



THE INVISIBLE CITY

BRIAN K. LOWE

THE STOLEN FUTURE BOOK 1

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BOOK ONE

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

I DEPART

NOTWITHSTANDING all of the fantastic things that have befallen me since the last day I spent on this Earth in the service of a king and country not my own, none has had the same nerve-destroying effect as the shelling.

When I came to war in the spring of 1915, with tales of German atrocities ringing in my ears, hell-bent to defend the land where I had spent a magical year researching the legends of Robin Hood, I still saw war as the romantic adventure of centuries gone, hardly changed from the days of stout yeomen and knights in brightly-beribboned plate, armed not only with steel but with the religious certainty that God fought by my side.

In that, I resembled no one as much as our own generals, who still believed that messengers from both sides should ride forth the night before the battle and arrange for a mutually agreeable starting time the next day. I had not anticipated (nor had they) the changes wrought when the battle ceased to be one wherein you saw with your own eyes the men you killed. They had still to come to grips with the shells and the gas.

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In that we differed, for I had first-hand knowledge of what they refused to see.

That morning, the shelling had stopped after three straight days and nights. It was March, and our company was pinned down in a long straight trench dug just east of the town of Pont à Mousson. If you had asked me who first excavated that trench, I couldn't tell you, because we had been trading the Germans the same strip of land for four months. We'd dug in right before what would have been Thanksgiving, in the States, and huddled in frozen hell through the winter. The German lines had been barely forty yards away when we started. When it wasn't snowing, one side or the other might try to gain ground; those who weren't cut down in the open were met with hand-to-hand combat.

On occasion, we would push the Germans out, usually when they were too tired or cold or sick to fight us effectively. The next day, fresher troops would arrive, and we would become the defenders. If we won, we stayed; if not, we fled for our own original position while bullets whined around us, or stopped with a flat smacking sound that meant another empty spot on the line. Sometimes we simply abandoned our prize and crawled back through the snow under cover of darkness.

By now I didn't know if we occupied their position, or our own. "Corporal Givens reporting, sir."

I wearily returned the sloppy salute of the courier I had sent down earlier. If he hadn't spoken, I wouldn't have recognized him, covered with the swampy mud that coated the sides and floor of the trench. The company commander was situated less than half a mile away; it had taken two hours to get there and back.

"What orders, corporal?" I asked in a voice a good deal steadier than I felt.

"Captain MacLean instructs you to choose a small detachment of men to cross no-man's-land and survey the enemy's position. He says Headquarters thinks the shelling may have been a cover for a withdrawal."

I bit back my first comment. "Right," I said. "Pick two privates who aren't too ill and report back here."

The corporal didn't move. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but the captain gave me strict orders that you wasn't to lead the patrol.

'Lieutenant Clee is not to undertake this mission under any circumstances,' he says. Sir."

This time I didn't muzzle myself. Captain MacLean knew that I would want to take the scout party out myself; we both knew what it meant to venture into no-man's-land if the Germans *hadn't* retreated. But commissioned officers were in short supply on the line, and he couldn't risk losing me, particularly on a mindless mission that was probably the result of a bet between two half-drunk colonels in a Paris brothel.

Angry as I was, I couldn't say that to the corporal. Normally I would be his sergeant's problem, but that poor devil lay thirty yards into no-man's-land, taking his orders now from God. The simple solution to my dilemma came to mind quickly enough.

"Good job, Givens. Give the captain my compliments."

He frowned. "And ...?"

"That's all, Givens. Just give the captain my compliments."

"Ah ... yes, sir." With a heavy sigh, he adjusted his gear and turned to go. Then he stopped, turned again to look at me queerly, and said: "Good luck, sir."

• • •

I cobbled together a patrol out of three random soldiers whose names I have since forgotten. One was a Canadian boy, but more than that I cannot recall.

I ordered them to spread out and climb over the edge only after I had cleared it. Captain MacLean to the contrary, I was not about to order one of my men into a situation I would hesitate to go into myself. First, though, I raised my helmet above the lip of the trench, balanced on a borrowed rifle. An old trick, and one the Germans had caught onto, so I was not surprised when it was not blown back by a burst of machine gun fire. I lifted it again with my head still well below the line of fire, and when it drew no attention a second time, I decided the coast was as clear as it might be.

The third time my helmet showed itself to the sight of God and everyone, my head was inside of it. Ten seconds later, finding myself still alive, I clambered out into no-man's-land.

Perhaps “clambered” does not properly describe the mechanics involved. The rain had eroded the lip of the trench to the point where no man could climb out unaided, and even with a ladder the footing was treacherous. While I scrambled for purchase on level ground, my Canadian pushed from below in a fashion that would have earned him a court-martial in different circumstances. I tried to keep my muddy boots out of his face, but I am not sure I succeeded.

Before I had covered a score of feet, I found myself nose-to-nose with one of the men who had failed to survive the last retreat. I held my breath and moved past. If Headquarters was right and the Germans had withdrawn, he would be buried today. If not, I would soon look just like him.

The shooting still had not begun, so I looked back for my men and cautiously waved them forward. What remained of my uniform was unspeakably fouled with mud, and in a moment of inspiration I smeared it on my face and helmet as well. As my patrol drew abreast of me, I pantomimed for them to follow my lead, and I was pleased to see that it did seem to help them blend with the ground. I confess I was most pleased because it meant that I blended in, too.

Thus disguised, we wormed forward. Every few feet we would stop, our eight eyes anxiously roaming the near horizon for any bit of movement, any hint that we were lambs being lured to slaughter. None came.

All at once we were peering down into a German trench — and no one was staring back.

The trench was not set out in a true line; we could see only a few yards in either direction. Fearful of any sound lest it alert a thousand Huns huddled around the next bend, I tapped the Canadian on the shoulder and motioned him to follow me. Signaling the remaining pair to remain, I slid into the trench. Like our own, there was no way out unaided. If it was a trap, I was committed.

With my guard at my back, I crept forward, straining for every sound. The pernicious rain, eager to heap upon me the greatest amount of suffering, began again to drop its offerings into the ankle-deep puddles, fogging both sight and hearing. The wet squishing of our boots made a mockery of our stealth.

After a short time the trench straightened, and as far as I could see, the Huns’ retreat was confirmed. We retraced our steps,

passing our original ingress, which spot we anticipated by softly calling to our companions lest they take us for the enemy. I reported our findings and moved on, but we returned even more quickly than before: The Germans were nowhere to be seen. This line, at least, had been abandoned.

I sent the two men up top back to Captain MacLean with my report and kept up my search. Truth to tell, now that I had apparently survived my fool errand, I was none too eager to face him and admit my flouting of his orders. It surprised me to realize that I had not planned my life that far ahead — that I had in fact expected to die in no-man's-land. A wave of relief swept over me that almost made me forget the mud — a feeling quickly stilled by an unmistakable wisp of movement up ahead.

The Canadian boy gave a start beside me, so I knew that he had seen it too. Again I took the lead, hugging the side of the trench, unpleasant as that was. Cold mud sucked at my back as well as my feet. I had not seen much, only that it was too large for an animal, and my mind retained an after-image of grey. Without that I would never have noticed it at all, but it stood out even in the rain against the universal muddy brown of the surrounding earth. Only the sky was grey, leaden where it was not black.

Where the path straightened again, we saw him, a lone German soldier striding strongly but unconcernedly away from us — *his grey uniform unspotted by mud and his black boots gleaming where they showed above the water line*. I stopped suddenly and pulled the boy up against the wall with me, fearful that the Hun would turn and see us.

"They must have a secret tunnel somewhere up ahead," I hissed in his ear. He nodded dumbly. "We'll follow him."

By some miracle we kept out of sight, although at no time did the German stop to look behind him. More astonishing, however, was that his uniform seemed impervious to mud or weather, as did he himself. He seemed no more concerned about nature than he did about anyone following him. Overall, his appearance began to take on a supernatural air, and I am not sure how much longer I could have taken the strain when he turned a bend and vanished.

Throwing caution to the winds, I scrambled forward to keep him in sight. As I drew abreast of the curve I saw that this disappearance,

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at least, lacked anything magical: The trench had been built to take advantage of a small natural cave at the base of a hillside. Beyond the cave mouth, it stretched on ahead, but the perfection of placement made the underground grotto the best candidate for a secret German redoubt. I congratulated myself on my perception — and very nearly into an early grave.

Thinking to listen at the cave mouth for guards, I crept forward and bent down toward the entrance — and the first shot spat up mud on the wall behind me. The enemy wasn't in the cave — he was fifty feet further down the trench!

The mud stole my footing from me and I went down, saving me from the next volley. Wallowing like a crippled turtle, I shouted at the boy to get back.

"I'll hold them here! There was a ladder back there — get back to our lines and tell them it's a trap!"

To be sure, I was no more certain that I could hold back the Huns than I was that he could cross no-man's-land alive, but neither of us had any choice. I brought my revolver around and fired blindly; the Germans were so thickly clustered that I couldn't miss. Perhaps they'd thought they had hit me, because the shot panicked them and they fell about themselves as helpless as I.

Helpless or not, they outnumbered me one hundred to one, and I was in the open. Blind luck had run out and left me only one option. I gathered my feet and dived into the cave, inches ahead of the next hail of gunfire.

I landed on blessedly hard ground. It sloped up from the entrance, keeping the water out past the first few yards. I rolled to my feet and stumbled away from the entrance, hoping there were no Germans inside, because I knew there were far too many outside. I didn't have time to adjust my eyes to the dimness before I trained my pistol on the light from the opening.

It took several moments before the first of them blocked it, and I rewarded his efforts with a single shot. Before they had dragged his body back, I was shifting my position. Still no one came at me from behind — could I have been wrong about the soldier I was following? But then where had he come from?

A rifle muzzle showed itself at the opening, firing randomly, but it couldn't reach me any more than I could reach the man

holding it. For the moment we were at a stalemate: they couldn't get to me, or past me, and I couldn't get out. It was critical that I hold this spot if my men were to have any chance of returning to our lines alive, but sooner or later my time would run out. And if the Huns had another way to reach no-man's-land, my sacrifice wouldn't even make a difference.

If sacrifice I was to be ...

Another rifle showed its muzzle at the entrance, and I fired at it just to keep the Germans honest. As it drew back, I did the same, retreating further into the cave, dividing my attention between the outside and my new home.

The ceiling rose as the cave deepened, and I grew more sure that I had found something. No one would have allowed this natural shelter to lie unused ...

I learned later that they had never known it was there. It had been hidden from mortal eyes by a device undreamt of in our time, and the only reason I ever saw it was a simple malfunction brought on by relentless rain and cloying mud.

At the time, however, I was convinced I had stumbled onto some secret Hun headquarters, and felt my way every step while I kept a wary watch on the outside. For this reason alone did I find the passage to the deeper cavern.

Keeping an eye out for the enemy, I reached behind me for the wall and felt nothing. I turned that way just as the cave entrance exploded with gunfire. The Germans had decided on a full frontal assault — a decision fueled no doubt by their surprise at finding this cave in the middle of their own lines. At that moment, I stepped backward and I, too, disappeared from sight.

I found myself in a passage screened from the front chamber by a curtain of rock, a camouflage only penetrated by my forced feeling of my way. A man with a lantern would not have spotted it, I am sure. But the twisting path I took explained to me a more important mystery: why no one had been drawn by the sounds of war. The stone acted as a baffle for sound as well as sight. I lost track of my pursuers the moment I entered the stony corridor — and the sight I beheld at its end drove all thought of them from my mind.

The man I had been following sat at a desk near the back of this chamber, which was roughly the same size as its predecessor.

He was facing away from me, and toward a doorway in the wall of the cave. I call it a doorway because that was how it seemed to me, even at first glance, but a doorway such as I had never seen before.

It shimmered, like mercury pinned in a vertical suspension. It stood higher than a man, and wider, but there was no evident frame, nor could I see any handle or knob. Yet it struck me undeniably as a doorway, a portal to something deeper inside the rock. Whatever it was, it was beyond my understanding of any German or Allied science, and it frightened me.

Tearing my eyes from it, I fell to examining the desk where the man was seated, oblivious to my intrusion. From all that I could see, he sat before a plain wooden table, head bent over several objects that I could not discern. While he was so engrossed, I was hesitant to move, believing myself safe for the moment, but I roused myself with an almost physical shake: If this was an enemy base, then the men behind me knew its secrets and my safety was but a sham. My only hope was to keep moving, my first task to subdue the man at the desk.

My wet clothes and soggy boots betrayed me only a few scant feet from my goal. He heard me approach and spun about, rising from his chair with a look of utter shock. Clawing at his side, his hand came up with a small box he pointed at me even as I lunged for him, but my muddy feet slipped on the stone floor and I fell. What the box would have done to me — for I had to believe it to be a weapon — I did not see, nor did I wait to give him a chance to show me. I scrabbled forward and knocked him off his feet.

We did not struggle long. Rough hands pulled us apart. The Germans, knowing I had not left the cave as I had entered, had found for themselves the passage to the inner chamber. I was stunned to see there were only four or five where I had expected hordes. Two held my arms. I could see my sidearm on the floor nearby, but it might as well have been on the Moon.

The rest ganged up on the other man, whose garments now resembled less a German uniform than they did the strange door itself, seeming to slide and gleam like liquid metal. To their dismay, the Huns found that this appearance was not deceiving, for the man slipped from their grasp and unleashed his box-weapon once more.

This time I saw the beam that struck down two of the Germans, and so did the men holding me. At once they released me to use

their guns; I saw the stranger stagger as the first shot rang out, then I slugged one of the Germans, broke free, and seized my revolver.

I had but two choices. Outside the cave was the enemy army; through the silver door might lie anything.

I made the wrong choice.

I chose the door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian K. Lowe has been writing since he was fourteen, when he took it up in a sudden burst of sibling rivalry, and wrote a novella which earned him no money, but a fistful of extra credit points in his English class. Since then, he has graduated from UCLA as an English/Creative Writing major, and currently works for an attorney. His short stories have appeared in *Escape Pod*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and many other venues.

“The voice, the romance, the heroism, and the unbridled sense of optimism all make reading *The Invisible City* a joy.” —Seagull Rising blog.

“Notwithstanding all of the fantastic things which have befallen me since the last day I spent on this Earth in the service of a king and country not my own, none has had the same nerve-destroying effect as the shelling.”

Trapped behind enemy lines in World War I France, Lieutenant Charles Clee stumbles upon an illegal time-travel experiment and finds himself catapulted 850,000 years into the future. Marooned in a nightmare world where prehistoric behemoths tread side-by-side with genetically-altered monsters from the laboratories of tomorrow, hunted by the eon-spanning Time Police and Earth's alien overlords, Clee races across the globe searching for the fabled last time machine—his only chance to go home.

If he returns, he can save the men of his command and turn the tide of the war—but if he remains, he can become the symbol of Earth's resistance to centuries of slavery.

In the end he must choose: Honor his oaths and rescue the men he swore to protect in the past, or honor his humanity and accept the leadership of mankind in the struggle to save the future?

No matter his decision, a world is doomed.