folk didn't like having forty-plussers near, even though they could do nothing to touch a Clean mind; but it was those going up to forty who could get seriously neurotic about their fellow Rated. Could they read your thoughts? Could they plant ideas in your head, or make you do stuff you didn't mean to? You took classes to learn to shield your mind, like folks had once learned physical self defence. Rate a sixty plus and you were interned or dead, no questions asked; the State had legislated on it. Lise had lost friends, lost them in several ways; they fled, or got interned, or had nasty little accidents that no-one saw in side streets. They certainly didn't talk to her any more, for she was only rated seventeen, and in a Zero-run state that meant they were on opposite sides.

She envied Rik and Sophie their closeness. She thought she had it too, with Dan: she had been wrong. Another one that passed her over. She could not seem to crack that side of things in life. Her hard face, which she could not help, and her hard nature which she had cultivated because of it, they stood in the way. Men might respect hard women as colleagues and friends; they did not love them. Not for very long. Nearly a year now: God, she ought to be over that bastard by now, turning out traitor to everything she valued.

There was another vehicle nearby; the driver was watching her. She must look a damn fool, sitting here. She started the car up and drove home, eking out the precious fuel it took to get her there.



TELEMACHE is a prequel to the Ilmaen Quartet. It is being piloted chapter by chapter exclusively to visitors to the author's website.

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