

Requiem for a Butterfly

By David Vickery

It was late afternoon when I arrived. A swathe of bitter red was slashed through the cloud-burdened sky and the nearly leafless trees clattered as they were grabbed by fists of cold wind. Even though I'd been warm a second ago I was already chilled. I turned up my clothing.

In front of me was a man, stooping among the trees looking for wood. There wasn't much left and he was reduced to gathering twigs and small sticks. Something about him suggested he should have been in the prime of life, but he was small, wiry rather than muscular, ill-formed, and dragged his left foot when he walked. Despite the biting wind and the stony earth, he was barefooted. His clothing consisted of a single sheepskin garment belted at his waist.

I walked over to him and he looked up warily. In his expression was puzzlement, curiosity, pain, worry, resignation. He didn't recognize me, which in itself was a shock for a man who lived virtually his whole life among the same forty or fifty families. But it was something more. I was dressed a little better than he was with my tunic, cloak, leggings and bundle on my back but I was still obviously low born. Yet evidently I didn't fit in, and this concerned me.

I reached up and broke off some dead branches that were above his reach. (Maybe my height was part of the problem.) They would be better fuel than his miserable handful. I held them out to him and he looked at me mutely, with a hint of something that might have been hope. I extended my hands and this time the gesture was unmistakable. He took the wood, his eyes never leaving mine.

"What do they call you?" As I thought the phrase, my language centre processor translated it into Middle English and I parroted the words I heard in my brain.

"John, son of William." My LCP also translated his reply for me, although the accent seemed outlandish. No doubt mine sounded equally strange to him.

"My name is Richard Attford." I looked about us. The winds were blowing colder and the light was starting to go. "I need a place to stay. Will you let me stay with you?"

He looked startled and scratched himself. "Where is your own home?"

"It is far from here. I cannot go there now. I seek sanctuary."

"Sanctuary?"

"Like in a church. I can pay you."

His mouth creased into a fleeting smile. "My home is surely no church, Richard atte ford; but if you can pay, you are welcome to it."

The conversation seemed to be at an end. He turned to go and beckoned me to follow him.

As he led the way I took the opportunity to view him in more detail. My EyeTap fed telemetry directly to my retina and projected it as a head-up display. He was twenty years old. His metabolic scan showed that he was deficient in many basic nutrients:

vitamins A, C and D were especially lacking. The problem with his left foot was revealed as a former broken ankle, incorrectly set. The zoom showed up both lice and fleas as fellow travellers. He was dirty, too, in ways that we moderns have long forgotten: begrimed, caked with dirt: befouled, and completely at ease with the fact. The smells that wafted from him were a rude shock.

We got back to his home and he stood aside to let me walk in. It was a one-roomed wood frame wattle-and-daub hut with a roof of verminous-looking thatch. There was one tiny window and the entrance didn't have a door but some sort of animal skin hanging like a curtain in an ineffectual attempt to keep out nature.

Inside was a woman, dressed in a woollen robe. She looked up at me in alarm, assuaged only slightly by the sight of her husband behind me. Two small urchin-like children clung to her legs.

"My wife, Adela," said John, entering the cottage. It was already starting to feel crowded. It was also cold despite the fire, dark and smoky.

"No wonder they're called the dark ages," I said, to the obvious bafflement of my hosts.

"This man is called Richard atte ford, honeycomb. He is willing to pay to stay with us." She looked at him with as much alarm as she had looked at me.

I glanced down at the children.

"And their names?"

John seemed surprised. "My son Arthur, my daughter Mary," he said.

John joined his wife who took his arm gladly. I looked at the family. I had seen poverty before – but it had always had some vestige of modern living about it. These peasants seemed almost as primitive as a Neolithic family.

My eyes rested on Arthur. He had an infected open wound on his arm, which was swollen and discoloured, and his brow seemed slicked with fever.

"A fine boy," I said.

"Yes," said John, with a hint of pride.

"A sad wound though." I touched the skin of his arm gently and he moaned.

Adela spoke for the first time. "I will ask mother Alice for a poultice," she said. "That will make him well again."

Both children were dirty beyond modern imagining. I remembered the old saw that those in the dark ages only had two washes in their lifetime: once when they were born and once when they died. I could see evidence of rickets in their legs.

I clapped John on the shoulder.

"You have a fine family, John Williamson," I said.

Adela answered, surprising me: "Yes, sir," she said. "All still hale and hearty, and two of three children still alive. Only my poor Bartholomew in his grave."

"This has been a bad summer, and a poor harvest to follow," said John by way of explanation. "But, the Lord willing, next year shall be goodly again. Eh, Arthur?" The little boy, finding himself addressed, smiled up at him for a second, but his eyes were dull.

I fiddled with my signet ring and the temporal display engaged before my eyes: September 5, 1315. I had known roughly where I was, but not precisely. I had been in too much of a hurry when I left. I called up more weather and climate data and realised that

this was the start of the so-called Great Famine: and 1316, contrary to John's hopes, would be even worse.

"Only the Lord can say," I answered. "But your family will be strong."

He smiled sadly. "I pray it, Richard," he said, before throwing his wood onto the fire. It soon flared up with an outburst of sparks, delighting the children.

"Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward," I said, quoting from the book of Job. But this well-worn quote evoked no recognition in John's family.

The meal had been pottage: a soup of peas, beans and onions with various herbs thrown in, flavoured with a few nuts. We'd eaten it with wooden spoons from filthy dishes. The pot itself was clearly never cleaned nor even completely emptied. For drink we'd had what John had called beer, but the name itself was about the only connection with the modern drink. It was weak, cloudy and insipid.

My stomach ached for meat after the chill day.

"Ah," said John, a smile of remembrance on his face. "It has been many a month since we had pork. But maybe we will need to slaughter one of the pigs soon," he added quietly while Adela settled the children down with sheepskins over them against the cold. The beds were piles of straw drawn as close to the dwindling fire as possible, and the family was shivering already. The pigs, a cow and a few scraggly hens were in the house with us now, huddling together at the far end, grunting, lowing and clucking, adding to the noisome smells.

I lay down on my side, waiting for the family to go to sleep. The wind knifed like stone through the open hut. I turned up my clothes yet again and the tiny inset heating filaments responded; yet my face and hands remained cold. I pulled my sleeves down to cover my fingers and draped my cloak over my head like a blanket.

At last the family was sleeping, fitfully and with shivers, but sleeping. It was only 8.23 on the evening of September 5, 1315, but work began at dawn and there was plenty of it. They were exhausted, hungry, cold and ill. The life of an English peasant was indeed nasty, brutish and short, as Hobbes put it.

I pulled out a lumen and ignited it, which filled the room with a dull, flat light. I looked over at John who was sleeping with his mouth open and I saw that his gums were bleeding slightly. Classic vitamin C deficiency symptom. I rummaged in my bundle and took out my medipack.

Here were things worth more than their weight in gold to John's family: vitamin supplements, immuno-system boosters, bacteriophages and much more. I moved over to Arthur, who was whimpering a little in his sleep.

"I can't bring Bartholomew back from the grave but I can prevent you from joining him there," I whispered. I focused my EyeTap on him, read his diagnosis from the head-up display and selected an appropriate serum. I loaded it into the syringe and pressed it to his bruised and swollen arm. It delivered it into his bloodstream without breaking the skin. He gave a gasp as though his body were startled, but he didn't wake. I sprayed the wound to disinfect it. Finally I put together a rapid-acting cocktail of boosters, vitamins and general tonics and injected them too. He turned over and the whimpering stopped: I wondered how long he'd been crying like that in the night. I felt his brow: already the fever was abating.

I returned to my bed of straw, retrieved and turned off the lumen, and pulled my itchy, scratchy sheepskin over me. Once again I'd broken the most serious directives of the Corps and once again it felt great.

When I woke, Adela was already up and the hut was filled with a grey light that made everything nondescript and colourless. She smiled shyly at me and picked up the night-bucket, gripping the handle in both hands. The smell of ordure came sharply to me as the contents slopped briefly over the side. She came back soon after and set down the now empty bucket in the corner. Then she busied herself bringing in water.

In the midst of this, John awoke and discovered Arthur sleeping peacefully. He looked down at him in astonishment: the swelling had visibly reduced, the wound had closed up and all traces of fever had gone. John held the little boy's arm in his hand but he still made no sound, nor was his sleep disturbed.

"Adela," he whispered.

She came over and exulted with him at the recovery. Then she wiped a tear from her eye. "I had thought him like to die and join his brother, he was so weakly," she said. She brightened up and wiped her face.

"No need for that poultice now," I said.

She looked at me with a smile. "Seemingly not, sir."

"What is it made from?"

"Ox dung, flowers, roots... I know not what else. It is mother Alice's secret."

I only grunted, but she must have caught something in my tone. "I have seen it work," she said. "Sometimes they recover."

"No doubt," I replied.

She smiled again. "Your coming has brought us good fortune," she said.

I turned to John. "We should celebrate your son's recovery," I said. "How about some meat for breakfast? There were some fine fat rabbits in that forest you were in yesterday."

John sighed. "And they must stay there. We need permission from the lord to kill even so much as a hedgehog in his forest."

"We won't tell him," I said, picking up my bundle.

John looked dubious. "We could lose our hands if caught, or maybe worse."

"Then just show me the way, and I will take the rabbits."

We walked out of the cottage. It was chill and the grass was wet with dew. Mist shrouded the trees and other huts nearby, from which came the sounds of other families stirring. The air was keen and it fuelled my already clamorous appetite. The sun was wrapped in gauze.

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," I said.

John looked at me. "Nice words."

"From a poem about autumn."

"Ah!" he gave a dry chuckle, which seemed to be his comment on the usefulness of poetry.

"Try this one, then:

*For if hevene be on this erthe, and ese to any soule,
it is in cloistre or in scole."*

John chuckled again. "True indeed."

“From a poem called Piers Plowman by a poet called William Langland.”

“I never heard tell of it or him.”

“Hardly surprising.”

“But if poets write about plowmen, why then they cannot be completely useless.”

We walked on in silence for a while.

“Do you have permission from your lord to travel?” asked John suddenly.

“I call no man lord.”

“Ah, you are a freeman. I thought it so.” He paused, musing. “To come and go as you will. It must be something, that.”

“I come and go, though not always as I will.”

“I am not fully free. But at least I am not totally bound to my lord. I keep some of my produce. I can cut hay from the meadow and graze my animals on the waste. I can take wood from the forest for fuel.” He sighed. He was not effectually consoled.

“You should be free, John. You and your family.”

“It is possible. If you run away to the city and elude capture for a year and a day, you can be free. One of my neighbours, Godfrey the baker, did so. But if they catch you the punishment can be terrible.”

“Sometimes you have to take great risks, John Williamson.”

He looked at me, weighing my words.

We had walked beyond the clearing now and the mist was lifting. The trees were growing more numerous, and ahead of us was the forest proper, birdsong lilting to us from the branches.

“Much of Europe is covered in thick forest at this time,” I said. I had really spoken to myself, but John laughed in incredulity.

“You have been to Europe! To France, perhaps,” he scoffed.

“Yes.” He saw that I was serious, and he gave me a strange look.

“If you speak truly, that is a great wonder. I have never been even to the city, although I know the road to it.”

“Where have you been?”

“Nowhere but Stoketon.”

“Your village?”

He nodded. “I know that Stoketon Parva is to the west, and Allenby to the south-east, but those villages are in other manors. I know the manor house of My Lord Walter FitzRoy is to the north of the forest.” He pointed at a gap between the trees. “I know my family, and my neighbours, and the Reeve and the Bailiff and the Steward. It is enough. It was enough for my father, and his father before him.”

“Maybe it will not always be enough for you,” I said. I took the bundle from my back. “Stay here, John. Then if I am caught you will not be involved.” I left him picking up twigs and walked briskly into the beginnings of the forest. The autumn sun was now brighter, and when it was not masked by cloud it was warmer than the previous day. The forest was alive with sound: creakings, twitterings, rustlings. It had a warm, earthy smell: of leaves and lichen, of moss and mushrooms.

I pulled my needle gun from my pack. After a few minutes of stalking through the ancient trees I saw a rabbit, lolling in some greenery. I targeted it and fired, the needle gun making almost no sound. It fell. I went over to it: its body lay quivering, and then the quivering stopped. I picked it up, the “needle” already dissolving in its fur.

I killed another in the same fashion, then made my way back to John, who stood nervously waiting.

“Don’t carry them by the ears like that for all to see, Richard,” he implored me. “Put them in your bundle, I pray you.”

Shrugging, I did so and we continued onwards. But before we had taken many steps a man rode out of the forest path and made straight for us, his horse’s hooves softly thunderous on the grass.

“God’s bones!” said John, his knees sagging. “Baron Walter himself!”

The good baron was splendidly arrayed in scarlet and gold, as was his charger. He looked well fed and accustomed to shouting at people.

“You men!” he bawled. “What are you doing? Trespassing, after my beasts, I’ll be bound.”

“No my lord,” cringed John, his eyes cast down. “I was taking fuel for my hearth.” He held out the pitiful sticks he had gathered.

“Hmmp.” He looked us over. “Is this one of the days you work for me?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then get back to your own land. My Reeve is too lenient on you idlers. And what of you? I do not know you,” he barked. He had seen me looking him in the eye and he evidently felt it to be impertinence.

“I am a freeman, my lord,” I said.

“A freeman. Are you indeed,” he said gustily. “And what do you in my manor?”

“Passing through on my way to the city, my lord. This man is my kinsman on my mother’s side.”

He looked at me long and hard, with that same air of being unable to pin me down as John had had the day before. I had a premonition that he intended to ask me to open my bundle. Which would have been very bad for one of us.

In the end, he turned his horse’s head. “Be off. I want you here no more today.” This was a flagrant dismissal of John’s rights, as he had listed them earlier. But John did not wait to argue the point. He slunk off homeward and I kept pace with him. I felt the noble Walter’s eyes boring into my back; fortunately, his vision was considerably less acute than mine. He spurred his steed and rode on to wherever he was going.

John wiped sweat from his brow, leaving an unwonted relatively clean area of skin. He blew heavily. Then he caught my eye, and we were laughing together: at the relief, perhaps.

When we returned to the hut John told Adela of his momentous encounter while searching for his knife. Arthur was now awake, and looked even better, and the two rejoiced at that. John found the knife at last buried in hay and began to skin the first rabbit: but the blade was blunt.

“I need to take it to Wilfred,” he muttered. “The edge is dull again.”

“May I see it?” I said, holding out my hand. He gave me the knife. It was, my EyeTap noted, made entirely of soft iron set in a wooden handle. The blackened blade was grooved and notched and certainly in need of sharpening.

I set it aside. “I spoke of payment, John,” I said, feeling inside my bundle without fully opening it. “I would like you to have this.”

I handed him a knife, handle first. He took it, his eyes wide, marvelling at the thing. As well he might. This too had a wooden handle but the blade was of shining steel, microtome-sharp and beautifully balanced.

“By God’s precious angel!” he breathed. “A knife fit for a warrior or a lord. Even the king!”

“It will never need sharpening,” I told him: but I don’t think he heard me. He was turning the blade in the air, catching the intermittent sunlight on the metal like a goblet of gold.

He looked at me, beaming, and gripped my arm.

“This were payment indeed and in full, Richard atte ford!” he said: and at once fell to his work of skinning. That work, in the hands of an expert like John equipped with state-of-the-art technology, took hardly any time at all. It was ultrahard titanium steel, iron fortified by an element that would be unknown in England for another 450 years or so. It pared the fur away as though it was paper, and cut through bones with equal ease. In no time at all the meat was added to the simmering pot, and the intact fur set aside. Virtually the whole animal would be used for something or other in this energy-low culture.

We sat back after our rabbit stew. The meat had thickened the pottage from a watery gruel into a rich, nutritious and satisfying broth (to which I’d surreptitiously added vitamin and mineral supplements).

“I have eaten my fill,” said John. “That is a new feeling indeed.”

Again, I knew that what I was doing was the right thing: even though it was illegal, arguably immoral and even potentially life threatening.

The purpose of the Time Corps was twofold: to garner information about history by travelling back in time to witness real events – and to prevent anything happening that would divert the timestream into a new and unknown course. Because once that happened, as they’d drummed into us in the briefings, there were literally no givens. We’d be in that lowering wood of strange attractors, causality loops, Lyapunov time and a hundred and one other concepts I only partially understood. I knew, though, that all of them represented a cat that, once let out of the bag, was never going to let itself be put back in.

We summed up the whole thing in that phrase, the Butterfly Effect. Taken from Lorenz’s paper written a long, long time ago – the 1970s or 1980s – that asked whether a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could cause a tornado over Texas. Chaos theory, applied to the weather. But weather is stability itself compared to the timestream.

Whom were we afraid of? Criminals, terrorists, the insane: someone holding the world to ransom with a butterfly’s wing. But just as easily, someone making a mistake. Picking something up accidentally from the past, dropping something from the future there, even letting slip an unguarded remark: all these could change history irrevocably.

Anyway, I loved the past so I joined the Corps, and they loaded each of us with discreet equipment, tools and neural implants to make our missions more effective. And then we were off, plunging into the timestream of the world.

It was incredible to see how things really were, so different from films and history books: processions in Byzantium, decisive battles (slower, less heroic and far more confusing), the launching of the first iron steamship, even attending the world premiere

performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony in 1813 Vienna with the composer himself conducting like a madman. Perhaps he really was "ripe for the madhouse" as one of his contemporaries described him after hearing that work. But it was great music and an unforgettable experience.

Maybe it was my soft-hearted nature that started the trouble: or possibly it was my Leanne leaving me. (An ironic touch: I who could travel in time could do nothing about this blow.) Perhaps it was a combination of the two. But the first time it manifested itself was in the mid-nineteenth century in Bristol. The streets were seemingly full of orphans and other waifs, begging a precarious living from an uncaring, bustling world. I gave one of them some money, almost unawares. Then I gave some to another. The astonished rapture in their grubby faces made it all worthwhile and helped me forget the ache at the centre of my heart. I continued to surreptitiously help them, and do the same for others on subsequent missions of information gathering and timestream integrity surveillance.

And then I found myself back in the twenty-third century, in a featureless room and naked as a jaybird. They wanted to make sure I couldn't access my devices, of course: but perhaps there was also an element of humiliation.

Sitting opposite me was some bigwig from the upper echelons. The pasty look of a bureaucrat who never exercised.

"Welcome back, Attford," he said. "Apologies for stunning you, but we felt you'd spent more than enough time in the nineteenth century."

"I thought I could feel a pain in my rear," I quipped.

"I suppose you don't remember your briefing sessions," he said.

"On the contrary."

"Then what do you think you've been playing at?"

"Saving lives. Except that it isn't a game."

"It certainly isn't. We think we've neutralised all your interference, but it's hard to be sure.... What made you do it?"

"Compassion," I said. "You should try it sometime."

"We don't play dice with the universe."

I smiled at the quote. "Why not? You might get a better throw."

He raised his hands and then let them fall in exasperation. *I'm wasting my time talking to this idiot* was clearly written on his face. "The Butterfly Effect," he said: "the smallest change can lead to completely unforeseen and undesirable consequences. We could wake up tomorrow under the thumb of despots."

"So, no change there then."

"Or not wake up at all."

That was what really bothered him.

He relaxed in his chair. "Anyway, it's not a problem. I'm afraid your once-promising career in the Corps is at an end. You're out of time, Attford."

"Almost witty. Tell me, why did you join the staff department? Oh, I know – you found accountancy too light-hearted."

"Laugh away. You'll have long enough to regret your flippancy." He pressed a button on the table. I could imagine security jumping up in a room nearby and strapping on their restraint tools.

"There's only one word for all this," I said.

"And what's that?" he said uninterestedly, starting to stand.

“Boojum,” I said. I made an unnatural movement, counter-rotating both wrists simultaneously. Almost like a magic pass. Wasn’t it Arthur C. Clarke who said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic?

He looked at me sharply: and then something made him shout “Guards!” and grab for me. But his fingers closed on empty air.

Quixotic I might have been, but I had no desire to end my days in a Corps penal colony. Before I started my missions of mercy, I’d had a friend in the labs insert an additional, shall we say non-standard, neural implant: one that interfaced with the timestream without the need for the standard bracelet. Locked on a single spatiotemporal destination and triggered by a physiological movement sufficiently weird to preclude accidental engagement.

I arrived in one of my safe houses, locked the door and gathered up my equipment. I picked spatial coordinates in the middle of England and spun some date back in the fourteenth century on my bracelet: far enough back to make finding me a headache. I knew I wouldn’t be returning, at least not voluntarily, so I made sure my equipment was fully stocked. Then it was just a matter of clothing myself for the period from my extensive wardrobe. Unremarkable clothes from the lower order, nothing to stand out in the memory.

As to “Boojum”, that was a bit whimsical I suppose: but it so happened I was a fan of *The Hunting of the Snark*: that reference to “you will softly and suddenly vanish away”. It seemed pretty appropriate for what I was about to do in the interrogation chamber. And Lewis Carroll was a good man, or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was, to give him his real name. I know because I had a delightful conversation with him over tea in Oxford once. I told him how much I’d enjoyed the Alice books and it just took off from there. Like all writers he was susceptible to flattery.

I took a last look around and then activated the bracelet. And did the Boojum thing once again.

Despite the cold, the dark and the primitive conditions, it was delightful staying with John and his family. Not a small part of the delight came from helping them, improving their health, helping them fight off disease and the like. The other main part was from being out from under the yoke of the Corps.

They’d made their rules, and to them they made sense, perfect sense. Anything else was madness and not to be contemplated. But to me, I was saving lives: intervening because I was there and I could. To do otherwise would have been like standing idle at an accident site. And anyway, who was to say things wouldn’t be better as a result? Was the grey, risk-averse society I came from the only, or even the best, version of the twenty-third century?

The week wore on. I spent time helping John in his back-breaking work: farming, gathering fuel, cutting hay and so on. Even the children, young as they were, helped to clear fields of rocks and stones that might damage farming tools. It was a shock to leave a world where almost nothing is done by hand for a place where everything was. There were shops in the cities, apparently, but none out here in the sticks. Just the occasional tinker passed through, selling his wares. Even the small beer we drank perpetually was brewed by each householder.

Everything also needed lots of travelling to. We had to walk to the meadow, walk to the forest: even walk between John's pitiful strips of land. For some inscrutable reason all the peasants' landholdings were split up across the manor. Perhaps to make life even more nasty, brutish and short.

But under my unsuspected ministrations, John and his family began to change. Even in a few days' time they looked far fitter, healthier and alert than when I'd arrived. I'd saved Arthur, perhaps from death: was this a Butterfly Effect change, or would it make no difference? Would he have survived anyway? Or would he die from pneumonia or typhus the next month? I didn't know. But for now, John and the others were filling out, were brighter of eye and healthier of skin. He already looked more muscular and stronger; the illegal protein I'd been adding to the pot was a much better foundation for a strenuous working day than watery soup and rye bread.

One morning, six days after my arrival, I said to John, "How is it you don't go to the river ever?"

He grimaced. "Going to the river is women's work, to empty the night buckets and get water for cooking and brewing. What is there for me? You cannot drink the water unless you want to get sick."

"There is the view."

He grimaced again, but grinned. He was getting used to my ways.

"My three strips of land are view enough for me."

"There is fish – isn't there?"

"Aye. My lord's fish."

"He seems to own more of the locality than he strictly needs. He probably never goes to the river – unless he likes an early morning swim."

John chuckled at the mental picture of the baron swimming in the river.

"Stoke up the fire, John Williamson. I have a strong feeling that Walter FitzRoy is feeling guilty for oppressing you and wants to give you a present of fish for breakfast."

I walked outside the hut with John's laughter in my ears and followed the pathway he had indicated. Before too long I came on reeds and weeping willows overhanging the river. It was easy to see – and smell – where the women of the village emptied out their ordure, and the grass thereabouts was stained and rank. But I walked further upstream and the heavy odours faded away. The river was dappled with early morning sunlight, water-birds paddled on the far side and fish flicked occasionally underneath the water's surface. As always in this rural setting it was quiet, and away from the village it was quieter still. The only sounds were the voices of the birds calling to each other and the wind in the tree branches.

A lithe shape that looked like a trout moved lazily in the water. Obviously the fish here had no predators to make them wary.

I eased out the stunner from my pack, held it over the river, set it for wide field and flicked the switch. There was a momentary thrashing and then the fish barrelled limply to the surface. It was slippery, but after several abortive attempts I was able to throw it onto the bank with both hands.

"It was indeed a beautiful view, John," I said as I re-entered the hut.

"And a beautiful fish, too," he said. It was interesting to see how his attitude to my plundering had changed in just a few days; he was already ceasing to be the downtrodden peasant I had met on the edge of the forest. In a moment he had his new

knife out from its usual place in his belt, and had gutted and cleaned the fish. We spitted it on a long piece of wood and had the lord of the manor's best trout for breakfast: John, Alena, Arthur, Mary and myself. Partners in crime. It seemed to me then that this "crime" was just as artificial as those of the Corps.

"Well John," I said as we relaxed after the meal, my mind on all the protein, vitamins, iron, calcium and selenium that they had absorbed, "what are your plans for today?"

As though in answer, a solemn bell began sounding in the distance. "My plans for the morning are made for me," he said. "Going to church."

I made some demur: but he insisted. "Everyone must go to church. It is law, even for you, Richard atte ford."

So I accompanied my new family, joining a small stream of other folk. It may have been my imagination but my companions already seemed fitter and healthier than anyone there.

"Make sure you look at the painting of St Christopher on the church wall," said John. I asked him why. "So that you do not suffer a sudden death this day. I thought all knew that."

I promised him I would safeguard myself as he suggested.

The village church looked old: I was no expert on architecture, but I thought it might be early Norman. The walls were thick and made of large coarse pieces of rock, with the gaps between filled with smaller rocks. Inside, despite light streaming in through small, high windows, it was dim and even dark in places. Massive pillars supported the roof. There were no pews, or seats of any kind. We stood about, honest peasantry and one interloper. The bell finally ceased its tolling.

The priest began the service, chanting in a monotone and sprinkling water from a metal vessel on a chain.

"Asperges me Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor: lavabis me, et super nivem dealabor. Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam. Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto..."

My LCP translated for me: "You will sprinkle me, Lord, with hyssop, and I will be made clean. You will wash me, and even more than snow will I be whitened. Have mercy on me, God, according to your great mercy. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit..." But it was clear that nobody else in the congregation knew what he was talking about.

Later in the service, though, there was a sort of performance, acting out a story, from two of the priest's acolytes, weeping and wailing. And here John was better informed than I was.

"They show us the torments of hell that await those who sin or who have not been baptised." And he shuddered at the thought.

It was a relief to emerge later from the gloomy church into the open air and the pale autumn sunshine.

"Those services should be in English," I said.

"Church services in the common tongue!" John smiled at the thought. "That will never be."

"And why not?"

"They would lose all their mystery, all their magic."

“Some things do not need mystery but to be made clear. And I think you would find magic enough in the messages, if you could understand them.”

“You understood the service, then?”

“I did.”

“Ah, you are a man of learning,” he said, glancing up at me in surprise. “You are a great wonderment to me, Richard.”

I smiled. “Mystery and magic, John!”

As we walked back to the village I viewed the medical records of some of John’s neighbours. All were sick, to a greater or lesser extent; all were suffering from malnutrition. They were in truth a small, dirty, starving, snivelling bunch – but they held the seeds of a great nation within them. One or two of them looked sick enough to be dying: should I try to save them too? Where would it end?

Sunday was a day of rest, even for peasants: a rare break from the grind. John and I had long conversations. He told me more about the church, which was the centre of their little world: how they went there for feast day celebrations and even for markets. He told me how he’d fallen in love with Adela and been married there. He described to me how he had to pay a tenth of his produce to the church, and how much of a burden this was to these people on the edge of existence. And I thought of the bad harvests to come in 1316 and 1317.

Later, after the evening meal, we walked by the river bank. The sun was setting over the water. A glorious panoply of red-tousled clouds tinged with gold filled the sky and stained the water in glowing colour.

“I must thank you for your food, Richard,” said John. “Since you came among us we have eaten well. The old way, the old hunger is – ”

There was a clangour of bells from the church. Shouts and screams came from the village.

“What is it?” I asked.

“An alarm,” he said, turning to run back. I ran with him.

The scene that met us was one of confusion and destruction. Several huts had been broken into and fire was pouring from the thatched roof of one. Two or three villagers lay motionless on the ground. Ahead of us were ten or twelve men, carrying torches made from wooden bundles and agricultural implements such as mattocks, some of them converted into pole weapons. Clearly a bunch of troublemakers, intent on rape and worse things. Times like famine brought out such behaviour.

An exclamation burst from John. I turned to see one of them pulling Adela from John’s hut. She screamed and clung to the doorway.

John and I ran to help her. I’d left my bundle in the hut before we went for our stroll, and in any case it wasn’t for the villagers to see my technology in action. But I’d been well trained for such affrays.

The thug in the doorway released Adela’s arms and let her fall back into the hut, spinning round to face us. He grabbed a polearm leaning against the wall and thrust it at John, catching him in the shoulder and upending him. He raised the pole for a downward slash. I ducked in under the pole and caught him full in the stomach, cutting at his throat with the side of my hand as he fell.

This was the signal for the rabble band to rush me. As they poured in I ducked, jumped, weaved and caught them, using their momentum against them. I threw many of them, some against others as they came on. Hip throws, stamp throws, body drops, wrist throws...bodies were whirling about me, sometimes clashing in mid-air with a thump of body and bones. Others I held in joint locks, levering and dislocating. In an instant, it seemed, that terrorising band was broken and beaten, its energy dissipated, holding arms, wrists, legs and heads and moaning.

Except one. Down but not out, he caught my leg with a mattock and whirled me over, my head hitting a rock and momentarily stunning me. He jumped up and raised his weapon over his head with a bellow of rage and revenge. As he hefted the weapon with all his force, up and over his head, John pulled his knife from his belt and hurled it at his neck.

Titanium, iron and carbon against flesh, bone and sinew was no contest. The blade pared through his neck like butter and stuck at an angle. My attacker grabbed for the knife but he was already dying. He flailed and collapsed to the ground.

My head already clearing, I got to my feet. Our villagers, emboldened by the rout, charged up with their own collection of agricultural weaponry, yelling and shrieking. Those of the rabble who could still stand ran disorganisedly away, into the woods; others were herded off in the direction of the church.

I pulled the besmeared knife from the neck of my dead opponent and cleaned it on the grass before handing it back to John.

“A good throw, John,” I said. “I owe you my life.”

“And I owe you mine,” he said, with a breathless grin, adrenalin still coursing through his bloodstream. He went inside to comfort his family.

That was true, I reflected as I rubbed my leg where the mattock had caught it. He had saved my life, although I was not a part of this timestream anyway, so saving me made no difference to history. But I had saved his life. I had also stopped the attack. Who else in the village owed their life to my intervention? Was this the Butterfly Effect? I didn't know, and frankly didn't much care at this point. The forces of barbarism had been held at the gates. A beer seemed called for, even if it was a pale imitation of its future self. I walked into the hut.

Fighting off the attack had made me a hero in the eyes of the villagers. As for John and his family, they had come to look upon me as their deliverer.

“You are a warrior,” he said to me the next morning. “And a better warrior than even a knight, since you need no armour nor even any weapon except your hands.”

“I'm no warrior,” I said. “But I can defend myself. I used the force of my attackers against them.”

“Would you show me how?” he asked, almost shyly: so every night after that, when the work was done and before the meal was ready, I showed him some martial arts techniques. He gradually built up to where he could defend himself well: far better than any other unarmed dark ages peasant, anyway. Whatever else happened, he would have that as my legacy to him.

So the days went by. John and his family were stronger, healthier and fitter than they had ever been. Their eyes were clearer, their skin free of disease. If this continued, they could look to live far longer than the average life expectancy for the time: thirty years or so.

But could it continue?

I needed to move on, to leave them to their own devices. But somehow I could never find the right moment. I spent much time inside the woods and around the edges. I set up defences: unbreakable plastic wire stretched between two trees. I watched the lord of the manor riding out to hunt or hawk with his men at arms, reflecting on his favoured status. It was true, he had certain obligations under the feudal system. He had to defend the village from warring hordes, for instance. But virtually all the obligations seemed to be on the other side.

One day in early October 1315 John and I walked to the forest. We talked about the lord of the manor.

“You need to leave this village and seek your family’s fortune in the city,” I told him. “Your Lord Walter will not save you in the times of trouble.”

“He is a harsh lord, perhaps, but a strong one,” said John.

“Strong for himself. He cares nothing for you or yours.”

“Why should he? What are we, the common folk, that he should care for us?”

“You are a man like him,” I said: and I could see that he was digesting the strangeness of the idea.

“Stay here, John,” I said. “I will get today’s game.”

I left him at the edge of the forest, as was our way, and walked in under the woody canopy. The air was chill now, even though it was after eight in the morning. I could see my breath before me as I spoke.

I hunted in the woods for many minutes: and finally saw in a small clearing a fawn, cropping the grass with its delicate mouth. I shot at it. It heard the tiny sound of the weapon’s delivery system and raised its head; but before it could react further, it was hit. It rolled over in the grass.

I stepped out and shouldered it, then walked back through the woods. As usual, John had put the time to good use by gathering fuel.

We started back to the village.

“There’s no hiding that animal,” he said to me.

“No. Maybe we can share some of it with your neighbours.”

At that point, the sound of hooves made us turn round. It was Walter FitzRoy and a hunting party. He had caught us fair and square in the open.

We stood for a moment transfixed. We couldn’t hear the words, but it was clear that the noble lord was dismissing his men and sending them back to his castle. They rode off. He turned to face us. Then he drew his sword and urged his horse into the gallop.

“Run, John,” I said: and I pushed him off into a different direction. I dropped the fawn and ran, faster than I could ever remember before, while the galloping warhorse bore down swiftly on me. I could imagine the sword being flourished and hefted for a cut that would split shoulder, collarbone and ribs.

Just barely ahead I ducked under the plastic wire. The nobleman either didn’t see the thread or thought nothing of it. But in an instant he was caught. The trees and the line quivered but they held. He was precipitated from his horse and fell onto his back with a crunch of armour and bones that seemed to shake the ground. The steed reared up and cantered away.

I picked up the sword which lay on the ground. And then I felt searing pain in my side, and dropped the weapon in my turn. A “needle”, already dissolving but leaving in its place a pumping red wound.

I dropped to the ground with a gasp. From out of the trees came a man dressed in twenty-third century clothing, its manmade textures looking strange in this ancient landscape.

“That’s it Attwood,” he said. “The end of the line.”

I looked up at him, at his face set firm. All his certainties on display. There was nothing for me to say. He raised his needle gun again.

Then a small sound distracted us. We turned, and saw John poised over the prone lord, his knife held over the breastplate.

“Stop!” cried the Corpsman, real panic in his voice. And I knew that this was the Butterfly Effect moment, the decisive point.

“Finish him off, John!” I shouted.

He looked from me to my attacker and back again.

The needle gun was lofted and fired.

John bore down on the knife handle and the blade sank in to the hilt.

The “needle” disappeared in mid-flight, slicked away like a vision: and the Corpsman did the same, sky and forest showing forth through him. He softly and suddenly vanished away, as though he had never been.

And indeed, he hadn’t. I looked down, and the wound damage faded to nothing, the pain cut off like the flick of a switch.

Somewhere in the future, something was different. Different for all of society or different for that one Corpsman? I didn’t know. I thought back to one of the theories they’d bandied about at the briefings, the *time pinch*: how someone associated with a major timestream change could be caught up in it, and the timestream “pinched off” to protect that person and the immediate environment. I didn’t know if this was a parallel dimension or not. I only knew I wasn’t going up the line to find out.

I got to my feet and helped John stand too, my arm clasping his in solidarity.

“So. It’s ended. I’m off to seek my fortune in the city,” I said.

He nodded dumbly, still shaken by the taboo he had broken.

“You need to go too, John son of William,” I said. “You need to get away before the baron’s men come looking for you. And anyway the next two years will be terrible in the countryside. They will be hard in the city, too, but you will have more chance of surviving.”

He looked at me. I could see that he believed me. “We will go,” he said. “I will make my throw of the dice, and God willing, become a freeman like you.”

I thought of the city, with its bustling population. Perhaps I could have a family of my own. A wife, children, grandchildren...it looked appealing. I laughed for a moment. This was a reverse of the classic Grandfather Paradox. Rather than killing my grandfather I looked like becoming my own ancestor.

“I haven’t ever been truly free,” I told him. “I’ve been nothing but a butterfly. But now that butterfly can finally rest in peace.”