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Lining up *Jester* to thread the high central archway was a little worrying because I was uncertain of the current's strength.

I could see no roils or ripples curling from the abutments, but the lighting wasn't very good. Just then, however, the low sun flared behind me. It had found a rent in the brooding cloud cover before it sank into the waiting teeth of the Massif Central. The ancient sandstone of the bridge in front of me turned suddenly from dark grey to vibrant dusty rose, and its shadowed archways flicked from sooty to royal purple. Incongruously, distant thunder rumbled with the splash of claret sunset, and so the floodlit girl fell off the bridge with a drum roll.

My mind registered that it must be a girl because of the moth-like flutter of cloth from the balustrade. Her skirt billowed up briefly when she hit the water. It was as if some lumpy creature had come suddenly up from the depths to snatch an exhausted insect that had fallen on the surface. Just before she went under completely, I saw a pale blob for an instant. It might have been her face, and then it was gone in the centre of a widening ripple that lived for some seconds in the lazy current. The limpid water of the summertime Garonne was hard to stir, and her splash made no sound that I could hear. There did not even seem to be any foam from the splash, but maybe the shadows absorbed it. In any case, it all happened unexpectedly and my view was obscured.

I shoved *Jester* into reverse and I did see, or thought I did, a long pale object spearing upward from the middle of the ripple for an instant before it, too, slid beneath the surface and the loom of the boat's oncoming bow. My mind told me that this must be an upward reaching arm, and it seemed to wave a thing that was just a blacker shadow with glints of gold. I remember thinking, stupidly, 'The Lady of the Lake', before *Jester's* prow blotted out the scene and then itself

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disappeared in the darkness beneath the span. It was purple darkness only for an instant because the sun was suddenly switched off by the low overcast or sullen mountains to the west.

While the stone archway was sliding over the stern, some hint of movement caused me to glance up. Silhouetted against indigo clouds and shy stars peeking through small rents in them, two shapes were leaning over the bridge's balustrade. One shape seemed to extend itself, like some lengthy and stealthy thing flowing down a wall, and I saw a reddish yellow flash with a few sparks. I ducked, which would have done no good whatsoever since I only increased the size of the target. I heard a metallic whine off the taffrail, along with a soft 'phutt' sound that was aggrandized into a magnificent fart by the bridge tunnel. Then the stone closed overhead and the two shadows were gone.

Under the bridge, in the archway tunnel of solid stone, the sound of churning, reversing water was like being right beside Niagara Falls on the promenade. But I knew that it was hopeless. You can't stop a boat like you can stop a car. *Jester* had passed over her, and might have pinned her under the water. I spun the wheel hard over to port with the idea of giving the victim some room in which to surface between the main hull and the starboard outrigger, but there was not much clearance in the tunnel.

*Jester's* speed had been much reduced in that fierce burst of full reverse, but not halted. The roar of water ceased as we glided out from under the other side of the bridge. I de-clutched the engine just before I scrambled behind the windowed wheelhouse.

How were they to know that the wheelhouse was steel, and that the glass was really polycarbonate?

I glanced quickly back under the arch, but saw no one struggling amid the black serpent coils of disturbed water. Next, I peered intently toward the top of the span, and saw two dark shapes watching from this side, now, as the boat drifted away from the bridge with hardly a ripple. Two more

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'phutts' sounded almost simultaneously, and along with them came two sprays of sparks. A clang like a bell sounded from somewhere forward, and water splashed close astern. Then, the two dark forms turned away and diminished until they were covered by the balustrade. They disappeared. I heard doors slam and then a car accelerating from idle to urgent with a squeal of tires along the invisible pavement atop the dimly lighted bridge.

The victim could not have known, nor the two observers up on the bridge, that *Folderol Jester* was a decidedly odd craft. The boat did not have a conventional propeller, but a kind of low-speed, high-volume jet drive. The impeller was enclosed except for a wire-meshed water intake aperture, so there were no exposed sharp whirling propeller blades to cut anyone into small and bloody pieces. I was remembering this even as I fumbled my way back to the wheel.

The Old City's medieval market quay should have been almost dead ahead when *Jester* emerged from the tunnel, and I half expected that its lights would be shimmering on the water. I'd done no night navigation for a while, and as I spun the spokes of the wheel I noticed only a few pinpoints of light amid the distant jumbled and angular shapes curving past the bow. The old market wharves, my planned destination, showed no lights at all. The market cobblestones glistened in only the barest glow coming through *Le Port Romain's* wide windows under the city's medieval wall. It was easy to forget how the world was changing. It continually came as a surprise, in small ways. Only the palest light from the Old City reflected off the low overcast to give me some aid in turning the boat.

Further ahead upstream, as the bend in the river wheeled into view, I could glimpse in the distance an uneven straggle of multi-coloured lights that still sparkled from the New City like a broken necklace in a deep vault. The New City of Moissac had been built in more modern times just where the mighty Tarn River flowing from the far northern hinterland

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of eastern France joined the east-west flowing and equally mighty Garonne.

The glitter of the more modern New City did not reach down the river to the old bridge. Dark Age night was again asserting its rule over medieval Moissac. The fuel shortages starting more than a decade back in September of 2000 had dictated ongoing electric frugality and, in the Old City at least, narrow twisting streets prevented these surviving dungeon lights from escaping beyond the ancient crenulated battlements.

Turning took time, some backing and filling in the dark, because the channel of the upper Garonne is not so very wide for a boat fifty feet long, especially with the onset of summertime low water. But at last it was done and I aimed the bow back toward the centre span. The bridge was neither golden nor picturesque since the sun had gone, and especially from this shadowed upstream side. It was a heavy dark medieval thing that hunched over the water. A dragon gloating over its prey. The archways were flat black against a scaly black of indistinct stonework.

I pierced the dragon with a stab of the searchlight. But I could see or hear no swimmer in the light. Although there was no propeller to do fatal damage, could the boat's hull have struck hard enough to knock a girl unconscious? Or – my mind was racing – could one of their shots have hit her? No, the sound effects had accounted for all three bullets. Could the long length of the hull have pinned her under long enough for a shocked victim to fill with water? Or... had the reversed jet not only slowed *Jester*, but had also pushed the girl ahead of the boat toward the Old City side of the bridge?

Visibility had not been good with the Old City shuttered and that had also been while I was cringing from the 'phutts' before the car squealed away, and naturally before I had turned on the searchlight.

With the shock and surprise transforming into a kind of dull foreboding, I did things methodically. First of all, I lifted a life ring from the wheelhouse coaming and then unsnapped

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the searchlight from its mounting. I could hold the light in one hand and direct its beam as I wished, while the other hand could toss the life ring if necessary. I throttled back to dead slow, once I got the boat turned about, and again aimed her bow toward the inky hemisphere beneath the middle of the bridge. I swept the searchlight methodically over the water. There was now hardly a ripple left from the earlier disturbance of full reversing in the tunnel. I would have seen anything floating, would have heard anyone swimming. *Jester's* steam engine never did more than breathe in soft sighs even when it was working very strenuously; and the deeply immersed jet produced only a chuckle of turbulence on the surface – except in the frenzy of emergency reverse on full throttle.

As for the sounds of traffic on the bridge, rush hour was over and Old Moissac isn't exactly a metropolis. In any case, with the petroleum shortage, there were noticeably fewer cars on French roads after work. So, there were few auditory or visual distractions, but I didn't see anything.

It then came to me, belatedly, that the two men in the car might well have hit her on the head, or tied her arms and legs, before tossing her over... if, as it clearly seemed, these two men, as I supposed they were, had been trying to kill her. What about that black object that the pale arm had held aloft? What about the golden glints of metal in the shadows? A weight and chains?

While this was churning through my mind, I brought *Jester* to a dead stop with compensating bursts of forward and reverse. After dropping the life ring to the deck and re-mounting the searchlight in its fixture so that its beam stared once more into the archway, I jumped and scabbled over the main hull's cargo and out onto the outrigger platform.

Levering off my size 12 Nikes against the edge of the plywood decking, I remembered not to dive headfirst into the river. No telling what sharp objects might be sticking upwards from the bottom. Folks in these parts had used the river as a dump for centuries. So I lowered my rather lanky

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six-foot two-inch frame gingerly into water that was not all that warm. It was only June. Cold winds still chilled the water, especially on overcast nights like this one.

I hoped that the weak current would carry *Jester* safely down to the bridge where the hull would fetch up gently against one of the stone pylons.

I Australian crawled my way from *Jester* and, swimming now, went under the stone span of the Moissac bridge again. Within the half-lit tunnel, my arms made echoed surf. It wasn't hard to imagine rhythmic surges of some giant thing almost upon me. When I reached the other side, where she had tumbled in, I treaded water, took some deep breaths, exhaled half of the last one and dived. I have fair breath, having grown up scuba and snorkel diving on the Florida coast – with military training since. My first dives that evening probably lasted more than a minute.

It was, of course, pitch black down there. It was not very deep, though, only twelve or thirteen feet with the lowering water. The canal route is supposed to have a dredged channel of three metres. I fought my way down to the muck and mud at the bottom, and began feeling around with my arms and hands. I had a very good idea of where she had gone in – more or less the middle of the centre span, the widest span. If she were still there, I would eventually find her. Probably it would be too late, of course.

I encountered no soft and clammy object that might be a drowned female body. But on the fourth dive, my hand encountered a smooth and squarish thing already half-settled into the bottom ooze. I felt around this, discovered that it had a handle, and knew it for a briefcase. Surfacing with it, I saw golden hinges, tabs and locks. I had the vague idea that it might contain some identification. It was black vinyl-covered aluminium. It wasn't heavy. Treading water, I drained it out, although I couldn't snap it open. It had combination dials on the locks. After it dribbled more or less empty, and this did not take long because the halves did not

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fit together snugly, I placed it carefully on its side on the surface.

It floated well enough on the quiet water in the eddying lee of a massive stone abutment. The wavelets were not so importuning as to splash up to where the two sides of the case closed together. It was not waterproof, by no means a top quality case. Then, I noted that its brass fittings suddenly winked out. *Jester's* light had swung away.

These observations may have flitted around my brain, but they cost no time. As soon as the case was bobbing on its own, and thankful for the short rest, I dived once more. This time, I could only stay down there for perhaps a minute or less. I searched the area carefully again, and stretched my time down there to the end. Coming urgently toward the surface I saw a bright oval blob swirling around crazily on the water above me. Searching? Had the men in the car been plagued with second thoughts? Had they come back with a flashlight to make certain? This notion caused my heart to kick, and it was already pounding in my ears. And this jolt caused me to lose control and snort water in.

No matter what awaited above, I kicked upward in desperation, the water searing my nose, throat and lungs in agony. I surfaced gasping, my vision dark and heart pounding heavily. I kept seeing a thousand points of light, as the elder George Bush had once put it, but the bright oval of incandescence had flitted off elsewhere. A blurred glance upward seemed to rule out shadows hanging over the bridge, and no one shot at me while I clung to the abutment fighting for breath and vomiting Garonne out of me. It had been a bit closer than I wanted to admit, and I had left no margin for that scare with the crazy light, but I was also morally sure there was no body on the bottom.