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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Europe in Winter**

Written by Dave Hutchinson

Published by Solaris

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**REBELLION**

Printed in Denmark

The Fractured Europe Sequence

*Europe in Autumn*  
*Europe at Midnight*  
*Europe in Winter*

# PART ONE

DESIRE  
PATHS

1.

THEY ALMOST MISSED the train. They had always planned to arrive close to departure time, so that Amanda had to spend as little time as possible on her feet, but there was a flash mob on the Place de la Concorde and all the streets leading into it were blocked.

“What the hell is this?” muttered William, who was driving.

“Anti-Union protesters,” Kenneth said, reading the placards being carried by the crowds boiling between the traffic.

“Well, God has a sense of irony, anyway,” muttered Amanda, shifting uncomfortably on the back seat.

William looked back at her. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m all right,” she said. “Don’t worry about me. Can we go another way?”

They were in a make of vehicle nicknamed *La Rage* by the French, basically a looming black mediaeval fortress festooned with bullbars and lights and antitheft devices. Kenneth had wanted something more anonymous, but William said the only thing Parisian drivers understood was force. It had one obvious drawback; although its defensive systems could cause epileptic fits and rectal bleeding in anyone stupid enough to try to steal or attack it, it was too large to go down many of Paris’s lesser thoroughfares.

“We’re stuck,” William said, twisting left and right to look out of the windows and hovering his finger over the icon on the dash display which triggered a 10,000 volt charge through the skin of the car, as protesters bumped and pushed by between the line of vehicles.

“Don’t hurt anybody,” Kenneth said. “We’ll be all right.” He looked at his watch, then at Amanda. “We’ll be all right,” he told her. “Fucking stupid car,” she said with a little smile.

He shrugged helplessly and turned back in his seat to look out through the windscreen. From this vantage point, he could see a street filled with the roofs of lesser vehicles, the spaces in between them choked with protesters blowing whistles and waving animated banners. Most of the protesters were wearing gas masks or scarves around their faces, the traditional garb of the political mob; some were more self-consciously retro, sporting Guy Fawkes masks.

“Well,” he said, to nobody in particular.

Unable to use the car’s more proactive weaponry – the horn had a mode which, when activated, produced a note that could shatter shop windows – William had to amuse himself by depressing the throttle pedal every now and again; the low, rumbling throb of the engine was enough to make protesters shy away momentarily. But even that palled after a while; William really wanted to electrocute or nerve gas or incinerate or just simply drive up and over the wall of cars and people standing between them and their destination, and none of these options were available to him, so he just settled into a long loop of swearwords in French and English.

Eventually, the *gendarmierie* arrived. Kenneth, William and Amanda were treated to brief views of large grey vehicles driving back and forth across the Place, spraying the crowds of protesters, journalists and rubbernecking tourists with riot foam, at which point many people fell down fast asleep and were subsequently scooped up by other vehicles and deposited none-too-gently on the edges of the open space. There would be broken bones and damaged camera equipment and probably some deaths, and later many lawsuits and insurance claims and scandals uncovered by the news organisations, but for the moment the traffic could move again. Which pleased William.

“Now we’re late,” Kenneth observed.

“We’ll be fine.” William touched an icon on the dash and the

car did his favourite trick apart from killing people – filling the windscreen with a head-up display which showed a GPS map of the surrounding streets, directions to their destination, and the location of anything the vehicle’s expert system judged to be a possible threat. A green carpet seemed to appear before them, stretching away into the distance, curving around the obelisk in the centre of the Place and fading out of sight. William depressed the car’s accelerator and it moved smoothly forward with the stream of traffic, passing police vehicles and straggling protesters alike.

The early part of their route had been something of a bone of contention. Kenneth had maintained that it would have been preferable to head directly north from the flat in the 8th and pick up the ring road. William had pooh-poohed that idea, saying it added miles to their journey and that it would be best to head almost directly south towards Savigny. In the end, the thing which decided the matter was the fact that William was the only one of them who could drive and could, basically, do whatever he wanted once he was behind the wheel of *La Rage*.

Once they were out of the traffic in the centre of town, William set the car into cruise mode and the note of the engine dropped to an almost subliminal vibration that pushed them gently back into the upholstery. Beyond the windscreen, the green carpet unrolled before them.

Kenneth looked at his watch, and from the back seat Amanda said, “We can always take another train.”

He shook his head. Travel on the Line was not like any other kind of rail travel. One did not, for example, normally have to take out temporary citizenship in the company which ran the Channel Tunnel rail route. If they missed this train, they might not be able to travel again until the Spring, and he couldn’t put her through all this again. He glanced across at William, who nodded at the little numbers at the bottom of the windscreen to indicate that they were already at the speed limit for this road. The French had a particularly bloody-minded band of traffic policemen, known as *guêpes* after their black and yellow ballistic armour, who rode ferocious 3,000 cc BMW motorcycles and carried assault rifles. Nobody in their right mind wanted to tangle with them. Kenneth shrugged.

The Line itself did not pass anywhere near Paris; the amount of demolition needed to accommodate it would have been ruinous. Its track gauge was unlike any other in Europe, to prevent other rail companies using it, but this also meant that everywhere the Line wanted to go, dedicated track had to be laid; it could not share the rail infrastructure of the nations and polities and duchies and sanjaks and earldoms and principalities and communes it passed through. In the case of Paris, a long consultation period had accompanied the negotiations for a Line Embassy. There had been protests and riots and sit-ins wherever the government proposed granting a site, and in the end Savigny-sur-Orge had been chosen simply because the level of civil unrest had been slightly lower there than elsewhere. There was a general feeling in France that Savigny had wound up with the country's Line Embassy because the Saviniens had just not tried quite hard enough.

France was an unusual proposition for the Line. Everywhere else it passed, cities and polities clamoured for branch lines and Consulates and Embassies; there was a certain – unfounded – cachet in having a connection with the Line. But in France there was, on the whole, very little welcome, and the Line Company had found itself having to deal with militant architects, conservationists, eco-terrorists, political terrorists of many stripes, politicians, heavily-armed farmers, the French Army and Air Force, and hundreds of thousands of annoyed property owners. The Line solved the problem the way it solved all the problems it encountered during its decades-long plod across the Continent. It just kept going and eventually the opposition gave up. The Line stitched its way from one side of France to the other, and in time a branch curled away towards what, in a gesture of capitulation, the French began to call Paris-Savigny.

The Line recommended that all passengers arrive at least two hours before departure, to allow time for security and document checks. In practice, this always resulted in a last-minute rush before the boarding gates were opened, and by the time Kenneth, Amanda and William arrived at the Embassy compound there was a long line of people waiting to pass through.

They had to park outside the compound – the Line allowed no foreign vehicles onto its territory – and find a concierge who could

come up with a motorised wheelchair for Amanda, but after that everything went to plan.

William had no visa, so they had to part at the gate to the compound, and all of a sudden the events of the morning seemed to melt away and they stood there awkwardly, unable to think of anything to say to each other. They settled for hugs, and then William turned away and headed towards the car park without looking back.

Kenneth looked at his wife. She was sitting uncomfortably in the wheelchair, cradling the bulge of her pregnancy, her face pale. “We’ll soon be on board,” he told her.

“It takes ten minutes to process each passenger,” she said with a weak smile. “Baggage check-in, security, documents, more security. They can process a hundred passengers at a time. Each train has a maximum capacity of fifteen hundred passengers.”

He reached down and squeezed her shoulder affectionately. “I know,” he said. “I know.”

“Two and a half hours to completely board each train,” she went on calmly. “And that’s if everything goes smoothly, which it never does because passengers forget their documents or their phones set off the security scanners or their perfume sets off the explosive sniffers or they just decide to argue with the officials about any damn little thing that occurs to them.”

“We’re in a priority queue,” he reminded her.

“More expense,” she said. “This is costing a fortune.”

“Just a few more minutes,” he said.

She reached up and took his hand. “I love you,” she said.

He squeezed her hand and looked around at the lines of people waiting to pass through the boarding checks. These were not, it occurred to him, people who were normally used to queuing for anything. Very few of them – none at all, in fact, he decided as he scanned the crowds – presented as working class, or even upper middle class. There were furs and Louis Vuitton carry-ons and cashmere overcoats draped capelike over shoulders, and children with sunglasses worth more than your average Renault factory worker’s annual salary. One small group – beefy shaven-headed father with expensive wrist jewellery, slim mother with a pushchair designed by the same people who designed Formula One racing cars, and three

large neckless men who were almost certainly bodyguards – he tagged as *mafiye*. He thought he caught a glimpse, at the core of another knot of passengers, of a German actress of a certain notoriety. The Line was not so much a mode of transport, more a lifestyle choice. He and Amanda looked the part, but their clothes were all cheap copies, their luggage bootlegs of Swaine Adeney Brigg classics.

The Line did not care what its passengers were wearing. Its French Embassy was a forbidding four-storey grey cube at the heart of the compound, its upper three floors lined with tall slit windows and its flat roof festooned with dishes and antennas. To one side stood a building which looked like a small out-of-town motel, and it was through this, shepherded by liveried and armed Line security personnel, that the queues of passengers were disappearing.

Amanda was speaking on her phone. “Yes,” she was saying. “We’re just waiting to get on board now. Very, yes. Some time the day after tomorrow. In the evening, I think.”

They had been living in Paris for five years now. Amanda had her own design business, producing limited-edition silk-screen T-shirts for film and theatre premieres. They had been here long enough, Kenneth thought, to get a sense of the city’s moods and rhythms. He had thought that apart from the obvious signifiers of architecture and weather and language, all European cities were much the same, but Paris had proved him wrong. It was quite unlike anywhere else he had ever lived.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Amanda. She had finished her call and returned her phone to her pocket.

He smiled and shook his head. “Nothing much. Who was on the phone?”

“The office.” She was worried about how the business would cope without her, even though Marie-France, her assistant, was more than capable of taking care of things in her absence. “The Luhansk stuff.”

Despite their name, Luhansk were a middle-aged stadium rock band from Leicester in the English Midlands. Amanda was trying to branch the business out into high-end concert merchandising. Kenneth said, “I thought all that was wrapped up.”

She shrugged. “It’s nothing. A couple of last-minute details. I’ll conference with Marie-France and their merchandising manager when we’re on the train.”

“You’re not supposed to exert yourself,” he told her.

She waved it away. “Fifteen minutes in a conference space. I won’t even have to stand up. Half an hour at the most.”

The queue moved forward a few metres, then stalled again. They were just outside the open glass doors of the departure building.

“Do you think William will be all right?” Amanda said. “On his own?”

“Yes,” he replied. He had gone over things with William over and over again; he was as sure as he could be that everything would run smoothly. Homicidal driving tendencies apart, William was a solid, reliable fellow. He was a credit to the group.

“I shouldn’t worry about him, I suppose,” said Amanda. “But still.”

The line moved again and they passed into the departures building, and then there was a smartly-dressed young Moroccan, with a pad under his arm and a little badge on the breast pocket of his blazer identifying him as ‘Etienne,’ standing beside them, murmuring apologies in almost accentless English.

“Mrs Pennington, Mr Pennington,” he said, “I’m so dreadfully sorry. You were never meant to queue here. Please accept my most abject apologies on behalf of the Trans-Europe Rail Company.”

“We expected to queue,” Kenneth said equably. “Everyone else has to.”

“But Mrs Pennington’s condition...” Etienne shook his head. “Unforgivable. I promise you the staff members responsible will be disciplined.”

“We don’t want to get anybody in trouble,” Amanda said.

Etienne shook his head again. “Madame,” he said with a solemnity deeper than his years, “we do not treat our citizens like this.”

The exchange was carried out in quiet voices, but even so it was starting to attract the attention of other passengers around them. Kenneth said, “So what can we do?”

“Please,” Etienne said. “Please, come with me.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” Amanda said. “Look, we’re almost at the head of the queue now.”

“Mrs Pennington,” Etienne said, holding out his hands. “I insist. It’s the least I can do.”

Amanda and Kenneth exchanged glances, and he nodded fractionally.

“Lead the way, then, Etienne,” she said, loudly enough for her voice to carry as she steered her wheelchair out of the queue and followed the Moroccan, the chair’s tyres hissing softly on the hardwearing carpet.

Etienne led them up to the line of Security desks and then turned off sharply and opened a door at the edge of the room. Beyond was a stark, utilitarian corridor ending in another door, and when they went through that they found that they had passed beyond the security and document checks. Etienne took them to a small side-room, where a young woman in a blue and silver uniform sat waiting beside a portable scanner.

“You understand,” Etienne said. “You must still undergo the usual procedures.”

“Of course,” Kenneth said, suddenly feeling trapped. The plan had been to go through Security with all the other passengers. It was late; the staff would be under pressure to process everyone quickly, they would be able to see the line stretching back to the doors of the departure building and know that they still had a lot to do. They would hurry, be sloppy. Here it was just them and Etienne and the young woman in her smart uniform, and all the time in the world. He looked down at Amanda and said, “Ladies first?”

If Amanda was at all nervous, she didn’t show it. She rolled the chair up to the scanner and waited patiently while the young woman – whose nametag identified her as ‘Claudine’ – set things up. Claudine was just as apologetically efficient as Etienne, but she and Amanda exchanged a few words – her English was almost as good as Etienne’s – and at one point Amanda reached out and rested her hand on the girl’s forearm, and Kenneth knew everything would be all right.

At one point during the procedure, Claudine looked up from the scanner’s readout and said, “Madame, there is a...” She touched her stomach.

“It’s a remote foetal heart monitor,” Amanda told her. “There were some problems early on. It lets my doctor keep an eye on things.”

“But no problems now?” asked the girl sincerely.

Amanda shook her head. “We decided to leave the monitor where it is, though, until after the baby’s born.”

Claudine nodded. “My sister, she was the same,” she said.

“Her baby, it’s okay, though?”

“Him? He’s just started school. Strong as a horse.”

Etienne, standing quietly in the corner using his pad to process their documents, glanced up momentarily, but said nothing.

“That’s good,” Amanda said with a smile. “I’m glad.”

Claudine beamed and patted her on the shoulder. “There,” she said. “You’re done.” She looked at Kenneth. “Now you, if you please, sir?”

Kenneth also passed the security scan, as did their luggage, and as Claudine packed up the scanner Etienne took over again, showing the couple out of the room and down another corridor and through another door and suddenly they were on the platform and there it was in front of them, the sleek blue and silver Paris-Novosibirsk Express, all seventy carriages of it, sleeping in the lunchtime sunshine.

“I have taken the liberty,” Etienne announced, beckoning a liveried porter over to help with their luggage, “of upgrading your berth.”

“There was no need to do that,” Kenneth said. “Really.”

Amanda reached up and touched him on the arm. “Darling.” She said to Etienne, “That’s very kind of you, Etienne. I’m sorry that we’ve caused you so much trouble.”

“You have caused us no trouble at all,” Etienne assured them, handing their documents back to Kenneth. “It has been a pleasure to meet you, and I hope you have a safe and comfortable journey.”

He turned and walked back along the platform, no doubt to firefight some other small problem. Kenneth watched him go, knowing that the young man’s life was about to become interesting in ways he could never possibly have imagined. Then he followed Amanda and the porter along the train, where a ramp had been fitted to allow Amanda’s wheelchair to board.

The upgrade Etienne had told them about turned out to be roughly the equivalent of upgrading from a Sopwith Camel to Concorde. They had booked the cheapest sleeper they could afford, a cramped berth with bunks and many space-saving features. The berth they were shown to was more of a stateroom.

“It’s got a bed,” Amanda said with a big smile.

They were obviously in oligarch territory. Kenneth had spotted the *mafiye* family a little further down the corridor, entering their

own stateroom. “And a shower,” he said, peeking in through an open door.

“Oh, thank God,” she said, levering herself out of the wheelchair. “I really need the loo.” She went into the bathroom and closed the door, leaving Kenneth to tip the porter, who collapsed the wheelchair, stowed it in a cupboard, and left.

Kenneth wandered around the stateroom. It seemed unbelievable that they had been upgraded quite so far, and if it was unbelievable it was suspect. He took his phone from his jacket pocket, opened an app that would sweep the room for bugging devices, and left it on the bedside table. There were baskets of fruit, chocolates and complimentary toiletries on the bed, along with a bottle of a nice-looking Cabernet and two shrink-wrapped wineglasses. He picked them up, turned them over, put them back.

The room was in fact four regular-sized berths knocked together. At one end was a little kitchenette-diner area; in the middle was a living area with an entertainment set and a coffee table and a small sofa. He looked in the cupboards in the kitchenette, found basic cooking equipment. One cupboard hid a little fridge with some wrapped cheeses and sliced meats. In one of the drawers he found a corkscrew, and he took it back to the bedroom and opened the bottle of wine, set it on the bedside table to breathe. The phone was still scanning, but it hadn't found anything yet.

The door of the bathroom opened. Amanda came out, saw him sitting on the bed, and came over and sat beside him. She took his hand and held it against her cheek. Neither of them said a word.

THE LINE HAD been decades in the building. It had originally aspired to being a straight line drawn across Europe and Asia, from the Atlantic coast of Spain to Cape Dezhnev, facing Alaska across the Bering Strait. Geography and simple pragmatism meant that this was never achievable, and the Line crossed the continent in a series of meanders and doglegs. Only one train a year ever made the entire journey – popular with tourists and gap-year students with wealthy parents and train buffs who had spent the previous decade saving for their tickets. The rest of the scheduled services ran on a

weekly or monthly basis, vast trains crossing the continent at up to two hundred and fifty kilometres an hour and peeling off down branches from the main Line to reach their destinations.

The Paris-Novosibirsk Express ran twice a month, in each direction. The capital of the Republic of Sibir had reconfigured itself into a financial powerhouse to rival Shanghai, a genuine global player, and according to Kenneth and Amanda's temporary Line citizenship application they were travelling there to meet with a group of hedge fund managers who had shown some interest in investing in Amanda's business. Siberian businessmen were big on physical presence; for important meetings they preferred face-to-face, in-the-flesh stuff rather than teleconferencing. It was a nine-hour flight from Paris, which Amanda's doctor had advised against, and driving was out of the question. Which left either a journey on various national railways made almost impossible by interminable border delays, or a three-day trip on the Line.

The train left Savigny on time on a quiet vibration of motors. It was said, although no one had yet been able to prove it, that Line trains were powered by fusion generators, notwithstanding that fusion power was still in its infancy. The train made its way down the branch line from Savigny at a steady seventy kph, leaned into a long curve as it joined the main West-East Line, and accelerated smoothly up to full speed.

Before they were even out of France Amanda put on her glasses, dialled some numbers on her pad, and settled into a long and apparently very dull conference with Marie-France in Paris, Luhansk's merchandising manager in London, and at least two members of the band themselves, probably in some Caribbean tax haven. Kenneth could only hear her side of the conversation. Glancing at her pad, on the living room coffee table, he saw a two-dimensional representation of the conference space she and the other participants were using. It was a generic boardroom with the avis of the others gathered at the end of a narrow conference table; the perspective looked odd because Amanda was seeing it in fully-rendered three-d through her glasses.

He left her to it, went over to the window. Not that there was much to see. The twin tracks of the Line ran across Europe between high

fences, about a kilometre apart. The space between the fences was a rushing wasteland of gravel broken by the occasional siding and repair depot. Any scenery was a long way away. He went and had a shower.

Amanda was still at it when he came out, sketching notes in a text editor on her pad while she carried on her conversation via the conference space. Kenneth poured himself a glass of wine and stretched out on the bed.

He woke some time later, the empty glass on the table by the bed and Amanda sitting beside him.

“Sorry,” he said, struggling upright against the headboard. “Nodded off.”

“It’s the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks,” she said. She stroked his hair. “It always makes me sleepy.”

“Where are we?”

She looked across the stateroom to the little paperscreen pasted to the far wall beside the kitchenette. It was showing, in a constantly-scrolling series of measurements and languages, their speed and present position.

“Still in Greater Germany, by the look of it,” she said.

He picked up his phone and checked the time. The bug-scanning app had finished its job and found nothing objectionable, but that didn’t rule out all forms of surveillance. “How was the conference?”

She shrugged. “It’s always the same. Last-minute tweaking, last-minute panics. They just need an adult to hold their hand and tell them everything will be fine. You know how it is.”

He sighed. “Do you want to go out for dinner or get room service?” he asked.

“Maybe we can eat out tomorrow,” she said with a smile. “I’m tired.”

“All right,” he said. He got up and went over to the entertainment centre and waved up the onboard menu.

Room service turned out to be excellent.

OLIGARCH STATUS OR not, it was still, after all, a train journey, and the next day dragged as the express crossed Poland, skirted the northern borders of Ukraine, and passed teasingly close to Moscow

before angling away eastward. Amanda took care of some more work, Kenneth tried to read a novel. They sat and watched a film, and then spent an hour or so arguing about it.

In the evening, they took the wheelchair out of its cupboard, unfolded it, and headed for the dining car in the next carriage. Few of the passengers had decided to take advantage of the early sitting for dinner, and the car was nearly deserted. Most of the other diners seemed to be travelling alone. Kenneth ordered Kobe beef with dauphinoise potatoes and a green salad. Amanda chose red snapper. They ate in silence, apart from a few comments about how good the food was.

Afterward, they went back to their stateroom and lay on the bed, holding each other, while the paperscreen on the wall ate up the kilometres and the train reached the edge of the European Plain – the edge of Europe itself, as some saw it – and began to negotiate the Ural Mountains.

Just before eleven o'clock in the evening, Kenneth's phone rang a discreet little chime. He sat up unwillingly and checked the screen on the wall, found that his calculations had only been a few tens of kilometres out, and he leaned over and kissed his wife. There was no need to say anything.

They didn't bother with the wheelchair. Kenneth began to take it out of its cupboard, but she put her hand on his shoulder and shook her head, and he understood that this was something she wanted to do under her own steam.

As they stepped out into the corridor, Kenneth felt the train slow and lean into a curve in the track; the approach to the Ufa Tunnel, cutting beneath a number of problematical mountains in the Southern Urals which it had been uneconomical or geographically impossible to go around. At twenty-four kilometres, it was the longest of the Line's many tunnels.

Kenneth and Amanda walked unhurriedly. Few people were about at this time of the night; they saw a couple of white-jacketed stewards carrying trays of late snacks to other sleeper berths, nodded hello as they passed. Just an ordinary couple stretching their legs before retiring for the night.

They walked three carriages towards the front of the train. At the end of the third, they came to a dead end, a blank wall. On the

other side of the wall was the carriage containing the train's power unit, whatever it was. As they reached it, there was a concussion through the train, the shockwave as it entered the tunnel at a little over ninety kilometres an hour. At that speed, they had about eight minutes until it reached the midpoint. Kenneth triggered the stopwatch countdown on his phone and looked into Amanda's eyes. There was nothing to say, really. She put her arms around him, buried her face in his neck, hugged him tightly.

Everything had, in the end, gone all right. Kenneth thought of William, hopefully by now out of France and on his way home. He thought of Etienne, probably sleeping the sleep of the innocent in a flat somewhere in the Paris suburbs. He had liked Etienne. He thought of the *mafiye* family, all the other families on the train, all the children. *We are not evil people*, he thought.

He held his phone so he could see it over Amanda's shoulder – she was a little taller than he was – and dialled a number, touched *call* to arm the device implanted in her belly. She'd carried it for so long, so stoically. She had never faltered. His heart swelled with love and pride for her.

The alarm on his phone started to beep. He dialled another number, hovered his thumb over *call*.

He said, "I love you so much."

She hugged him tighter. "Oh, sweetheart..."

He touched *call*.

For a fraction of a second, before the top of the mountain blew off in an explosion which was heard in Kyiv and detected by a college seismology experiment in Vermont, both ends of the tunnel jetted a plume of plasma as hot as the corona of the Sun.