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The Anthology 2014

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FOREWORD

Whenever I return to Dublin from my home in New York, I take the chance to walk by Clonkeen College, just for the air of it, the feel of it, and the shock that thirty-two years have gone by since I last officially passed through those gates.

All those old immemorial feelings send a cold bolt along my spine. There are no days more full than those we go back to. The shoe-slap in the corridor, the high trill of the lunchtime bell, the schoolyard jitters, the nights studying for the Leaving, the whole complicated ballast of memory. And yet if I have one confession about my days at Joey's (as we called it then) it's that I actually liked it. Unfashionable, I know, but I enjoyed my years at Clonkeen, where I got the chance to make mistakes, to tread new territory, to experiment, to fail, and to expand my wings as a writer. I still return to those days often, no matter where I happen to be. They are not so much days of angst or turmoil or even too much difficulty: it was, I must admit, a rare school, with rare teachers, in a rare atmosphere of expectation and learning.

I still find myself, for indefinable reasons, tracing that old trenchant childhood route that makes possible the leap back to the radical innocence of the moment when I first walked through the gate, eleven years old, nervous, edgy, unsure. Suddenly it was there. So large, imposing, white-bricked. So many windows. So many nooks and crannies. I paced along the faded lines of the tennis court, then looped around under the shadows of the trees. Some of the older

lads stood smoking behind the sheds. I huddled in a small group of students who knew each other from Saint Brigid's. We affected bravado. In truth we were terrified. And when the bell rang we had little idea that the bell was really ringing for our adolescence.

~

We get out literary voice from the voices of others. I have a lot of thanks to give to a lot of people, not least the teachers with whom I spent time when I was at Clonkeen. It seems disingenuous now to name them specifically because a school is a culture and is never driven by a single individual. We are the sum extent of all who choose to teach us, and sometimes even those who choose not to teach us, by their silence, by their exile, by their cunning.

I suppose what I have come to adore is the idea of good teaching, which is in effect the idea of giving. And what the teachers at Clonkeen gave to me was the love of books. It sounds awfully reductive now, to say that my love of literature came from the simplest source, but it is no less true. That I had the same encouragement at home from my father (a journalist in the Irish Press) helped enormously too, of course. I was surrounded by books. Dylan Thomas. Gerard Manley Hopkins. A stray copy of Jack Kerouac. An essay by Richard Brautigan. A book by Toni Morrison. A poem by Seamus Heaney.

Every word matters. That's what I learned. Every conceivable pattern ran through this young writer's mind. A writer should read, and a writer should copy, and a writer should develop, and finally try to break into a voice of his or her own.

I should admit that my own work, while at Clonkeen, was not very good. A bit dreamy, self-conscious. I wouldn't like to see it these days. Bad poems and bad stories, but so what? We learn from our mistakes.

And I did develop the most important thing – a passion for language and an ability to believe that my voice might eventually matter. What it took was a lot of time and stamina and perseverance – and indeed a lot of failure. Nobody mocked me. Nobody stunted me. Nobody took away my voice.

What I love about the idea of a literary magazine for Clonkeen is that it gives an opportunity for the students to find that elusive and necessary voice. It is the first of many incarnations of voice, believe me, but the world is listening and waiting for you.

And so a few short words of advice: Do the things that do not compute. Be earnest. Be devoted to things. Do not be afraid of sentiment even when others call it sentimentality. Never become an emigrant from the country of empathy. Be sensitive to the inner laws of the forgotten. Be subversive of ease. Permit yourself the luxury of failure. Grab this moment. Take it. Inspire it. Even against the judgment of others, push yourself further. Be sensitive to others. Have trust in the staying power of what is good. Have faith. Believe in the rightness despite all the wrongness around you. Do not allow your heart to harden. Take pause. Have wonder. Have gratitude. Practice resuscitation. Endure the rough weather: in fact embrace it. Get ripped to pieces and learn to put yourself back together. Forget ease. Push the edge. Become the edge.

Imagine yourself into the lives of those who do not have your advantages. And be there, yes, be there, when the bread comes fresh from the oven.

All of you there, in my old school, my only school, I am proud of your efforts, even from this vast distance.

And your own efforts will bring us together. Good luck – and thanks.

Colum McCann

January 2014

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SCI-FI

The Inner Being

Ryan Higgins

1. The Beginning

The year is 2056. The human race has excelled beyond expectations and has reached the outer corners of the Milky Way Galaxy. The Space Star Corporation is the most renowned in space exploration and defence of Earth colonies.

The founder of this company, James Hackre, was a father, an explorer and an entrepreneur. This man was the first to venture into the final frontier. Discovering other beings, planets and galaxies; boosting the reputation and the funding of his company. He is a national hero, known and loved by everyone...except one.

Tiberious Hackre, his short black hair matching the younger image of his father and his hazel eyes matching his mother's, was built like a man, with wide shoulders and stocky. Sadly he was a slacker, a pessimist and a huge pain in the ass, but he is also the heir to one of the most successful companies since Microsoft back in the 2000s. He is one of the only people to hate the national hero; this is because his father isn't all he is made out to be. Tiberious went through the harsh childhood of a billionaire; kids clawed their way to his feet, trying to be his friend, but this was because of money and fame. People wondered how he could be so lazy and have a father like his. When his mother

died, his father threw himself into his work and also into whisky. People didn't see James behind closed doors; there, he was a drunken self-pitying fool who had women throwing themselves at him morning, noon and night. He effectively ruined Tiberious' childhood.

This was until the untimely passing of James. Dying at the young age of 73. Surprisingly, Tiberious wept all night over his father. This was mainly because he now had to run the Space Star Corporation, a corporation that was now without its CEO. James left his legacy behind as well as a last request to his son; to jettison his ashes onto the first planet he ever explored; Planet K. After the reading of the will, Tiberious was furious. How could his father ask that of him? He knew that he hated space travel. Sadly, Tiberious was a guilty person by nature and so he was left to venture out into the furthest region of the Milky Way to fulfil his father's last dream.

This brings us to Co. Meath space port.

Stepping into the bridge of a Class 3 Dreadnaught cruiser felt empowering to say the least. But Tiberious Hackre hardly paid attention, as it was a child's tinker toy compared to the Class 7 Battleships he had served on during the war. He had seen his fair share of battle and he was still only a child at the age of 24. The Captain-on-Deck whistle sounded as he sat into the Captain's chair. This was his first venture as Captain and it would probably be his last due to his dislike of space, and the powerful forces working behind the scenes to make sure it was his last space travel.

2. Space: the final frontier

Tiberious was hit with the familiar smell of rocket fuel and the feeling of G-force as his head was pushed into the back of the seat, due to the amount of acceleration put out by the engines. He gave the nod to the pilot to activate the Slip Space Drive as soon as they were clear of the atmosphere. A Slip Space Drive is a truly wonderful thing, as it basically allows ships to bend the universe in order to make journeys shorter. Unfortunately, Tiberious had never experienced this first hand as it was introduced the year after he left the war. As soon as the drive kicked in, he hit the floor in a heap and everything suddenly went black.

He awoke to the sounds of space which is well...nothing. But it has an eerie noise with all the subtle beeps, whistles and groans coming from random instruments in the medical bay.

MEDICAL BAY! Tiberious thought to himself. What the hell am I doing here?

The nurse, who seemed to be a cat humanoid, answered his quizzical look with, 'You passed out from the Slip Space Drive; you should be fine within the next few minutes Captain.'

Regaining his balance and dignity, Tiberious strode to the bridge to assess their journey.

Once again entering the bridge to the sound of the Captain's whistle, he was greeted by the bright shine off the nearby sun to their right; he worried about it but soon pushed it to the back of his mind, returning to his chair and observing the bridge's proceedings. It was a silent few hours of small

problems with the engine's fuel and weight and one problem with a missing crew member. He concluded that they would turn up soon enough and he appeared to be right, until the ship shook viciously and started to career towards the sun.

The groans of the hull echoed in his ears as he ordered people to direct everything to the engines and get them out of there...but nothing happened. This was when Tiberious ordered a full scale evacuation. Him being the captain, he decided to go down with the ship. It was a stupid decision but he stuck by it. Announcing that they have all served him well over the intercom, then taking manual control of the ship and pulling against gravity itself. He heard the tear of metal, felt the heat of the ever growing sun and finally felt the last breath leave his body as the oxygen was flushed into space. Screams...screams were the last sounds Tiberious Hackre would ever hear.

3. This ain't no place for a hero

Light...Light? Air...Air?

These were the thoughts that ran through Tiberious' head as he lay there in sand, on a planet, alive. He jolted up and gulped in the air. Checking his body parts and his various features, there was a large gash from ear to chin. Another scar threatening to compromise his image. Although being part of the land of the living again, Tiberious still worried about where he was. It was barren, desolate and too hot. Rising from his once sandy grave, he began to feel the thirst that was now present in the back of

his throat and began walking in, what he hoped, was the direction of water.

His walk was long, tedious and somewhat intensive due to thirst. But Tiberious soon sighted what seemed to be a floating city. He was convinced it was a mirage but hiked towards it anyway. A sudden shade swept over him and he was grateful for the relief from the sun, but soon he started wondering what had caused that shade and regretfully looked up. What stood there was a large floating rock with bits of pipe and tree roots sticking out in various places. It was as if the rock was suddenly ripped from its original resting place. He wasn't left wondering for long as soon he felt a presence right behind him and whipped round to see *him*.

He was about Tiberious' height, at six foot, but less stocky. He brandished some sort of gas canister on his left hip and bore a helmet which completely covered his face but had a tinted glass screen along his eyes to allow vision. He was draped in a white jumpsuit with scorch marks all over and hints of red streaking through his clothes. The aura that pulsed from him sent shivers down Tiberious.

'H-Hello?' Tiberious uttered, trying to hide his terror. No response. 'Who are you?' said Tiberious, while taking a step back.

The man literally vanished from in front of him.

Utterly stunned by what had just happened, Tiberious just...sat down. He honestly couldn't manage to do anything else. He was grateful of the hit to the back of his head and the blackness that followed.

Tiberious awoke to the smell of burned toast, sea water and a strange man's face staring at him. He stood just a bit taller than Tiberious with red hair, glasses and stubble running along his chin. He sat there, fully aware of Tiberious being awake but didn't say a word.

This endured for several minutes.

'I guess I better explain where the hell you are.' The strange man addressed Tiberious as an equal, which in the current predicament, he did not seem to be.

Tiberious was silent.

'Ah, another mute?' the man said.

Tiberious assumed he was referring to the other vanishing man from earlier. Tiberious responded with a shake of his head and uttered a small 'Where?' before staring at his kidnapper intensely.

He began with a single word, 'Sanctuary,' and then continued with, 'That's where you are. A floating fortress in the sky. A refuge for bandits and mercenaries alike, but we keep civil...well, some of us do.'

He took a second to let Tiberious absorb the information before continuing. 'More generally, you are on the planet of Pandora, a dumping ground for adventurers, scum and crazies...and people like you, of course.'

A lot of it didn't register for Tiberious as he froze in shock at the casual attitude the man took to the situation.

4. We're not all bandits

'P-Pandora?' muttered Tiberious, more to himself than to the man now standing over him. Tiberious felt as if there was more than met the eye, as if that small glint in the

man's eye was saying something different than what was coming out of his mouth. 'Who are you? Are you a bandit?' Tiberious was slowly recovering his ability of speech.

'Flynn. Koen Flynn. Pleased to make your acquaintance. No, I'm not a bandit. Yes, I'm one of the civilised people on this godforsaken world,' he continued. 'Some of us kill the bandits of this world for people like you...we call you *softies*.'

Koen had proceeded to use air quotes to emphasise this.

Tiberious offered his hand and simply uttered his full name and then returned his hand to his side, nervous and shaking slightly. Was he really stranded on this godforsaken place forever or until he dies? He couldn't deal with that. His thought train was interrupted when Koen drew a pistol from one of his many cabinets.

Tiberious scrambled to his feet in terror but soon realised that Koen was handing it to him. 'If you're going to survive here you're going to have to keep something like this handy. Have you ever fired one?'

'Yeah, I have shooting experience,' was Tiberious' simple reply.

Koen sighed. 'Well I guess I better show you around, tell you where to avoid and all that boring stuff.'

The door was opened for Tiberious and he stepped out into the night.

Quite a bit of time had passed since Tiberious had been knocked out by Koen. Turns out Tiberious had been out for nearly a whole day.

Night had fallen while they talked and they slowly made their way towards a large pillar-like machine.

‘This is your best friend on Pandora, next to your gun. This will bring you to any other of these stations placed throughout Pandora. All you have to do is touch where you want to go and you’re there,’ Koen explained.

Tiberious curiously touched one and he was gone in the blink of an eye. Koen sighed and pressed the same button as the previous customer.

The Dust, a barren wasteland full of wrecked metal and bandits, of course. Sadly this was where Tiberious had chosen to go. He was unaware of the nausea that followed your first *fast travel* as they had called it. He was lying in the sand heaving up his earlier snack when another flash of light delivered Koen to his side.

Koen waited for Tiberious to finish and stand up and then began leading him into the desert that faced them.

The heat was unbearable, mirages appearing left and right, heat reflecting off scrap metal into their path and the distant sound of engines...the closer sound of engines...the imminent sound of engines. Cars circled them and firing off shots into the sand at their feet. Koen rolled behind scrap and fired shots in the general direction of cars. Tiberious dived after Koen, sand got in his eyes and all his clothes. Adrenaline kicked in and Tiberious was staring at his gun, firing shots and hitting the gunners on the cars.

5. Awakening

Tiberious couldn’t understand what was happening and frankly neither could Koen. A man barely on Pandora a day was firing, with perfect aim at fast moving cars. Deciding it was better to shoot first, ask questions later, Koen

continued shooting alongside Tiberious. Bullets flying from all around, through skulls, through tyres and ricocheting off all the scrap to create a stereotypical standoff between what seemed to be the bandit leader and Tiberious.

The bandit was faster, pulling his revolver and firing at Tiberious. But Tiberious wasn't where he once stood. He now stood a foot to the right, pistol drawn and his finger on the trigger. Bang!

The bandit leader's body slumped to the ground, blood pouring from a very noticeable hole in his forehead.

The sand under Tiberious' feet was now soaked red. Koen stood there, mouth agape, eyes wide with fear. In shock and awe at what Tiberious had just done. Pandora had awoken something deep within Tiberious. Tiberious was panting heavily as Koen continued to stare.

'Something wrong?' Tiberious inquired.

'Um no, nah, nope, not a thing,' was Koen's slightly fearful answer.

Tiberious had moved faster with that gun than Koen had ever seen on Pandora before, and he had lived a long time on Pandora. It scared him, to have only met this man and already be aware that he was outmatched in almost every way. The rifle on Koen's back suddenly didn't feel so deadly compared to Tiberious' supposedly flimsy pistol.

Tiberious stood over the body alongside Koen.

'You may want to scavenge anything he had' was Koen's simple direction.

Tiberious looked at the dead man at his feet, the man he had killed. A man who not a minute ago was trying to kill him. A strange array of feelings ran through him; guilt,

nausea, sadness. But most of all, he wanted to do it again. Was he a psychopath? Did he enjoy murdering? Whatever the case, Tiberious knelt down beside the now rigid body, took a calming breath and began looting whatever he could. He allocated special attention to the revolver which seemed to fit in his hand like an old friend he had been missing his whole life.

Tiberious rose to stand beside Koen. A moment of awkwardness fell upon the two. Tiberious ended it.

‘I served in the army in my younger years, okay!’

‘Then why did it look like that was the first time you killed?’

‘War’s different to this.’ The look in Tiberious’ eyes answered all of Koen’s questions. The silence fell again as they moved on back to Sanctuary via the fast travel.

6. The reign of fire

The duo didn’t arrive in the fast travel in Sanctuary; they arrived on the outskirts of the city near the mechanic’s place. Their confusion was soon answered by the massive plume of smoke drifting sluggishly from the centre of town. The smell soon reached their noses and screams reached their ears. Koen’s eyes reflected fear as well as the now fast approaching flames; they seemed to be being pushed along by an invisible force.

Gunfire...gunfire towards them. Someone was shooting at them. Tiberious seemed to push his normal self behind his newly awakened self. Instinct took over and he began sprinting for cover, dragging the traumatised Koen behind him.

Koen only seemed to stutter out the words, 'M-my h-home'. He retained the glazed look in his eye until Tiberious shook him.

'Koen, Koen! You have to snap out of it.'

Koen blinked twice and then anger filled his eyes. 'He'll pay for this...I'll make him pay.'

Tiberious didn't question it any more he just handed Koen his gun and pointed in the general direction of the gunfire. 'We have to shoot that way Koen, towards the centre of town.'

Koen nodded and the two began diving and rolling through the debris and the flames. Smoke slowly folding around them, clouding their vision, constricting their lungs and making it difficult to get any sense of direction.

The gunfire ceased suddenly and was replaced with feet on concrete. The feet were running but not from them. The duo took the chance and sprinted through the smoke to an area totally engulfed in flames but not much smoke, the smoke was surrounding them from every side, blocking their vision from around. There was a body lying in the centre of the flames, there was writing on it, one word...'Koen.'

There was silence in Koen's ears. Darkness in his eyes and emptiness inside him. When light returned he was greeted by an aghast Tiberious staring blankly at him, his eyes flicked to the body and then to the flames around them. They parted and a man stepped forward. Covered in scorch marks and a white jumpsuit, both men had seen him before and they both said, 'That's him,' at the exact same time.

The man was known on Pandora as The Real Firehawk and had a reputation for burning down the lives and homes of anyone and everyone. One of these turned out to be Koen Flynn's father; killed when Koen was just a boy, in the comfort of his own home, by an 'accidental' fire which everyone knew was a blatant lie told by the authorities on Koen's home planet. Koen swore to have revenge on the man that killed his father and today he would have it.

7. Penance for a black soul

The man raised a round nozzle towards the two and the smell of gasoline filled the air, Koen dived to one side and Tiberious to the other, flames filled the space they had just left and the air became unbearably hot. Tiberious tried to catch Koen's eyes but they were locked on the man and rage had overtaken him. When the flame stopped, Koen vaulted the crate and sprinted towards the man. Tiberious followed suit.

As Koen reached the man he loaded a punch as the man did the same, Tiberious saw the man was going to strike first, so he intervened. Spring-boarding off a small crate, he kicked the man square in the chest, knocking him back and letting Koen start his barrage of well-aimed punches. Left-right, left-right! All aimed at weak points around his helmet. Then as Tiberious raised himself off the ground he witnessed the man catch Koen's fist and in the blink of an eye he had pushed Koen's wrist beyond human limits. The crack was sickening.

Things went in slow motion for Tiberious, as they had seemed to do a lot when he let his 'other self' take over. He

first grabbed the wrist of the man and bent it away from Koen. Koen fell to the ground holding his now broken wrist. Tiberious then took his other hand and shattered the man's helmet with one powerful punch. Behind it lay black, scorched skin.

The man let out a gasp as Koen shattered his kneecap with the heel of his right foot. With the man on the ground Tiberious bent his arm into an arm bar and with one quick lift and a pop, dislocated the man's shoulder. The man fell in front of a now gun-wielding and vengeful Koen.

Gun raised, aimed and cocked, Koen took a shaky breath and closed his eyes.

Tiberious prepared for the bang and splatter of blood...but it never came. Tiberious opened his eyes and saw that Koen had dropped the gun, and was now staring at the blood pooling around the man's shattered kneecap.

Koen was muttering profanities under his breath and his eyes were glassed over.

Tiberious, still in his other-self had no hesitation. He shot the man point blank. Tiberious then turned to Koen, returning to his normal self and gave him a questioning look.

Koen answered any questions Tiberious had with, 'He needed punishment but not from the man he had sinned against.'

Koen then turned and walked towards his probably, by now, fire-damaged house. Tiberious followed Koen, unquestioning of his strange behaviour. Koen was still the only person who hadn't tried to shoot at Tiberious, and on Pandora, that was the closest thing he had to a friend.

Tiberious stood tall next to Koen and wondered: 'What other danger will I run head first into to trying to get back home?'

Death in Dunwall

Scott Flynn

Dunwall is dying. Once the capital of a great empire the city now lies in a state of ruin. Whole districts of the city are infested with rats, the Wrenhaven River is polluted with corpses and debris, and half the city's populace are either dead, dying or worse. To make matters even more unstable, the city's Empress was assassinated less than a month ago. The heir to the throne, Lady Emily, was also kidnapped at the time of the murder. The new Lord Regent now rules what remains of the city with an iron fist.

On a crumbling rooftop high above all the death and destruction crouched a figure silhouetted against the full moon like some great bird of prey. The figure was a man, in his mid-forties; he possessed strong chiselled features that gave the impression of experience and hardship. His hair was dark brown with not a hint of grey. His clothes were made of tough leather and were surprisingly clean despite the filth around him. On his face he wore an old industrial gasmask taken from an abandoned whaling factory. The man's name was Doud and he was hunting, hunting specific kinds of beast; the noblemen.

Meanwhile, in the street below, the door to a large brothel called the Golden Cat flew open and four men poured out. The man at the head of the group was short and

rather fat and was dressed in expensive clothes that set him apart from the plague ridden streets around him. The other men were from the City Watch. They were stern faced and wore navy blue uniforms. The aristocrat was Lord Tomas Shaw who had accumulated his vast wealth by evicting plague victims from their homes and reselling the property. Doud had been hired by one of those displaced noblemen to silence Shaw for good.

Shaw drunkenly waddled to his private railcar which was parked next to the Golden Cat. Doud watched silently as the overweight nobleman and his guards clambered into the car and it started to roll down the street with a grinding sound. Now Doud moved. He moved not in the traditional sense, he simply vanished with the sound of rushing wind and a puff of black smoke. A blink of an eye later, he was crouching on a different rooftop several doors down on the opposite side of the crumbling street. His green eyes, well-adjusted to the gloom, followed the advancing railcar with ease. Lord Shaw's transport was now approaching the Wall of Light checkpoint dividing the Residential District from the Estates District; dividing the very poor from the very rich.

Doud's cat like eyes moved away from the car itself and to the Wall of Light, the wall was comprised of two large pylons with arcs of electricity crackling between them. Doud watched unfortunate rats scamper between the pylons and become reduced to ashes in a blinding flash of light. The railcar on the other hand drove straight through the menacing machine without incident. Doud took a less

direct approach. In another rush of air Doud disappeared and then reappeared right in front of the advancing railcar!

The car's occupants barely had time to react. Doud simply raised his hand and time itself began to slow; everything: the car, the rats, water, even the sound of suffering plague victims slowed to a crawl. Without hesitating Doud raised his other arm. A miniature crossbow was mounted on his wrist. The bow launched a bolt with a shaft filled with volatile whale oil that was aimed at the railcar's front axle. The shot connected and time returned to normal with a jolt.

The front of Shaw's railcar exploded in an orange ball of fire, causing the vehicle to come to a sudden stop. The car's occupants were quick to respond. The doors flew open and two City Watch guards jumped out with swords drawn. Doud drew his own sword and readied himself. The first guard slashed aggressively at Doud's neck and he quickly parried the blow, throwing the thug off balance. Doud promptly drove his blade into the man's stomach; a dark liquid began to stain the guard's blue tunic as he collapsed.

The second thug was more cautious than the first, moving from side to side looking for an opening. However after a brief exchange of blows Doud took a swipe at his right leg severing it below the knee. The guard screamed in pain, Doud silenced him with one quick thrust to the heart.

The distinct sound of boots on gravel signalled the arrival of the third bodyguard. Doud turned to face him; this soldier wore the uniform of an officer and he had a leaner build than the other guards; he was the sergeant. His eyes were the colour of steel. Instead of charging the

masked assassin the sergeant raised his pistol and fired. Doud used his magic to avoid the fast moving projectiles, teleporting again and again. Suddenly Doud stood directly in front of the soldier with his sword drawn. Before he could react, Doud decapitated him with one swipe of his blade. Doud wiped the blood from his mask and turned to find his prey which was waddling down the street as fast as it could.

‘Guards, guards!’ it shouted as loud as it could.

Doud raised his hand again.

From the very ground that Lord Shaw stood upon came dozens of large and vicious plague rats.

Shaw screamed in terror as the rats tore at his flesh. In less than a minute his fat body had been reduced to bones.

Doud could hear the approach of the City Watch. They were too late. Doud gave the pile of bones one last look before vanishing into the night.

Dunwall is dying.

The Other Side

Tom Kerins

It was a mystery for so long. What was in there, at the centre of the Earth? Molten lava, a hollow shell, or maybe there is no centre, maybe the earth simply never ends. In my opinion we never should have known, but I can't control the fate of humanity. No one person can.

The year is 2099, the earth is failing. Overcrowding, lack of resources and radiation the main causes. The Chinese attacked as soon as their precious fossil fuels ran out. They had nothing to lose; they had the worst of the overcrowding and the radiation poisoning. Most of Europe was destroyed as a result of the hydrogen bombs. South America was completely obliterated along with parts of Asia. Australia, Africa and the USA have survived so far.

Fortunately, I am in the United States and the self-appointed dictator and former President, Grishord Lewis, is ordering all military and government personnel to the capital of Washington D.C. so that we can come up with a plan to get out of this *mess*, although by sheltering ourselves here, we are leaving the rest of the country and the world to rot. It is obvious that he is insane but things are so bad at this point that I'm willing to do anything to survive because nobody is going to make it on their own.

‘I have called you all here today to carry out my plan to save the planet with the utmost efficiency as I know you are capable of doing. Together we shall launch an expedition to the centre of the earth and use its untapped energy to power the world and ultimately save the planet!’

The packed capital hummed with whispers as the President rambled on about his *plan* and taking the lack of questions as an acceptance of his self-proclaimed genius.

Grishord hastily finished his speech by telling the crowd to converge on the entrance of the Kakau caves, which were discovered in the south of Washington forty years previous, as he believed it was geographically closer to the centre of the earth without providing any evidence of his belief having any truth behind it.

Two months have passed since that speech and the earth is now closer to death, which we have learned from the reports by the President’s personal spies. They tell us of animals that were once human roaming the country, of the destruction of the landscape and the seas from the radiation seeping steadily into the earth’s crust. We are kept alive with a stockpile of food that the President has amassed over the years as he has been planning the earth’s downfall for years now. Maybe he is not as insane as I thought.

We have dug almost 6000 kilometres into the earth’s core and are nearing its centre. The Kakau caves have become our base of operations where we sleep, eat and live. As you descend deeper it becomes our mining base, where the equipment and heat repellent suits are kept. Also our

saviour and only chance of breaking through the earth's crust: The Gaia 1. It is kept digging with possibly the only supply of coal and oil left on earth, courtesy of the President's Secret Services.

The Gaia 1 is the top of the line in heat repellent technology as well as digging efficiency with its twenty foot wide circular drill. It also ensures minimal losses as it is a remote controlled drone and is unmanned.

I was put in charge of Team Delta, the group who was assigned the top most priority of maintaining the Gaia 1. So I am keeping the mission going and everybody is relying on me. This is strange for me because before the crisis, I was Secretary of Alien Affairs, the most laughed upon position in the whole US government. I don't think he even knew my name before the crisis so he must have a use for me. Maybe he just sees me as a disposable pawn that will get the dirty work done.

'ALERT WARNING RED! ALERT WARNING RED!' rang through the passage way carved by the massive drill. This is it; this is the moment we have been waiting for since the President called us here. The Gaia 1 has reached The Centre of The Earth.

We waited until the drill had cooled all of the nearby lava before approaching. My team of three men and two women, I don't even know any of their names. We are just numbers in our group. I am number one.

The air became strangely colder as I neared the sloping hole as if all the heat was being sucked into the hole just dug by the Gaia 1. I jumped the two metre drop to the apparently marble surface below. I felt my ankle crack as I

hit the floor and I grunted in pain. I shouted back up to the rest of the group not to jump down as it was too far.

I looked up from my crouched position and my mouth dropped in awe. A square cavern at least five metres high and ten metres across spread out before me. At the centre of the room lay a floating ball of what appeared to be black velvet at least three metres in diameter. The rest of my team had now lapped down to me with a rope and one of them, an Asian looking man, commented that the drop seemed shorter from the tunnel above, and I realised that I had thought just that when I dropped down.

One of the women, an African-American one, announced in a very foolish manner that there are symbols all over the floor. As if none of us had already noticed that.

They looked like nothing I had ever seen before. Not Egyptian hieroglyphs or even the Ancient Greek alphabet. Another one of the men, a very tall one, asked if we should approach the black ball. The last man, an apparently cocky one, didn't see any problem with the idea and ran right up to the ball, close enough that he could touch it. We noticed it instantly that he was being sucked into the ball, but at a physically impossible angle. He didn't even seem to realise what was happening. And then, within the space of only a few seconds, his whole body was pulled into the vortex without him even seeming to move.

We all started to panic and the second woman, a very short one, ran screaming towards the rope and tried to drag herself up but it just melted away like Play-Do in her hands.

While everyone else was panicking and asking questions, I noticed that the ball had grown slightly. I also noticed a slight pull coming from it. Then we all felt it. We were being dragged into the ball at the same impossible angle as the man. I didn't feel like I was moving but I was. Things started to get dimmer around me and then suddenly the ground was swept away like someone had just snatched a rug out from under me. I was spinning and falling and I wanted to throw up and to just be anywhere but here and there was nothing but black around me and then... I hit the floor.

I could feel a buzzing in my head and everything smelled of fresh cut grass; my favourite smell. I opened my eyes slowly, afraid of what I would see and it turned out that my fear was not unwarranted. I could see nothing but black, as if I was still tumbling through the black vortex. But I knew that I couldn't be because I could feel something solid beneath me and it was clear I was still not in the underground cavern. The only explanation was that I had gone blind.

I could hear mumbling close to me and I prayed to God that they were coming from my team and not something bigger and more dangerous. I could feel a warm summer breeze on my face and I knew that we were outside somewhere. I began to contemplate screaming for help when I heard several sets of footsteps coming closer to me. I could hear them whispering among themselves. At least four people, a mix of men and women.

I assumed they were human from the sound of their footsteps and the fact that they were speaking some sort of coherent language even if I didn't know what that language

was. I knew I was going to die as I felt one of them coming closer to me. But a voice in my head told me not to move or panic, that I was going to be fine. I didn't get the chance to run as the person put their hands on my face and started talking in their strange language.

The air began to smell of mint as the man whispered to himself in the strange language. I realised the man now sounded just like an American even though I couldn't understand the language; his accent had changed. I also realised that my vision was returning slowly and I could now see what was happening.

An ancient old man with a snow white beard and startling blue eyes stared at me while he whispered to himself. My team stood beside me on a hilltop while five other people stood in front of them and stared into their eyes while they whispered to themselves just like the elderly man in front of me.

Suddenly, everything seemed ten times clearer, like I was wearing the most high-tech glasses in the world. The man also started speaking English and I caught his last word. 'Whoops'.

The ancient old man walked over to where the other strangers had gathered. They were the weirdest group of people I had ever seen assembled. Not far off my visit to Comic Con when I was a kid.

They all wore the same style of robe, although they were all different colours. It was a bathroom robe made of some sort of strange velvety material that always seemed to be moving, similar to the ball of floating *velvet* we were sucked into, which lay still floating behind us.

The three men all seemed to be the exact same height, around six feet, and the women too, although they were a few inches smaller. They all had their own unique hair styles but their eyes were the strangest thing about them. Sure they were different colours but they were so all bright and vivid. I could hardly see the whites of their eyes because of their pupils which were so wide, they took up half of the space and the different colours of blue or green or hazel which took up almost all of the rest of the space. I couldn't stop staring.

The group of strangers suddenly turned around and looked all of us up and down like they were trying to assess our souls. The old man then smiled and began to speak. He said in a very friendly tone. 'Welcome to Ogygia guests of honour, we have been expecting you for quite a while. Ogygia is a place you all know as earth, but better.'

He beckoned us to follow him to the *Grand Hall*, a place where all of our questions would be answered, which I found unlikely because I had so many questions and I was hopelessly confused. But we followed him anyway.

As we walked the old man who told us, his name was Augusto. He explained our apparently extraordinary situation. Our arrival through the Portal Gate was predicted in an ancient prophecy thousands of years ago. It was foretold that we would bring great destruction to their land of Ogygia, otherwise known as the Earth. He explained that our two worlds were very similar, they had come about in the same way and their histories were the same except for one thing, Wjadt.

The word was pronounced like 'widge-at' but with a guttural sound to it that I didn't know a mouth could form. Augusto then explained that Wjadt is a substance within every human being which lives in their very souls. It cannot be seen, although it does have a distinct smell that is unique to every person. His smell was mint.

'Wjadt is what your idea of magic is based on. It is a power inside of everybody that allows us to do many amazing things and the only limit it has is your imagination,' Augusto explains.

As we walked and passed several small towns, I realised how happy each person was. There were no homeless people on the street and everybody looked well fed and healthy. I wondered if Ogygia even knew the meaning of poverty. I enquired more about why the Earth has no Wjadt and he explained that sometime during the past all of the people who possessed Wjadt were eradicated by the mortals who feared and could not comprehend their abilities. But in Ogygia the mortals were accepting of the Wjadt and throughout the centuries it has been bred into every family so there are now none of the original mortals who rejected the Wjadt.

I was so engrossed with this information that I did not realise that my team and I had walked into the Grand Hall and were now proceeding up a red carpet to a raised dais where a line of twenty wizards sat in the fanciest wooden chairs I had ever seen. The Hall was like a church but five times as big. The ceiling was so high that I could not see the very top and there were enough rows of benches to fit at least five thousand people. All of these seats were filled.

Augusto told us all to turn and bow and we did so which prompted a massive wave of cheers and claps. I felt like a hero but I hadn't even done anything.

G.A.M.E

Jayrald Opingo

I quietly sat on my comfortable couch. I was watching a T.V. program called 'The Simpsons'. The program seemed very hilarious. I gave an outburst of laughter. The program ended and the credits had finally shown. I got out of my couch. In an instant my hips began to ache in agony. I stepped outside the room and into the hall where I stretched my limbs and hips. It felt good. I ran down to the basement and there it was, my computer. Looking at it gave me a tingle of excitement. As I ran down the stairs, a piece of nail was sticking out of the wooden floor. I fell and tumbled down into the basement. I smacked my head on the floor as hard as concrete.

When I got up on my own two feet I saw a wooden crate in the corner covered with a large cloth. I approached the crate. It seemed very suspicious. I knocked it open with my fist and a hole appeared on the crate. I took out a few nails from the inside and the crate shattered apart. There was a strange computer, named G.A.M.E, there was no keyboard and a strange black coloured helmet was stuck into the computer with a metallic tube.

I took the machine out and plugged it in the empty socket right beside where I plugged in my computer. The machine sparked and turned on. I attached the strange looking helmet to my head. I began to feel queasy. Soon my

vision vanished into the darkness. In that moment I lost consciousness.

I awoke in a strange world. The sky was bright blue and I was standing on a strange floating island. I began to shake with fear so I stepped away from the edge of the cliff. I felt the air and it felt realistic. After I spent a few moments in this strange world, a strange voice spoke into my ear.

‘Hello. Welcome to G.A.M.E. In this world you can socialise, fight and live with other players. I am your guidance for this tutorial.’

Then a large screen opened in front of me. It showed three strange looking characters; warrior, archer and wizard.

Then the voice spoke again, ‘Please choose a class.’

I selected my desired class, the warrior. Then a sword and armour materialized in front me. I wasn’t used to the game’s systems. A screen appeared and an option bar flashed green and blue. I tapped it with my finger and it moved to the next screen. There was an image of me, in the right bottom of the corner, a tool which lets me equip. I tapped the tool, the sword materialized into my hand and my armour materialized onto my torso. I tested the sword; it was light as a feather. It moved swiftly and its speed was tremendous.

‘Congratulations, you have completed your tutorial, enjoy G.A.M.E’

Then a strange pillar of light appeared where I stood and I disappeared into the mist.

An hour later, I found myself lying on the concrete floor; it was cold, even though in a virtual world, you could still

feel things. In this place, there were many players including the virtual people, and the non-player characters. I approached to a nearby newbie player like me. I could tell if it was strong or a weak player because there's a tool in the system which lets me inspect other player's equipment and levels. My level was three and so I am a newbie who needed help. The guy who I approached was odd looking; he had a red bristly hair, his armour was hidden under his garments. Garments were costumes for style.

'Hey, what're you up to?'

'I just got myself an interesting item.'

'What sort of item?'

'Some kind of bottle which restores your health points, that's it a health potion.'

'Nice item', I replied sarcastically. 'So, umm how do I get out of this world?'

'Have you looked through the manual?'

'What manual?'

I was so pathetic, I should've read the manual but I didn't bother, I'm destined to find my way out of this world.

'Here look at this manual.'

He showed me the manual, on the last page, it says 'The End' and an image of the last boss appeared after, it had an appearance of a bull, it carried an infernal axe with a flaming aura and the beast was surrounded with a magical shield that reduces a minimum amount of damage dealt to it. Its weapon burns any living thing that makes contact with it, dealing a huge amount of damage. Its health points were huge. There were more than six digits on its health

points. I fell on my knees, the final boss was hard to kill and I would need a miracle to defeat it.

I could only find this boss in the infernal depths of the game. The place was heavily guarded with infernal soldiers. The recommended level was one-hundred. So I was shocked, I won't be able to find my way out of this game and it would at least take me a year or more to reach that level. I continued to search through the manual, hoping I would find a way to level up rapidly. Luckily, I found what I needed, an item which allows you to advance your level from three to one hundred, it's the rarest item and there's only one that exists, it appeared like a fragment from a star, it glowed like an ember. Now my quest to get out of this game had begun. I took out a teleporting orb, then a blue light closed in on me and I vanished.

Green grass swayed, I lay awake, surrounded by trees and peaceful creatures. I drew out my sword. I approached the outside hostile zone, I saw a sign which said 'Danger: On this path, you are about to go outside the safe zone. Please equip your gear and continue safe on your journey!' I stood on the border of the zone, I took a breath of fresh air and I exited the zone.

I felt a strange dark feeling from the ground. I was prepared for the worst, I did not fear death. I carried on down the slope of the green leafy earth. Suddenly, the sound of thunder filled my ears and then lightning struck the ground. A strange creature appeared from the lightning. A pig, human-form creature carrying an axe covered with their prey's blood. The creature's level was displayed level

ten and its health points were five-hundred and its name was highlighted in red.

I pointed my sword at the creature. The creature's look was saying that it was about to strike its weapon. The creature screamed into the air then he outrageously ran towards me and swung his axe sideways. I dodged the creature's first move. He stopped and I struck my sword in its neck. The blood was dripping from the creature. The creature did not care for its life but only to kill its prey. His remaining health points were four-hundred and ninety eight. My damages were like ant bites to it.

Quickly, I looked through my equipment. I saw a gifted sword. I opened the gift and a shiny scimitar appeared. I held it in my hands and it felt heavy. The creature was going to strike again. As soon as the creature charged with its weapon, with my brute strength I swung my sword dealing a damage of six hundred. The creature's head popped off its body and it vanished into the mist. I received a huge amount of experience points and I levelled up by seven. It was my first battle. I continued on hoping to see more monsters to battle with.

It was getting dark, a lone tree stood on the ground and I took its branches. I also took a few flat rocks to make a flint. I lit the branch on fire and it burned, its fire warm enough to keep me from the cold. There was food inside my backpack, I took the first bite. The taste was similar as the real world. After, I lay onto the ground and rested throughout the night.

It was a fresh chilly morning and I stood up from the ground. The fire burned its last wood and it faded away. I

heard a loud argument. I ran to the tree and took a peek. A gang of players were ganging up on two newbie players. These players' levels were twice higher than me. I thought of a plan quickly. I searched through my inventory. I found a plastic tube, coloured in black. I used it and it blasted a fog of black smoke. I grabbed the two newbie players with me. We ran ahead and hid beneath the green bushes. The gang of players' names were flashing rapidly in blue and their status mode was shifted in 'PK'. They were tough players so I couldn't face them. We waited patiently until the noise of their footsteps had vanished.

And one of them said, 'Thanks for saving us back there.'

We continued on ahead, while both players introduced themselves.

'My name is Dave and this is Stan.'

'So why were those players trying to kill you?'

'We found a map from a cave and those people were trying to rob it from us.'

'What's this map you're talking about?'

'A map to get a weird looking item, it glows red like a volcano.'

I looked closely to the image on top of the map. It was the item I needed.

'So, umm, could I have that map?'

'What do you need it for?'

'I need it to defeat the final boss.'

'Since you've help us I'll give this to you.'

With no words to say thanks, we continued onto the next town.

It was a long walk but we managed to reach the fortified city. I waved my hands as a farewell and the two disappeared into the crowd. I ran to the alley and took a quick peek of the map. The place was located to the north two-hundred kilometres from here and the place was on a snowy region. I roamed through the streets and I saw an armoury. Inside, there were sorts of strange looking armour. I needed armour to protect me from the bitter cold in the snowy region. I saw furry skinned armour glowing like a star; it was shaped like a wolf. The cost price was half a million gold. My current gold was seventy-five thousand, so I sold my current armour and bought the armour.

All I needed was a weapon. I roamed through the streets and located an odd luxurious weapon shop. The shop's most expensive weapon was a two-metre sword gold and silver plated sword. The sword was blessed; it glowed like the sun and had a white angelic aura surrounding it to boost its damage. It cost over a million gold. Out of nowhere, the sound of bells came and a notification note appeared into my eyes. 'You have received: two million gold!' I was amazed the way the game gifted me. Without delay I bought the sword.

My flesh was tingling with excitement. The sword was like a precious jewel. It glimmered from the reflection of the sunlight. I swung the sword, it felt amazing. It gave me the absolute power to kill the final boss. I had nothing else to do but to travel to the snowy region.

There were raging snow storms. I carried on with my two legs. I spotted a cave beneath the cliff. I got closer and closer to it. I was inspecting the cave. I sensed a great

power swirling into the cave. I crept slowly, avoiding any suspicious traps. There were blue frozen icicles stuck up on the roof. Any sudden movements and these spiky cones would fall dealing sudden death damage. I passed through and onto the icy steps.

The steps lead into the depths of the mountain. I kept on until I saw a large bridge connecting between the two platforms. On the other platform, there was a glowing crystal which lay in the ground. I ran swiftly to the other platform. Just as I made a run for it, the ground shook and the bridge began to collapse. I ran furiously and made it across safely. I took the crystal firmly and its power transferred to its wielder. Then my conscious mind and vision went blank in a split of second and I collapsed into the ground. My vision slowly disappeared into darkness.

My conscious mind returned. My level had risen up to one hundred. My status points were massive. But I was shocked and curious to know my whereabouts. I stood on a cliff surrounded by active magma. It ferociously spit up into the air and came back down.

I felt a strange aura coming towards me. Afterwards a strange figure arose from the stony ground. I stared directly to its eyes. Its eyes were burning with fury. It held a two metre spear. I quickly ran my way through the infernal soldiers, slashing their bodies apart. Soon I escaped the aura.

I made my way through in the infernal depths. Ahead, a strange door stood in front of me. The door was covered in sparkling gold. I opened the door and the strange room was warm and filled with bright colours. It was the throne

room, as soon as I approached the throne, the door shut, I was trapped. Then a strange black fog from atop came down. There was a murmur contained in the fog. The fog vanished into thin air and it revealed the appearance of the strange creature.

The last boss finally appeared in front of me. I was possessed with fear. I was not confident enough to fight the creature. I fell onto my knees and thought of all the adventures I had in this world. Then I remembered that I had desired to get out of this world. Then a sudden fury burned in my heart and I was filled with confidence. I felt power. We were about to clash.

The beast took its first strike by swinging its weapon sideways. I dodged the first swing, but the second swing struck my shoulder. The armour cannot withstand the damage it dealt. The piece of the shoulder armour cracked and the first layer of the armour split apart from the main armour. The beast dealt a damage of one thousand. My health points remaining were twelve thousand. I retaliated but the beast parried my attacks. I quickly scanned through my skills list. One skill was called 'Breakthrough'. I used it and it broke the beasts' guard. I slashed my weapon into the beast's flesh dealing a damage of one thousand. The beasts' remaining health is one hundred and nineteen thousand. I still had a long way to go.

I used another skill, 'Cyclone' but only for thirty seconds. My movement and attack speeds were tremendous. The beast didn't catch up to my attacks, I was hitting through its vital points. I dealt forty hits for each hit and dealt one thousand five-hundred for hitting the vital points. I did a

massive damage strike. The beasts' remaining health points were fifty nine thousand. The beast roared and a magical shield appeared and surrounded the beast. It summoned a buff spell. Then the beast strangely stood there. The creature's opened its mouth steadily. Then strange light appeared between the beast jaws. The light formed into a sphere and it expanded. It kept expanding until the beast reached its limits. The beast shot it like a laser. I dodged the laser and headed towards its head. I buried the sword in his head and the blade penetrated the muscles of the beast. The beast screamed in pain as he tried to throw me off. With my last attack the blade broke through the muscle and the sword got through the beasts' head. Its head split like a melon. Then it began to fade until parts of the beast disappeared.

A strange doorway appeared in front of me. I walked through it. Suddenly, I awoke back to the present day, the moment just before I put on the helmet. The strange machine on the screen appeared to say 'Congratulations! You have completed the game.' After it said its last words, the machine steamed up and blew up into pieces. For me, I had and greatest experience I ever have. Then I got up and continued to live in this world.

Log Horizon

Mark Pader

It was Saturday evening on the 28th of November. I had just finished playing my favourite online game called Elder Tale. I glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was midnight; I cautiously walked upstairs so that I didn't wake up my parents. I went straight to the bathroom to brush my teeth, then headed into my room; I got under the covers and got ready to sleep. I woke up to the sound of a bell tower; I opened my eyes and looked around. I was surprised to see cracks on my room's walls and my room was full of spider webs. I jumped out of the bed and came to realise that it wasn't my room. I ran to the window and looked outside; I saw old medieval buildings covered in moss.

I dashed outside in order to get a better look at the place, I was surprised to see a whole city covered in moss, I could see people walking around, some confused and some were just casually walking like nothing had happened. I walked towards the centre of the city and saw a giant tree. I began to panic, I knew that I was not in the real world anymore and that my family wasn't anywhere to be seen but I wondered what this place was. I ran around in panic, saw a huge building and on top of the door I saw familiar letters which spelled Magnolia, the first thing that came to my

mind when I saw those letters was the online game; Elder Tale, the main city of the game was called Magnolia.

I somewhat calmed down and realised that somehow I had entered the world of Elder Tale. I noticed that the big tree from earlier was also in the centre of Magnolia, inside the game

I thought to myself that if I got into the game world then maybe my friends from the game might also be in this world, I tried looking at the game menu and saw my name; Shiro and my character class; mage, with a red health bar beside it, underneath it was my friend list, the first name I recognized on the list was Jay. I quickly pressed the call button, someone answered and I recognized the voice, it was Jay. I told him what had happened and it seems to have happened to him too, so we arranged to meet at the big tree immediately.

I walked down to the tree, I could see a guardian class at the trunk of tree, I then saw his face and I was filled with excitement. I quickly ran to the tree, there I could see Jay sitting on the trunk along with a small girl which had the class of an assassin.

Jay was very happy to see me and I was also happy to see a person I knew from the real world, he introduced me to the girl who acted very maturely; she told me that her name was Remie. We began to talk about what had happened, Jay told me that there are NPC's in the game. These are non-player characters, which means they are not from the real world and they are the people casually walking about. NPC's are normally called people of the land, Jay told me that the people who look confused are people from the real

world who had played the game before, just like me; we are called adventurers in the game. You play the game by levelling up, to do this you have to kill monsters to gain experience, but it seems that whatever level you are in the online game of Elder Tale is your current level in this world. The three of us are currently on the maximum level which is level 90.

Chapter 2

I grouped up with Jay and Remie to start exploring the outside of Magnolia, we walked to the gate of Magnolia; once you get out of the city you are no longer in a safe zone which means monsters and even other players can attack you. The three of us began to move outside of the city, as we were walking, goblins blocked our path so we had to defeat them, these monsters re-spawn in order to let other players gain levels. There are also monsters that live underground which can be accessed through caves; these are called dungeons, dungeons are where you can find skeletons and stronger monsters which give you large amounts of experience points for levelling up and also gold; which is the currency of the game.

My group had travelled half the world fighting against monsters in order to gather information regarding the game. We recently just got back to Magnolia and here we met a familiar character, a leader of the Crescent Moon guild, guilds are larger groups with a name and their own guild hall.

The guild leader's name was Riven; a friend of mine on Elder Tale. She had told me that in the east of Magnolia there is a town called Ren which is currently occupied by players who steal from other players. She told me that one of the members of her guild is stranded in that town; the name of the member was Lucy. She also told me that Lucy had met a player who is currently guarding her; she asked my group if we could go and rescue her. I agreed to help her and that we would be on our way tomorrow morning.

I woke up to the sound of the bell tower. I immediately called Jay and Remie, walking to Ren would be a problem as there is a huge dungeon half way between Magnolia and Ren so we decided to take griffons and fly to Ren; griffons are giant birds that are used to fly to other towns and cities. We arrived at the gate leading to the town but there wasn't a player in sight, we entered the town anyway. In the town there were players who carried many weapons; they looked dangerous, staring at us with their cold eyes.

We got a call from the player guarding Lucy. He told us that they're on the building up the hill; we walked slowly trying not to attract the attention of the stealers. Inside the house on the hill I met a familiar face, he had a race which is similar to a cat and the class of a swordsman. It was a chief from my guild. Jay also knew him as he was in the same guild, beside him was a little girl who, I figured was Lucy. We walked through the town and arrived at the gate but it was blocked by a huge number of stealers, preventing us from leaving, so, the only choice was to fight them.

After hours of fighting we defeated all of them, I then asked the chief to join my guild and he agreed as his cat race guild was no longer active. We got back to Magnolia by flying on griffons. The guild leader was very glad to see Lucy and thanked me; she told me that if I ever needed something I could ask them for help. I then went outside for a while. Suddenly, I saw a man with the class of a mage inviting me to join him. I followed him into a big library, he told me that he was the Oath of the Lake; these are mages who specialized on research about magic. He told me that I had the class of an archmage and all about the different classes in the game. He then told me that archmages can do global magic where you can gain the ability to control the whole world in a spell called *world refraction*. Then I thought to myself that this world is full of mysteries...

To be Continued...

The Virus

Rob Behan

12. Jan. 2604.

Diary,

The virus has spread throughout all of Europe, and tragically, there are very few signs of life known to the planet. Chaos has spread through the streets of all cities in the world, with no exception. A year ago, who'd have thought that the majority of the human race would be wiped out due to a simple virus outbreak? The virus is not what you would typically associate with the sickness, it's different. Once it enters you, it controls you and there is nothing you can do about it.

Ever since the virus epidemic our standards of living have gone back to basics. Only a few quarantine zones dot across the world which, act as safe havens for the citizens who have escaped the virus. Unfortunately, these zones are run by modern day thugs, they scour their area, and take any source of food they can to feed the people within the wall's boundaries. Ever since all world leaders left this planet, for Mars or beyond our solar system, the world's system is run like a school yard; social groups. We are constantly on the run from the infected, we are their prey. But then you have the quarantine zones leaders, they use manipulative or bully tactics in order to function, not letting anybody in or out of the zones but themselves. Then

you have the rest, the independent groups that are constantly on the move, which are slowly dying out, doing what is needed to stay alive.

I have been recording my past seven months on this diary. I like the idea of writing on paper although I'm probably one of the few left who still do, now with the modern technology. Some of you may notice the tearing at the start of my diary. This is from the scarring incident in the manor earlier this week, where valuable sections of the diary were torn out. Only now have I built up the motivation to begin writing again. Considering the circumstances, I should tell you my journey up 'till now and some background information

Background

It started as a typical fever to a young girl in Rocinha, Brazil. As time went on, the fever did not go. Weeks had passed and inhumane characteristics began to appear with the girl; her pupils were dilated, she lost muscle control, her skin became almost transparent and her hair began to shed. It became clear to the girl's family that it may have been more serious than initially expected. But one night, the girl was screaming in her bed. Her voice was different than before, it was deeper. She was aggressive, like a Rottweiler. Her family had tied her to the bed in panic, in the hope she wouldn't bite anybody. The community were almost certain it was an exorcism and so the favela priest was called to remove the devil from her. As he leaned over to bless the girl on the forehead, she aggressively tore through his hand with just one bite. The priest was infected

and within ten seconds the priest had fully developed the inhumane characteristics that the girl had. As expected, the virus had spread through the whole favela of Rocinha and panic spread through South America. The USA tried to stop all passing through the Mexican border but within a month, it had started in North America. These citizens are not human anymore; they're hungry daemons, hunting for human blood.

Ireland was one of the last provinces affected by the virus in the Republic of Europe, (former EU), thanks to our isolated geographical position. Ireland was actually used as a quarantine zone, run by the last of the Irish Catholic Priests' since the reform of 2303, unfortunately a public aircraft from the UK landed in Belfast carrying an infected passenger and the virus had finally reached Ireland. Ireland began to become infected and the Emerald Isle soon became nothing but a grey, lifeless wasteland.

One thing about the infected is that they only come out at night. Exposure to any light causes their pale hairless figures to experience epileptic type fits, eventually leaving them to suffocate and die. In my opinion, destroying these beasts is not the answer as their numbers are too vast, but to find a cure or a neutralisation could at least give us the time we need to remove the virus. Containment is not an option anymore as the numbers in quarantine camps are declining daily.

I am currently working with the United Nations, in the Medicine and Science Quarters. I have travelled from my homeland of Ireland to southern Germany in a Baltic province which I think was once known as Bavaria. I am

constantly on the move. I came here to try to find a neutralisation for the virus with Doctor Bäcker head of The Virus Elimination Headquarters of The UN (VEHUN). We had been communicating via radio for over seven months since the outbreak, but getting here was not easy.

My family are being protected in the UN quarantine zone, Iceland, but unfortunately, I don't get to enjoy it. I have a deadline on which I must make some progress within, and if I don't, my family and I are out of protection.

It's hard for my wife to deal with two kids, both under the age of twelve, in the middle of the possible end of the human race, while I am thousands of miles away. My last memory of them is from when I was boarding the UN plane with other scientists, I remember telling my twelve year old, Sam, to help his mother, and his little sister, Anna, who is six, to be good. Anna doesn't really understand what is happening. It is slightly beyond her, but Sam is old enough and although we haven't had a direct conversation about the virus with him, he knows. I remember hugging my wife, not being sure if it was my last time to do so, and I said goodbye with a gentle kiss. I had also given her a mobile phone in which I keep in contact with her; every day I send her the same text, letting her know everything is okay.

The Manor

The plane did not bring us to our exact destination as each scientist had a different destination, so, the plane brought us to mainland Europe where we had to part and make our own ways to our individual destinations. This is what makes this job so dangerous, getting there, in-itself, is a

challenge, especially through the heavy snow. We use no motor vehicles, just travel by foot and survival instinct. I was paired up with French pharmacist, Doctor Clément. He spoke both French and German but his English was limited and my French was poor yet, we seemed to be able to communicate using expression, we just clicked. It was our duty to stick with each other and battle through the snow to Germany, avoiding populated areas hence, avoiding the infected.

Weeks of travelling had passed. One night darkness was catching up on us and we needed a safe place to stay. It was a foggy night and the fierce cold had reached our bones. Along the horizon, we saw a glowing light and as we got closer the shape of an old manor house began to form. Smoke was pouring out of the chimney and we discovered that the light was coming from the bottom left window. Clément and I decided to try our luck, we knocked on the door multiple times, until we realised that the door was slightly ajar. We entered the house and the heat finally hit us. It was clear that the manor was old, from the oak panelling to the hundreds of tiny pictures along the stairway. We could hear the open fire crackling as we shuffled through the hallway, nobody was home. When we reached the kitchen we heard the front door slam from the hallway. We hid ourselves; I was behind the doorway so I could vaguely make out the outline of people entering. There were two men and a woman. They were carrying shotguns and had a dog of some sort in their hands. I was relieved to see that the house wasn't occupied by the

infected until Doctor Clément translated what they were saying to each other for me. 'We're eating well tonight!' shouted one of the men. The woman then began agreeing with the man, saying 'Yeah, I've had enough of that human flesh.'

My heart sunk to the pits of my stomach. I had heard some people had turned to cannibalism due to food shortage but I never believed it up till now. Clément and I looked at each other, we needed to get out. In the centre of the kitchen we saw a trap door leading into the basement, and without thinking we climbed in, to plan an escape route. The basement was a narrow corridor leading to a door. It was dull; we could barely see a foot in front of us. We commenced walking towards the door as the dampness and stench filled our lungs. I slowly pushed the door open, and I was shocked by what I saw.

A surge of about fifteen prisoners came rushing towards us; men, women and children. There was also a man lying on a stretcher, his leg, mutated. These were the victims of cannibalism, future food to the sick-minded people above us, living in the manor. But we couldn't take any chances; these people were prepared to do anything to leave the cellar. We tried to retreat but weak hands began clawing us back. A hand was tugging at my diary from my rucksack on my back, desperately clawing for help. I swiftly turned, pulling the rucksack away and in an instant, precious pages from my diary were extracted, but we had to keep going. We had quickly broken from the clawing hands and slammed the door behind us, locking them in. We clawed our way back up the cellar and locked it behind us.

We had to get out of that house for fear we would be taken for future food. The back door of the house from the kitchen was slightly blown open and we ran for our lives. But the house owners were watching us. One of the men stood at the back-porch with a gun, smiling as we ran off into the nightly forest. Surely we were safe. Behind me I heard a bang followed by a sigh let out by Clément and he was down. He lay there lifelessly, lying in the red stained snow. There was nothing that could be done. I tried everything they taught me in medical school but it was no good. I knew he was gone but I was not going to leave him there to be devoured by the people in the manor. I lay him, to rest, deep inside the snowy German forest where he could be at peace and I took his supplies as they could possibly be my only chance of survival. I am now travelling alone but I am not far from The VEHUN.

17. Jan. 2604.

Diary,

I apologise for not writing lately, but I was trying to make progress through to The VEHUN, surviving on aid from the UN. They dropped small boxes of food supplies from an aircraft to me daily, yet it was rarely enough and I often slept hungry. Due to the *zombie's* condition, I had to move swiftly through the daytime when they can't be exposed to light but as dusk crept in every evening, I knew that it was time for me to seek hiding either in attics of abandoned homes of the snow-capped towns or climbing high in trees, which was enough for those daemons to stay away from me. It often wasn't ideal and I would usually

have an unpleasant sleep as the cold, winter snow lurks in the air and the frost seeps through to my bones.

A few days ago, I had made it out of the long forest and reached an old snow-capped town. The sun was setting behind the clouds and I was looking forward to finding a room to possibly stay in, as I had previously been sleeping on the sturdy branches of tall trees. I knew in my gut, that this would be a much more cautious night due to the higher population of the infected in towns, but hopefully, it would be a more comfortable one. On the corner of the cobblestone street, I found an old barricaded bakery. I pulled open a timber plank from the window to allow myself to creep in. It was dark and had a funny smell, but it was less cold than the outside. I climbed the stairs to the second floor to find a small hole to the lower left of the door, and I quickly climbed in. There were no windows in it, and it was quite small and cosy, with nothing but a rocking chair for furniture, so I felt safe for the night. In the corner of the room I found a stale loaf of bread, it was like waking up on Christmas morning for me. I devoured the whole loaf and I could feel my stomach expanding, but I was happy. I peeked through a crack in the timber walls to reveal that outside it had hit darkness. I knew that there was a high chance that the infected, who once inhabited the town, were lurking the streets sniffing for prey. That night, I slept with one eye open.

I woke to a creek outside the door of the room. I peered outside and it looked to be nearly dawn but still mostly dark. My heart almost throbbed out of my chest. I snuck up to the door to listen to what I hoped was my imagination.

Pressing my ear up to the door, I heard nothing and finally relaxed. Sometimes being by yourself can play mind-games on you in situations like this. I sat back down to where I was creeping and within an instant I heard a roar. I had no time to react, I was still. There was no escape. The door in front of me was battered down and I saw the silhouette of the infected. There was a silence as he stared, looking down on me. He slowly sauntered towards me and I had to make my mind up quickly about what I was to do. The infected have an extremely good sense of smell which they use to hunt their prey but poor eyesight. I figured I could use this to my advantage, but how? I sat in the corner where I slept the night before, I put my rucksack in front of me, almost as a form of protection. I could feel the blood pulsing around my body with tension. The infected bent over and had its face inches away from mine. I saw every vein through his transparent skin in his face, his eyes were cold staring through me, and his teeth were on show like a vicious wolf ready for its meal. He roared at me like something I had never heard before. I could feel the coldness of its breath on me. I panicked, I knew if I stayed, that in seconds I'd become one of them. With my bag on my front, I rushed up and pushed past him. I sprinted down the hall way for my life, floorboards creaking beneath. I had no choice but to run through the window of the first floor. With this zombie chasing me, I crashed through and fell thundering to the ground. I lay on my back and I saw the zombie plummet down towards me and I knew I was in for it. I looked directly into the infected eyes of the zombie and he screamed, but it was not like any other. I could tell he was

in pain and I could tell the back of his head was burning. It was dawn. Hope had sprung up within me once more as I knew if he was exposed to light much longer he'd die. He quickly jumped off from pinning me and sprinted off where he could find shade, I was safe.

Trying to comprehend what had just happened, I battled my way through the snow in the village. Seeing the picturesque snowy village brought sadness to me. It reminded me how much I miss the memories I used to share with my family, before the virus had broken out during the holidays. I often wished to turn back around, but I knew if I gave up on my duty, the UN would kick my family out of the camp, leaving us to fend for ourselves. I checked my bag for the phone that I used to keep in contact with my wife. I must have dropped it while trying to escape from the bakery. I was angry, I had nothing to let my wife know that I was okay, which was one of the most frustrating things I could have gone through at that time. This motivated me to get to the VEHUN quicker, knowing I could contact her once there. However the negative thoughts always lurked in my head, the chances of me actually finding some sort of a cure is quite slim, but it's worth the fight.

I was determined to reach the VEHUN that day, knowing that every night I was putting myself at risk for the *zombies* to bite me. I was walking through the forest where the VEHUN was meant to be but I could not find it. Was it just a set up by the UN? Were they trying to get rid of me, after all the work I had done? I was just about to lose hope when I saw there were no trees ahead of me, and the closer I got, the more I could see the tall shining gates of the VEHUN. I

ran with happiness towards it, I hadn't run that fast since running from the Manor House previous. I dropped into the snowy ground, overwhelmed with emotion as the gates began to open for me. Months of training and travelling and separation from my family had led to this, but I knew that the job wasn't over.

The VEHUN

20. Jan. 2604.

Diary,

The past few days, have been the most valuable days of my life. I was welcomed greatly by Dr. Bäcker and all the world's leading scientists who had made it there. He was disappointed to hear that Dr. Clément didn't make it but let me off for two days to recover from my journey, where I was treated very well by the VEHUN staff. I got to relax and was gradually fed more and more food until my health had almost fully recovered but I knew this luxury wouldn't last long, and I was right.

The first day I was to start working, Dr. Bäcker approached me.

'We would like to use you as a part of our experiment' he declared. I could feel the anger in me welling up.

'Did I really travel all of this way just to be used as a part of an experiment? I was told I would be working in the labs and you expect me to risk my life again, for some experiment that I probably have a higher risk of being killed than of surviving?' I blurted out, forgetting who I was

talking to and the power he had, but after I said it, I felt much better and I could feel the anger being poured out.

‘I understand you are angry,’ He said calmly with his thick German accent ‘but let me explain. You see, we have a theory that we strongly believe in, you don’t know this but we have isolated the west wing of the building as it is currently contaminated by the virus. One of the infected got in and we had no choice, all workers from that part of the building are now one of them. Isolation was our only recourse. We believe that if we inject you with a certain bacteria, the zombies will not hunt you, they do not feed off the flesh of the sick. We have experimented this with rats and it had a complete success rate. I understand it’s not a cure for the virus but at least we can stop running from them, and when the infected all die off our future generations can live virus-free. All we want to do is inject you with the bacteria and send you off into the west-wing of the building. We are relying on you to do this, it’s our only hope and you will be seen as a hero for centuries.’

‘Okay’ the word just rolled off of my tongue. I was away from my family, I had lost almost everything but my life, and risking my life for the possibility of life for the human race, sounded fine to me. I was taken almost instantly. Dr. Bäcker allowed me a phone call to my wife and children. They were so relieved to hear from me after losing my phone but when I explained to my wife what I was about to do, I could hear her voice crackle on the phone, she didn’t want me to go but she understood it was for the best. I told my kids I loved them and that was it. An hour long phone call with my family felt like seconds.

That evening the medical staff sat me down and explained everything to me in the slightest detail. They told me that the bacteria which they were to inject was easily curable and would not be fatal to me, and before I knew it, the bacteria was in me. Everybody walked me to the barricaded door leading to the west-wing. I got hugs and well wishes from everybody, and I could feel my heart pounding. Dr. Bäcker handed me a microchip to clip on my shirt to record everything that I was experiencing. The last words I heard from him were 'Good Luck'. They quickly opened the doors for me, let me through and slammed them behind me. I looked back to worried smiles, which wasn't helpful but it was too late to turn back. I was in the west-wing.

The west-wing was massive and housed most of the VEHUNS workers, almost one hundred and twenty. I walked down the massive corridor which had walls made of pure glass. I looked out and could see miles of snowy forest and in the distance I could even see the village in the darkness. I continued walking down very slowly. Then and there, I heard the sound of a pack of wolves charging for their prey. I could feel the ground from under me vibrate. Down the corridor I saw, charging, about one hundred of the zombies. I continued walking. They were attracted to the sound of the door being opened. I could hear their snarls and barks but they soon began to fade as I continued walking towards them as a gentle melody began to play in my head blocking out all their sounds. The zombies were about fifty meters away from me, yet I continued walking as they charged. I was not panicking, nor was my heart

thumping out of my chest. Everything was in slow-motion and I gently closed my eyes. Everything I had been through in my life literally flashed before my eyes. I could see my family, friends, my old home and memories of everything I had before the virus broke out. I stared blankly ahead of me and I could sense that the zombies were within reaching distance of me, I prepared every muscle in my body to be savagely ripped apart. I sensed them beside me. But they kept running, every single one of them continued to run past me as if I was just a pillar. The bacteria worked, the zombies do not feed off of bacteria-infested bodies. I dropped to my knees shaking and screamed into the microchip 'It worked.' I broke down. I now knew that everything I had gone through was worth it, and the world can now live just like we used to until we find a way to cure the virus itself. I was free to go back to my family and the human race could start building itself back up once more.

PERSONAL STORIES

A Day I'll Never Forget

Neil Toner

It was the 29th of April and the adrenaline was pumping through my body. My big moment was about to come. I sat there in the dressing room listening to my music to get me in the mood for the final. It was a local derby in the 'John Murray Cup' between Cabinteely and Park Celtic, a personal battle for me as a few of my friends were playing on the Park team.

The trash talk between us had been going on for weeks. To be honest, Park Celtic had the edge. They were the physically stronger and faster side but we played better football and on a carpet like the pitch of Tallaght Stadium, I thought the odds could play in our favour.

Park Celtic was in our league and so far in the head-to-head, it was in their favour. When we played them earlier in the year, they played us off the park in a 5-1 win down in their home ground but back in the fortress of Kilbogget (our home ground), we got robbed. Somehow we lost 2-1 with the quality centre-back of Park scoring a towering header in the last minute after us piling on the pressure throughout the whole second-half. We were distraught and determined to get them back today in the big game.

In a professional manner, we arrived at the home of Shamrock Rovers in a team bus. I could tell the nerves were kicking in when the bus quietened down as we came that

bit closer and closer to the two o'clock kick-off. Most of the team, bar the odd player had music playing in their ears; including me who had *Pump Up* by Avicii blaring as I tried to get myself going.

When we arrived in the dressing room all of our jerseys were hung up in numerical order. I was assigned the number ten. It was exactly fifty seven minutes before kick-off and so, I started to get my gear on. I started off by putting on my socks and shin-guards carefully, to make sure they weren't going to annoy me in the game. Then I superstitiously put two lines of green tape around the inside of my sock and then put four lines of the tape on the outside of my sock to make sure that my shin-guards stayed still as I was expecting to be hit a few times in this game. I did not put on my boots until the minute before we hit the pitch for the warm-up.

From this point onwards my adrenaline was immensely high because we were inching closer and closer to the kick-off. My headphones did not leave my ears unless my dad wanted to talk to me because throughout the years of playing football, I learned everything off my Dad, so he was really the only person I listen to when it comes to advice.

My manager, Oisín then grabbed the attention of the team.

'Listen Up. LISTEN UP!' Oisín screamed.

He then ran through the tactics on a neat little whiteboard he had purchased specially for today. We were playing a new formation we'd never really used before. It was a 4-3-2-1 with an attacking twist on it. This meant that we played four defenders, three defensive midfielders, two

attacking midfielders and one lone striker. I was excited looking at this formation as I could tell we weren't going to sit back and try to get them on the counter attack. We were out for revenge and we were going to show them how it felt to lose 5-1 to a local team.

We were going to flood the midfield with players who could win the ball and stop their expert passers string the ball around. We played three holding midfielders; probably the two best ball-winners on our team besides our centre-halves, who were having a cracking, injury-free season. We had confidence in this type of play because it had worked throughout our season, so we weren't going to change it now.

After all the tactics had been explained and everyone understood their role, our manager gave us ten minutes or so just to ourselves. I again lifted my headphones over my ears and continued to get into my little zone.

We were then called out by the groundsman so we could warm-up. First of all we got into a slow, relaxing jog just to get our muscles warmed up and get the stiffness out of us. After the muscle warm up and then stretching them out, it got serious. My manager had cones down and we were zigzagging quickly between them, then into skipping, then thighs up and heels up and so on, so forth.

Before I knew it, the warm-up was over.

We made our way back to the changing rooms, making adjustments to any niggles or problems we had. I unravelled the tape off my shin guards and superstitiously, put five layers on this time. Don't ask me why I do this; it's just a habit, another one of my weird habits!

After expertly wrapping the green tape around my socks, I was ready to go, full of adrenaline just rearing to get onto that beautiful pitch to play some ball.

The referee called, 'Cabinteely, when you're ready.'

'Come on lads!' echoed around the dressing room as we vacated it.

I kept a straight face walking out of the tunnel not making eye contact with anyone until I saw one of my good friends and I then could not help but pull a little smile. We then all lined up and shook hands like it was a Champions League game.

'Captains please,' demanded the referee.

I confidently jogged up to the centre spot, where the ball was laying with the referee and the opposition's captain was there waiting for me to take part in the toss. He was a nice refree, unlike those grumpy old ones you get who wouldn't even say hello to you.

'Cabinteely you have the call. Heads or tails?' the refree asked me.

'Tails please,' I said with *tails never fails* playing in the back of my head.

'Tails it is. Cabinteely you have the choice to take tip or to choose sides. It's up to you'

'I'll take tip' I said as there was no wind and no hills so I thought, 'why not get the team used to the ball with a few passes before they get near it.'

The game started poorly, it was like watching paint dry at times. Both teams were very reluctant to send players up the pitch to try and create a few chances as both of us were scarily dangerous on the counter-attack.

The first-half ended with a flurry of chances for us. I had the best of the lot with my free-kick from about 25 yards out, cracking off the crossbar. The Park Celtic keeper was left stranded on his line gazing as the ball was inches away from meeting the green and white nets. A few half-chances went begging for both sides but I could sense we had the upper hand going into the second half.

The second-half was more intense, physically and mentally draining. All twenty-two players on the pitch were giving it 110%. The Park Celtic players were getting visibly frustrated as we grew in confidence after every pass we made. It took a nasty, late tackle on our centre forward to get the referee to hand out his first and only yellow-card of the whole game. Cabinteely were beginning to look very dangerous.

Against the run of play, Park Celtic won a corner after one of their three centre-midfielders took the ball up from around the half-way line and twisted and turned his way up to our box beating about four players in the process. The smashing, individual display led to Park Celtic winning their first corner of the day. A nicely, whipped in corner by the Park winger resulted in a demoralising one-nil lead completely against the way the game was heading, but sure, that's the game of football.

As the captain, it was up to me to get the lads going again, with help of a few others and within minutes of the restart, we had a golden opportunity, only to be taken away from us by a cracking tackle from the Park centre-half.

Our confidence was through the roof as our slick passing tore the Park Celtic defence to shreds although, we still hadn't got that all important equaliser.

It took a moment of brilliance from our right-back, who spotted me making a run through a channel in the Park defence and he exquisitely played the ball into my path. I took one touch, looked up and calmly dinked the ball over the oncoming keeper. As I turned around, the whole posse of Cabinteely supports leaped up into the air all at the same time.

One all and it was game on.

It was around the 70th minute or so when I scored that goal and because we only play eighty minutes, these last ten minutes were going to be crucial.

Surprisingly, our manager told me to get the players to put their all into the last ten minutes or so of the match because we were going for the win in normal time. Like an expert tactician, my manager took our centre-half out of defence, slotted him in the middle of the park and pushed me up in the hole behind the strikers. Now we had a 3-4-1-2 formation going. This formation intrigued me as it would clash with the opposition's style of play as they play a holding midfielder and also an attacking midfielder so the concluding ten minutes were going to be oozing with quality and it didn't disappoint.

It was like watching a Champions League game, the game was immensely intense. End to end football. Park Celtic had arguably the best chance of the game, even the cup! Their scarily good centre forward skinned two of our

defenders and rounded our keeper but somehow (don't ask me how) he missed.

It was a life-line and that bit of luck changed the game completely.

It was exactly the 81st minute. One minute left of stoppage time; we were hammering down the post. Our right-winger had caused havoc down the wing the whole game and hadn't got a reward for that until now when he pulled one or two step-overs, accelerated past the right-back. The Park centre-half rushed into the box and clipped the heels of our winger and the referee awarded a penalty. To be honest, I felt sorry for the young lad as it seemed to be accidental as while he was running he barely clipped the foot of our winger but the referee awarded a penalty and that's all that matters.

Being the set-piece taker on the team and having a 100% success rate from twelve yards out this season, I picked up the ball and strolled up to the spot. I was vigorously shaking with the nerves and my legs started to feel like jelly. Somehow, I kept a cool face and stepped up and found my favourite spot with the instep of my foot.

The sense of relief was unreal when the ball met the net. The crowd went crazy and so did all the players and even my manager. I was at the bottom of the pile-on but it was worth it.

As soon as we got up, got back into our positions and Park had kicked off, the referee blew his whistle and I dropped to the ground completely burnt out of energy and just smiled knowing we'd won.

I genuinely can't remember the next ten minutes or so until we were lined up ready for the presentation, I was put last in line, so I would be the one receiving the trophy. I was grand and ready to pick up the trophy until some idiot decided to shout 'Speeeechhhh.' I wanted to kill him.

I left the speech short and sweet and then I was given the trophy. I leaped up in the air with the trophy and we were champions!

The whole squad started singing 'Championés, championés, olé-olé-olé!'

We took a few pictures but we didn't look nice with our sweaty heads and mucky knees but sure, we were champions and that's all that mattered.

I went home over the moon with the win and my performance. It was a day I'll never forget!

The Fight of My Life

Colm Hayes

He was fed up of feeling the same way; it was time to make a change, a change for the better.

Bob Murphy was just about to turn thirty eight but wasn't looking forward to it. His weight was getting him down even though he had a loving family supporting him. He weighed just over twenty four stone. He had been this way for most of his life and now, after all the times he felt depressed and annoyed at himself for doing this to himself, he had finally decided that it was all going to change.

In primary school, by the age of twelve, Bob's weight had reached ten stone which was huge for a kid his age and it has climbed ever since. He was always picked on in primary school, being called names and never got picked on anybody's team for games or sports. His secondary school days were never fun. He never sat and talked with anybody at lunch, never got to be with anybody when they did a project, and never texted or got to go out with anyone. He always had a tough life but he got on with it and became a computer programmer.

On his thirty-ninth birthday he decided that by this time next year he wouldn't be the same. The time had come for him to do something serious about his weight. The next day, he went to see a dietician asking about starting a diet to lose weight, because he knew with the way he was going,

he was going to live a short life. The dietician told him to get rid of any fatty foods in his house and stick to a strict low calorie diet. He was also told that he needed to exercise by either taking walking or swimming.

For the first week, he found it very hard without treats or fast food in the evening but he had great determination and stuck to the diet plan he had been given. He learned how to make a lot more foods and enjoyed doing it. He had his family over more and he even started doing walks around the park outside his estate. Bob started to feel good about himself for the first time in a long time. He felt he was making a difference rather than sitting on his couch watching TV and eating crap. His mom started helping with the cooking and shopping on days that he was stuck with work and began to look at what she and her family were eating too. They all tried to support him by eating healthy too. She knew that he was doing the right thing and that it wasn't going to be easy but she was so proud of him and knew that once he had set his mind to something that he could achieve it.

After the first month had passed, Bob went for his first weigh in. He was nervous and didn't know what to expect, he was afraid that he had lost nothing and all his work would have been just pointless. He hoped that if he had lost a stone or two it would encourage him to keep on going but he was also afraid that if he hadn't done so well that it would cause him to get discouraged and give up, he had really tried so hard and hoped that it would show. As he stood on the weighing scale, he watched the nurse in anticipation, she jotted down a few things and looked at

him and smiled, she said he had lost just over a stone. Bob was over the moon with joy, he couldn't believe it, it was just the boost he needed to keep him doing what he was doing.

He started to walk to work every morning instead of taking the car, he would do some shopping on his home and carry all bags back to his house. The walk to work would take about thirty minutes and then the walk back including doing the shopping would take about fifty five minutes. He also started a cookery course so he could learn to be better at cooking his food at home. He remembered back to before he started the diet; he would have about three take-aways a week which is unbelievably bad for him. He was delighted with the way his life had begun to change, and at the choices he had made for himself.

After two months he had lost an astounding three stone which meant he now weighed twenty one stone, which was incredible. He knew with the way he was going he could be fit again in no time. He kept his determination and never wanted to give up because he knew what being fat and unfit was like and he didn't want to feel like that ever again. He had even developed a taste for some of the foods he was forced to eat at the beginning. He couldn't even remember the last time he had an unhealthy snack which was a good sign.

Bob went to his local GP and got his blood tested, his cholesterol levels were normal and he was no longer in the high risk of developing diabetes. He even noticed that his breathing was better and that his fitness levels had risen. He even started to jog again, it was tough for the first

couple of weeks but he stuck with it and when it did seemed impossible he didn't give up because he didn't want to go back to being lazy. He was feeling good and he liked it.

Everything was going well but then he started to get pains in his chest. He went to see a doctor about it and all the doctor could say was that he wasn't used to doing a lot of exercise, that he could be putting too much pressure on the heart. They did ECG's and Eco-sounds on his heart and all the results were normal. Bob was sent for several more tests and they discovered that he had developed Reflux. The doctors prescribed him a medicine to take in the mornings to help him ease the discomfort. The doctor recommended taking up yoga to strengthen the body. He kept walking but stopped running until he was fit. He took up yoga classes and he loved it. It was harder than he expected but the coach he had pushed him to the limit and he got better and better.

After six months he had lost around five and a half stone and was so proud of himself. His mother couldn't believe how much he lost in such little time but knew he always had this strength inside of him. One of the main reasons why Bob did this in the first place was so he could make his mom proud and not be embarrassed to call him her son, but she never was, he always just thought that and he always thought everyone hated him and slagged him because he was fat but really it was all in his head. He knew people always looked at him and some probably did make comments but everyone that loved him never saw him that way and were always full of support, even at times, when he didn't want to listen. He had to make up his own mind;

he had to be ready, physically and mentally to make this change for himself.

One day Bob ran into some of the guys in his secondary school and they were surprised to see him and didn't recognise him at first. They complemented him on his achievement and commitment and how far he had gone. Bob was very proud of himself. His confidence was finally growing. Five months after his visit to the doctor Bob finally felt fit enough to start running again. He had no pains anymore and could run the park three times without stopping of exhaustion.

It was only a month to his birthday and he skipped his weigh-in until then. There was still a month to lose more and he made a promise that after his birthday this new lifestyle would not stop. His cholesterol levels were at an all-time low and he couldn't have been happier. He realised that this was the best thing he had ever done for himself. He had never given up when he thought it was too hard and now look what he has achieved. He has lost ten stone in under a year which, from his point of view, was incredible and it was.

On the morning of his birthday he felt excited for once about going to a weigh in. His whole family surprised him when he got up that morning, they couldn't wait to hear the news when he got back. The nurse told him that in the whole year, with all the hard work and dedication, he had lost twelve stone. He couldn't believe it and broke down in tears of happiness. He couldn't wait to tell his family when he got home. They all began to cry with happiness and were so proud of his achievement. This was a long hard change

for Bob to take on but he has saved his own life by taking control of his eating and exercise habits. This just goes to show you get nothing without effort. Put the work and effort in and you can achieve anything you set your mind to.

FICTION

The Price for Georgia

Tim Charles

The day began like any other school day. I woke up, brushed my teeth, ate my breakfast and went to school. Once in the class I knew instantly what the topic of discussion was, the same one talked about every day. 'What would you do to spend the night with Georgia Salpa?' It's amazing how one girl can be the subject of conversation for so many pubescent boys? Now this is when the story gets a bit weird, well it was weird enough from all the disgusting hypothetical's lads would come up with in order to sleep with Georgia Salpa. After reaching my limit of horrible things lads could imagine, I went to the toilet. I had just finished washing my face when I looked up and saw a tall, bearded man who looked exactly like me...

He touched my shoulder and spoke. 'You must come with me to the future and right the biggest wrong of your life.'

This short blond-haired, green-eyed man had to be six foot three and had the exact same thin frame I have. I finally asked, 'Who are you?'

'I am you twenty years from now. I must show you what the world has become.'

He then clicked a beeper (a beeper, yes, that's the best I could up with, I'm only eighteen) he had on his waist and

before I knew it I was in Dublin city centre. Then my future self said, 'You are now in Dublin in the year 2031.'

I have to say I was quite surprised how everything looked exactly the same; no flying cars, no jet packs, nothing. The only slight difference was that guys were strikingly more conscious about their looks. One man around my age took out a mirror. I was going to shout 'Faggot,' or another remark that if you think about it, doesn't make any sense, but I could tell I was not surrounded by my fellow peers anymore and I might want to show more maturity than that.

I kind of forgot about my future self for a moment until he piped up and said, 'I will now take you to the Salpa Games. This is Ireland's national event. Three men fight to the death and the final man gets a date with the magnificent Georgia Salpa.'

The two main words that shocked me were 'death' and 'date'. I kept repeating these words until finally I blurted out, 'What has Ireland become?'

My future self looked down at me and answered 'Ireland is concerned about nothing other than getting off with the opposite sex.'

Did I laugh a bit when he said *sex*...possibly?

Then I was told that the new generation of men worshipped this television show called 'Geordie Shore' and practiced their beliefs in their temple called *The Gym*. Religion and education were not as important as looking muscular in order for females to find you attractive. On the women's side, they had a carefree attitude and could get

anything they wanted with their womanly charms. This didn't seem like the Ireland I knew and loved.

After I had been enlightened on the state of Dublin I was taken to the Aviva stadium. It was draped in banners of Georgia Salpa, not like I was complaining or anything. I was then pushed into a small changing room with two other guys. I turned around and realised my future self was gone and the door was locked. I then walked up to these two giant lads. They had gym shorts on, tight t-shirts, obvious fake tan, plucked eyebrows. I didn't know their names but I instantly hated them.

Eventually out of the fear and pure boredom, I walked up to one of the muscular guys introduced myself and asked him what was going on. They laughed while staring at themselves in a mirror. Then one of the *pumped-up-protein* guys spoke and replied, 'The Georgia Games is where we fight to the death and the survivor wins a date with Georgia Salpa.'

I found it hard to listen to this moron but the calmness with which he said 'to the death,' coupled with his soft, posh-boy accent made me realise this was a common occurrence.

After a long silence I realised that I couldn't stop myself from starring at these guys' massive arms and chests. Eventually one of the giants said, 'You checking out the guns?'

'Maybe, how often do you go to the gym?'

'Two or three times a day.'

'How do you find time with school and all?'

'I don't go to school. I go gym. Who needs brains when your body fat is less than five per cent?!'

I was silent after this knob spoke and then saw 'Brad' written on his name tag. Then 'Chuck' on the other monster's. Then I looked at mine and saw my name, which meant I was associated with these brainless, fake tan wearing, dopes; which really worried me.

After the longest hour of my life, this clean-cut man walked in with a microphone and said, 'It is now time to meet the contestants.'

He was apparently some big shot television host that was the biggest name in Dublin. He certainly had the appearance of someone of that description. He had the most perfectly brushed hair and picture perfect smile I had ever seen. Then I realised he was caked in make-up. 'What a queer,' I said in my eighteen year-old mind.

Finally he stopped talking and took us to this giant field that used to be the pitches of the Aviva stadium. I looked around and saw close to fifty thousand people cheering and chanting for me and the two other chaps to rip our heads off. The television host came to the centre of the field and said, 'Welcome ladies and gentlemen. I am your host Bob Lyster, and welcome to the Salpa Games! (Followed by cheering) Allow me to explain the rules. The three contestants will be allowed to choose one weapon to kill the two other competitors. The final man standing will win the grand prize. This is a date with the lovely Ms Salpa. (This was followed by even more cheering) Now let the games begin!'

The spotlights went on Chuck, Brad and me as we were told to choose a weapon. Brad chose an AK 47. That was when I nearly shat myself. I realised these men were actually going to kill me. All for an effing date with a tart (I am sorry Georgia; I immediately regret calling you that). Then Chuck chose a knife. The spot light then shined on me and I don't think I have ever been so scared in my life. Words couldn't describe how much I missed my old life, with my school friends and my loving family. I hadn't said a word for the past fifteen minutes out of pure shock and fear.

Then I heard my future self, 'Choose a mirror.'

Since that was the first option I heard, I just blurted out, 'Mirror!'

The entire audience, Chuck and Brad looked very confused. Then I was given this tiny old golden mirror that was covered in dust. The music started while Brad and Chuck sprinted in opposite directions.

'What am I supposed to do?' I asked myself.

Both lumbering men reached the ends of the stadium then Brad shot his AK 47 directly at Chuck. I believe it was the fifth bullet that hit Chuck between his eyes. I was still in the middle of the arena, shocked that a man I saw walking around full of life ten minutes ago was now gone forever. Brad quickly turned the scope towards me and fired. I can't explain what came over me. I would like to believe it was my survival instincts, or maybe I saw it in a movie once. Either way as soon as Brad pulled the trigger, I leaped into a hiding hole in the middle of the Aviva. My heart had never beaten so fast and loud. I could barely see through the

sweat in my eyes. Then I realised that I was trapped and the next thing I knew, Brad lifted me up and threw me across the field. He then swung his gun from his back to his chest. Then pointed the machine gun at me. Just before he pulled the trigger he blew a kiss to the sculpture of Georgia Salpa on the far left of the battle field. I thought about how much I would miss my old life and that gym junkies are feckin' psychos. Brad was now three feet away from me. Then I heard my future self whisper, 'The mirror.'

I took out this small, crappy mirror. Then I started to get angry at how un-threatening a mirror really is. I looked up and the barrel was right in between my eyes. I jumped out of the way hearing the W-I-Z-Z-I-N-G from the bullets as they went past me. Then I realised why the mirror was such a perfect weapon. Almost like an epiphany. What was the only thing that could ever distract Brad from winning this stupid competition? The answer was *himself*.

I screamed out of fear and adrenaline, 'You're looking a bit unwell, don't you think?'

Brad instantly dropped his gun and went as red as a Wexford strawberry. He replied, 'I do not. Do I?' sounding confused.

I then quickly replied, 'Have a look for yourself,' as I handed the mirror to the bewildered giant.

He then looked at his reflection and started to touch up his face and hair. I knew this was my only chance. So I Picked up Brads AK 47 and shot the centre of his perfectly sculpted back.

The crowd roared with approval. I closed my eyes and was back in my school bathroom. Till this day I haven't told

anyone this story. Why would I? No one would believe me because I still don't believe it myself.

Whether it was real or just my imagination I did learn a valuable lesson. In life you can spend all your time trying to look better and stronger in order to impress the opposite sex. (Sex; makes me giggle every time) You can worry about your weight, how big your arms look, all in order to be confident and happy. You will eventually realise that the key to confidence with people is to be yourself which will lead to happiness. Also no woman is worth changing who you are.

Except Georgia Salpa. Change everything about yourself! Because she is a beautiful goddess that is well worth killing two humongous tools for.

The City of Everlasting Change

Clifton Lewis

Chapter I: And Now the Other Side

‘Ah,’ I gasp, holding my breath. ‘It has to be the strangest and most obscure thing I have EVER seen,’ this is my first reaction to what I find on the other side of the red door.

Chapter II: And Now the Foam Dancer and Me

I stare at the glassy surface of the water, my eyes watching all the tiny waves as they glisten like diamonds in the orange sunlight. My hands are huddled in the warmth of the pockets of my brand new Regatta jacket. Even with the warm orange sunrays, I can feel goose bumps crawling up my arms.

It has been cold for this time of the year; with a cold breeze blowing from the north, throughout the duration of the journey. But it is particularly chilly today, even though the ship is only a few degrees to the north of the equator. I pull my right hand out of my jacket, which with a bit of reluctance, agrees, and I hold it out over the starboard bow. As I do so, I notice the foam; a few drops jump out from the ocean’s surface and land on my hand and dance on my palms before falling back into the water.

The water is cold, which is definitely as a result of the wind. But it is not freezing, probably just a few degrees above it. I peer down the hull of the ship. ‘It is a good thirty

feet down,' I guess. I can now also see that something has been painted on the bow of the ship. I can just make out the words 'OCEAN'S MAIDEN.' The letters have been finished with a glossy blue paint. My face is hit with a spray of cold Atlantic water. The water has a sense of freshness to it, which, with the wind blowing at my back, feels exhilarating.

I always had felt a connection with the sea. The connection was, undeniably, as a result of my dad being out at sea. As a result, he had missed most of my childhood. He had been serving in the US Marines for over two decades. Whenever he was home, we would always go boating. It was like a father-son hobby. By the time I was fourteen, we had been on almost every body of water in the state of Mississippi that could hold our small wooden boat, from small rivers to lakes and even a pond in a public park. We were chased out of the water and needless to say, were banned from entering the park, indefinitely.

Even from a young age, I had loved the sea and the animals that lived within it. For my fifteenth birthday, my parents got me a large aquarium for my room, which was now a mini eco-system with multi-coloured corals, with numerous fish and four small turtles. Therefore, it came as no surprise to anyone, when I decided to do marine biology in college. I went to study in Florida. This is where I got to see the amazing wildlife of the Gulf of Mexico.

I spent most of my holidays at sea, examining all the diversity that the gulf has to offer. However, life was not all plain sailing. After finishing my degree, it was almost impossible for me to find a job that suited my passion. I worked in various supermarkets while also working part-

time in a pet shop. Even with the two jobs, I struggled to keep on top of the bills, which constantly flooded my letterbox. After three years of toiling, I got my lucky break. I landed a perfect job at Marineland.

At first, I got to swim with the dolphins, feed the seals etc. Soon I was promoted to supervisor. I loved the job. But one day a letter came to me. It was an invitation from the Florida State University, to be a part of a marine biology team. In a nutshell, I got to travel the world for free and see more marine creatures; I couldn't and didn't decline the invitation.

My train of thought is brought to an abrupt halt when the captain of the ship decides to join me on the deck. He is wearing the white sailor's outfit with gold epaulettes stitched on either shoulder. I had known this man throughout my whole life. He was one of Dad's old pals. The pair had forged their friendship during the time they spent together in the Marines. I knew him so well, he was practically like my uncle. A golden badge glistened with his name Maxwell Carter, across it.

'Hi... enjoying the view?' he asks, giving a long pause after saying 'hi' and continuing on when I don't respond.

I answer his question with a nod of my head and a slight smile stretches across my cold, pale cheeks.

'I'm sorry but I can't take you any further, pesky little insurance policies. I would've loved to come along on the expedition if I could; sadly, I have fifty other passengers on board that need to be taken care of. I would advise you to borrow the motor boat and continue this expedition by yourself.' Max states.

‘Thanks; it probably would be handy if I did borrow the boat ‘cause I’m not sure of how far away it is. Here, hopefully this will cover the cost of the boat rental and the ride,’ I say, taking out four hundred dollars from my wallet. ‘Oh yeah on that note, thanks again for the ride,’ I add.

Max starts to refuse the payment but I keep insisting and reluctantly, he agrees to take it.

‘I’ll walk down with you because I’ll have to sign a few release forms before a boat can be taken out, you know, normal procedure?’ he asks, rhetorically, as we start heading towards the stern (back) of the ship.

I drag along a suitcase and I also have a backpack hanging on my shoulders. They hold a few extra pair of clothes and some basic survival items including plenty of food and water and also a few emergency flares. In case I get lost there is enough food for me to survive for at least five weeks, after which I will have to use one of the flares. After signing the forms and saying good-bye to Max, I get on the boat.

‘Good luck,’ Max yells out from the back of the ship as my boat starts to slowly drift further and further away until the ship becomes just a speck on the horizon and then disappears.

I can feel my hands start to tingle both from the cold as well as a mixture of giddy excitement, nervousness and expectance, as I start on my first solo expedition.

Chapter III: And Now the Nautical Journey

The wind is quite strong, a lot stronger than I had anticipated. The small motorboat begins to bob up and

down over the massive waves. At times, huge walls of water form on either side, as the boat is stuck in between two waves, some of which tower over me like skyscrapers, threatening to engulf and capsize the boat. But luckily the boat just about manages to stay on top of the waves.

The gusts of wind constantly force water onto the boat. It is not the nice soothing kind like I had felt when the foam danced on my hands while on the ship, but rather it feels like somebody is constantly throwing full glasses of icy cold water on your face. To make the situation worse, the freezing water is also salty which showers my face, repeatedly. I manage to cough it out of my mouth but it still remains to irritate my eyes. This is definitely not an experience I am going to gloat about.

The initial excitement has started to wane in me and nature follows suit by calming the winds. Now I am in the middle of an open sea with nothing much to see except for the monotonous scenery of the dark, navy water of the Atlantic Ocean, stretching out in all directions and into the horizon. The greyness continues on from the horizon as the sky becomes overcast.

I start the motor, realising that a storm is soon approaching. After starting and steadying the motor, I slump down in the boat, already tired. To replenish my energy, I pull out a packet of crackers and munch on them as the motor continues to purr into my ears.

After about two hours, the storm hit. It is late afternoon or early evening when it happens. In the storm, the wind has managed to double its harshness, bombarding the boat

and not sparing me by chucking pieces of ice at my face, which is quite painful.

From the overcast clouds rain pours down like cats and dogs, nearly flooding my boat. I am so happy that I had convinced myself to buy this Regatta jacket because right now it is a true life saver. It has managed to keep out most of the cold water and has definitely prevented me from getting hypothermia, which any Atlantic sailor will tell you, is a truly torrid experience.

Soon the night falls and the storm subsides; I decide to switch off the motor. I am exhausted, my eyes heavy with sleep, and without realising it I am fast asleep on a small white motorboat that is drifting across the Atlantic and into the waters of the Bermuda Triangle.

Chapter IV: And Now the Approach

I woke with a start. The silver moonlight is shining down on the boat and I, like a spotlight from heaven. I rub my eyes to fully wake myself. I stare at the night sky which always reminds me of the dome of the planetarium that my dad took me to see as a kid. I start to fondly recollect those memories. That also shoots a pang of pain to the bottom of my gut, as a horrid memory resurfaces, of how cancer stole my dad from me.

I look at the watch on my wrist. It had been my dad's last present to me. Presently, it shows that it is fifteen minutes past midnight and a glance at my compass confirms that I am somewhere in the Caribbean. I realise that I have been floating across the Atlantic for the past four hours. It is only when I sit up and glance at the horizon that I see it...

At last!

I can see the island, rising out of the water majestically like a huge sea monster. It looks strange and mythical, almost as if it has been ripped straight out of a science-fiction novel. The endless amount of late nights, with lots of coffee, spent researching for just this very island. This is the island I had been in pursuit of for the last three years. I knew this was it, because it has the distinct yet peculiar green pulsating light oscillating from the shores of the island. The luminous light lights up the water around it like a lighthouse on the shore.

As I make my final approach to the island, my brain becomes clouded with suspicion. It is almost as if nature has created this spectacular show especially for me. I can feel my heart skip a beat. This is uncharted territory. I am in a place where no other known human being has set foot on. It is privilege, I know, which is rare in our modern society as the rest of the world has already been discovered and I was born too early for the exploration of stars.

The team had aptly nicknamed the island Pulse Island. I decide to start the motor back up and direct the boat in the direction of the pulsating light. The closer I get to the island, the more mystifying and eccentric the sight becomes. The green pulsating light is in fact the bark of the strange trees that dotted all along the shore.

It seems as if the trees are using the water or more correctly something from the water to glow, as it is only the trees on the bay that are glowing while the ones inland aren't. How an island that has almost has a sign saying 'find me', has not yet been discovered, is beyond me.

I decide to kill the motor when I get close to the island because the water has now become so muddy, it clogs up the blades. So I drag out a piece of glowing driftwood from the water and begin to row silently towards the roots of the luminous trees. I decide that it is a good idea to transfer the contents of my suitcase into the backpack knowing that I can't drag my suitcase along this rough terrain.

After transferring the food from the suitcase, I resolve to leave behind two pair of clothes, a spare jacket, a pack of batteries and the stove and only take two of the ten flares. My backpack is almost bursting at the seams as I sling it over my back.

As the boat brushes at one of the roots, it comes to a stall; I haul myself out of the boat using a hanging branch above my head and climb onto it. The scene is literally stunning and I have no words to describe what is in front of me, only 'beautifully weird'. I hop along the bay using the intertwined roots and branches as stepping stones. Every step on one of the roots or branches causes that part of the tree to glow brighter.

I nearly fall a few times into the dark murky water of the shallow bay, as I lose my footing on the thin branches. If the trees are affected this strangely by the water, I can only imagine what kind of freakish creature lives in it. But I don't think twice before I come to the firm resolve that I don't want to go snorkelling here, not tonight anyway.

The mainland is quite deep into the trees. It has taken me more than half an hour to get to the mainland and I know as soon I place one step on the soil that it is a bad idea.

Chapter V: And Now the Chase

The stench off my boot was nauseating, I had managed to wipe away most of the excrements but some of it still lingered in the crevasses of the sole. The first step on the island was onto the biggest piece of faeces I had ever seen. 'It is definitely from an animal the size of an elephant or bigger,' I conclude. I try to clean it by stepping in dry sand but to no avail. I cannot afford to waste precious drinking water on this.

I was just thinking of how lucky I was that I hadn't vomited yet, when I do just that. Everything comes out. All I had was breakfast on the ship and the packet of crackers on the boat, yet it seems more food has decided to make a reappearance, including the bile from the bottom of my stomach. This signifies that, 'that's it!' my stomach is completely empty. The bile has left a bitter aftertaste to it for which I risk taking a gulp from my water bottle to wash it down.

I keep on walking however, my curiosity unfazed by the recent calamity and still at its zenith. The thick undergrowth helps to decrease the amount of the stench reaching my nostrils. The undergrowth is littered with autumn leaves, shading the tiny plants underneath as well as my feet up to my ankles. My boots start to get camouflaged as the dark soggy mud underneath my feet has spewed over the boots. However, this does not concern me; my eyes are still busy admiring the landscape. It is breathtaking, nothing like I had ever seen befo...

Wait, MUD? Mud!

It only starts to sink in when I spot it. Mud this far inland usually signifies another body of water. And a body of water there is. In front of me is a big lake not too dissimilar from the one my dad and I used to swim in during my childhood.

The moon, in its full splendour, showered the night sky with a dazzling light, its shimmering reflection casting a silvery sparkle on the still waters of the lake. It also reflects the stars like a mirror. The lake looks a bit like the cosmos. It is a marvellous sight to behold yet something feels out of place. I can't put my finger on exactly what it is. The place is too eerie, the lake so serene, with a deafening silence all around it. Even the insects are mute. This is strange as near a lake life is at full spring, even at night; no, especially at night. In fact the place is too tranquil.

The lake mirrors the space above it with a jet black shade. There seems to be no signs of life on the lake. The only thing I can see is a large beastly- looking head made of stone poking above the surface. Suddenly the ground beneath me shakes with a tremendous jolt. 'This is either a volcano or an earthquake,' I think to myself. Both are scary prospects but I stand there, frozen, awaiting the onslaught of either rock or fire. I know I could never outrun a scathing hot river of molten rocks as it cuts through the land and I don't even make an effort. However the true reason of the earth shaking actually astounds me.

The stone head on the lake has fallen into the water, most of it now under the surface with only the crown of its head jutting out. The hollow spaces where the eyes are supposed to be, I can now see are inlaid with blue

gemstones that shine in the bright moonlight. That is odd; I had not spotted that before. It almost seems as if they are getting brighter by the second.

Then it hits me; they are getting brighter because the head is actually moving; it is moving towards me. In fact the gems I had thought, were supposed to be eyes are actually eyes. They are blue and they are glowing. They share the same glow effect as the trees on the bay. I start to back away slowly trying to maintain the space in between me and the beast as well as to show the beast that I am not going to harm it. I had learnt that the hard way while I was on a safari on the African plains.

My jaw drops, my muscles clench and my eyes stay wide open as my brain tries to process the beast in front of me as it rises slowly out of the water. It looks calm but I can sense its rage burning just below its skin, evident, through its gleaming blue eyes.

The creature looks similar to a Komodo dragon but only a hundred times bigger and even more terrifying. It has adopted the same leathery skin that is now soaked because of its swim in the lake and the slimy black tongue that pops out just as its Pacific island cousins. It is only then that it sees me and to say the least it is not pleased.

All of my attention is now directed to the mouth of the beast as it starts to growl. I stay there perplexed. The mouth is glowing blue, the very same luminosity as its eyes. The mouth is unlike any I have ever seen before. I can now clearly make out the razor-sharp teeth that line its jaws; they twinkle in the bright moonlight. All the teeth are canine-looking with a sharp front but on the inside edge

they are saw-like, which with just one glimpse, I know they could eviscerate my bones as if they were twigs.

The idea shakes me enough to get my body to start pumping adrenaline into my muscles and I turn on my heel trying to evade the scene as quickly as possible, at least away from those menacing teeth. How do you outrun a beast which though quite slow can cover a good two metres with just a single stride? I waste no time to think as I keep running even though I know the beast would close the gap in between very soon.

It is only a few steps from my heels and too close for comfort as now I can feel its warm, pungent breath on my back, making all the hairs on my neck stand tall with fright. I start to say my goodbyes beginning with my parents, my brother and Eileen, my girlfriend. She must be worried sick, I had left without notice. She knew I would be leaving soon because I had been frantic the last few nights before leaving in the early hours of Monday morning. It was now twenty hours since I had left home. This thought brings me back to reality and I have an idea.

I start to weave to the left and a look over my shoulder confirms that the beast is not very agile in between the trees. I use this tiny advantage to its full value darting in one way with a burst and then quickly changing direction. This has successfully managed to disorientate the beast. I have now managed to space myself a good thirty yards from the beast when I decide to make a sharp turn to the right while looking over my shoulder. I ran into a large tree trunk which brings me to a sudden halt.

I can taste the wood in my mouth but it is soon replaced by a metallic one which coincides with a warm liquid that has started to ooze out of my right temple. I see white fuzzy light and that is when my knees give away; I slump to the cold soft ground and my eyes shut.

Chapter VI: And Now the Tree and the Copper Staircase

I open my eyelids slowly, wincing at the sharp pain. My vision is still very hazy. So I shut my eyes for a few seconds and make myself adjust to my surroundings. As soon as I open my eyes again, they are blinded by a warm yellowy light which I think is the sun. I wait for my eyes to settle into the light. There is no sign of the beast that had been chasing me last night rather the scene is quite nice with a summery feel to it, which is a nice break from the ice cold water of the Atlantic. 'At least I haven't suffered from memory loss,' I think.

I slowly sit myself up and drag my limp body to the tree which I had crashed into yesterday. I bring my hand up to my temple and quickly find the bruise. That means I hadn't dreamt it all. I assess my body for further external damage but bar my clothes being shredded by the thorns I don't find any. I find a few of the thorns are still stuck to the fibres of my Regatta jacket. I'm delighted to find that I still have my backpack. So, I take out a bar of chocolate I had packed and I indulge myself in its sweetness.

After finishing my tiny meal, I try to stand up. It seemed such a simple task yesterday but now it takes all my effort just to do this menial task. I use the tree trunk as support and after a while the sensation comes back to my feet. I

cannot run but I can just about manage a medium-paced hobble. I examine the tree I had banged into.

The trunk is very tall. It extends straight into the clouds and bears no comparison to the *official* words tallest tree. It is about a hundred and twenty metres, just the trunk, after which the clouds obscure my sight. The roots of the tree firmly hug the ground. In between them, grow small plants and its own leaves form a thick layer over them. It is only then that I realise that I must have tripped over one of its huge roots after I had smashed my head into its trunk. The trunk is unbelievable wide as it is tall.

The bark of the tree is rough and dragging my hand down its trunk causes a few splinters to break away and lodge into my skin. The bark is crumbly with wrinkles that run all across the length and width of the tree. I inspect the tree from a distance. There are many knots on the trunk, some of them as large as me. I start to walk around the tree, dragging my left hand across the coarse surface.

Something catches my eye, an etching. It is at about my shoulder height. The bark had been scratched out by a sharp blade, more than likely a switch blade due to the precision of the cut. It is a heart with the letters AE+ME carved out with an arrow struck across them. 'Probably some star-crossed lovers,' I think to myself. That means I am actually not the first person on this island. But the etching does bring back warm memories.

On our first date, Eileen and I had gone on a picnic at the local park. We were so madly in love and wanted to proclaim it to the world but carving a tree was the next best thing. We chisel at a tree, drawing a similar shaped heart

except with our initials in the centre. I trace my index finger over the heart and what happens next nearly gave me a heart attack. Without any warning, a large portion of the trunk slides to the left, like a wardrobe.

Inside the dark surroundings, I can make a long spiral staircase down. I know it is probably a bad idea but my curiosity is stronger than my will power and I cave in. As soon as I took a step, the trunk/door shuts close behind me. I slam at it, trying to open it again but it is futile. Rather than being in stuck in eternal darkness, there was a strange luminous green light, like the trees on the bay that illuminated the whole staircase and it seemed to be coming from the bottom of the staircase.

I was in a dilemma; I either go down the long spiralling staircase and possibly never come back or sit here for eternity until someone opens the door from the other side. But I steel my nerves and decide to find out what strange mystery awaits me. I cascade down the narrow, creaky, copper staircase, grasping on to the guardrails with a death's grip because the steps are very narrow.

I could not have anticipated what lay before me at the bottom of the staircase.

Chapter VII: And Now Edison and the Pencil Marked Elevator

Only one word could describe what I felt: disappointment. All that the staircase led to was an office. The whole expedition until then had been so out-of-this world extraordinary, from the glowing trees on the bay, to the beast I had run from last night and even to the way in which

I had ended up on the staircase through a tree, but in front of her was just a plain old office.

The office is rather basic. The walls are bare, with the uniform white paint spread over them except for the two doors; one on my left the other on my right, facing each other, which were left bare. From the ceiling hangs a light bulb, not a fancy chandelier not even a light shade, just a simple light bulb hanging down but this was what was giving the room, and the staircase, the weird luminous green glow. It is the only strange part of the room.

The rest of the room does not impress me any more than the dull white walls. The floor is made of wooden planks similar to the tree I am in right now. In the centre of the room is a table and a chair, all made from the same wood. The table is cluttered with huge towers of paper, most of which have writing on them... the chair is occupied by a lady, who looks like a receptionist.

She was scribbling something down and looks so engrossed in it that she does not even bat an eyelid in my direction. I clear my throat just to catch her attention and it works. First, she raises an eyebrow, then an eyelid, followed by her face and soon she is beside me introducing herself as Cecilia and that in fact, she IS a receptionist.

‘Hi Flynn, my boss has been expecting you,’ she says, nodding at the door on my left.

‘Em, Can I ask who your boss is?’ I question Cecilia; not knowing who in this part of the world would know him let alone expect him.

‘Why don’t you know Mr. Edison, Thomas – Alva – Edison, the greatest inventor of our time,’ she proclaims

and as if right on cue Thomas Edison decides to pop out from his office.

‘Ah, Flynn, it is Flynn, isn’t it? Did you have a good trip? Max told that you left the boat yesterday,’ he says. This takes me aback. ‘How is Max involved in all of this?’ I think and I decide to ask.

‘Good question, well Maxwell Carter is my great great-grandson,’ he declares.

‘What!’ I blurt out before I can stop my mouth.

‘He is my great great-grandson.’ Thomas Edison repeats.

‘Yo...you are not the guy who invented the light bulb are you?’ I stammer.

‘Well, I invented this one alright,’ he claims, pointing at the green light bulb on the ceiling. I stand there flabbergasted, tongue-tied, and dumbfounded. I stare at him sceptically for a while.

But he is the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

‘You can call me Thomas, though most people prefer to call me by my middle name, Alva. Well, introduction’s out the way. Cecilia, give him the key. I think you can make your own way can’t you?’ he enquires.

Cecilia gives me a key hanging off a key ring which has a card with the number three on it, which I guess is the room number. He opens the door on my right and says. ‘after I close the door press that X mark on the wall there, you see it?’ he points at it and I nod ‘after that press one and you’ll be in a hallway and then just find your room using the key, got it?’ he asks.

I just about managed to catch the main points from him.

‘Press the X mark’ → ‘Press 1’ → ‘Open the door with the number three on it.’ I nod, confirming I have understood.

‘Well in you go. And try not to annoy your room-mates.’ He adds as I get into the room. ‘That is kind of odd for him to say,’ I think. But before I can ask about my room-mates he shuts the door on me.

I look around absorbing the surroundings. The room is tiny, slightly bigger than a closet. It shares the same bleached walls, wooden floors and the green light bulb but has nothing in it. I decide to press the X mark. As expected nothing happens, it is just a pencil mark I conclude. It seems to be drawn on using a pencil. I am about to leave when the room shudders and slowly starts to sink.

At first I am scared not knowing what is happening. A panel has started to protrude from the wall and on it is a keypad with two numbers: one and two. I assume the floor I was on was two, so I press one. In response music starts playing from the corners of the room. It is classical music as I can now hear a woman belting out something in either Italian or Latin. All this time the room keeps descending. ‘It is an unusual elevator in an unusual place how did he build all of this?’ I ponder.

The most startling thing about the elevator is that it is not going down vertically but rather accelerates down a diagonal path. The room thuds on a metallic plate and come to a sudden stop. This gives me a fright while I am still astounded by its engineering.

The hallway is long, fitting at least ten or eleven rooms in it. The floor is carpeted with a light green shade which amplifies the lights which are the same green luminous

light bulb I had found in the office and the elevator. I make my way to Room Three, the door is a polished wood made from the same material as the office, the elevator, as well as the tree I was under right now. The number three has been fastened to the door with screws on either end and the plate itself looks like it is made from a green metal which I don't recognise. 'He definitely loves green,' I smile and fidget with the keys. When I open the door my jaw drops.

Chapter VIII: And Now From the Elevator Onwards

I walk hesitantly into the door. It is pitch black. I can hardly see my hand in front of my face. I reach for the lights, which I expect to be on the inside wall. But my hand comes into contact with a damp cold surface, which I stare at, quizzically. I use the torch from my backpack to examine the wall. I stare at the wall, confused. It is unlike any wall I have ever seen before. It is jagged like a rock face and a thin layer of water covers the surface.

It is only then I turn around and point my torch into the room and then my eyes blink in disbelief. It is a limestone cave. My eyes drift to the end of the cave. It's impossible to tell if an area bathed in shadow will lead to a tunnel, or is simply a cave wall hidden by darkness. It could possibly go on forever. I can feel my breathing slow down as my lungs try and adjust to the stale, humid air. I look at the floor and I find that a small stream is flowing beside my feet.

I turn around only to discover that I am now enveloped by a never-ending rock fortress. I was sure that I hadn't closed the door behind me but now there is no evidence of it, it just disappeared into thin air. I find that the floor is

uneven, I begin to walk, wearily, forward, and my feet feel like suction cups to the wet mud on the ground. But I still stumble and fall face down on the dank surface.

I continue on into the abyss. I feel like I am walking deeper and deeper into the mouth of a terrible animal, I can almost hear it breathing. I can now hear a soft dripping noise ahead of me as dew slides off of the ceiling and lands on the cold, rocky ground. Drip, Drip, Drip, rhythmic like a heartbeat. Spires of rock hang above me which seem so fragile that even a slight noise could set all the stalactites, skewering me on their way down.

The floor is covered with mounds of limestone. The cavern, even with its high ceiling and wide walls, feels quite claustrophobic; even in this spacious expanse you get a sense that someone can be right next to you and you wouldn't know it. I jerk my head behind me as if expecting someone to be following me but there is only darkness behind me, yet the uneasy feeling still remains as if a pair of eyes is staring at me right now. Suddenly, out of nowhere a chilly draft blows in and sends shivers and fear down my spine.

After about ten minutes of walking tepidly, disaster strikes. My torch runs out of battery and I realise I have forgotten to take extra batteries. I had them in the suitcase but not knowing their need, I had decided to discard them. I am disoriented as my eyes adjust to the darkness I hear a faint buzzing sound that seems to echo throughout the cave. That is when I see them, more than a million tiny lights stuck to the ceiling and I recognise it easily, glow-worms. It as if nature knew my predicament. Now with the

path being illuminated by a sharp green light, I decide to continue on in the one direction I hope leads me to an exit. I fall a few more times but rise up quickly, each time, and I am rewarded for my determination as it seems I have now managed to reach the exit. I take one look at the mouth of the cave. I gawk at what I discover at the end of the tunnel.

The ground is dusted with a layer of pine needles. And above my head I can see the long trunk and the cone-shaped foliage from which the needles seem to be shedding. The tree is not spectacular in any way, just an ordinary pine tree. The whole forest is covered with pine trees and in the odd spot a Lawson's Cypress grows. It is quite distinct among the awl-like pine needles; the Lawson's Cypress has scaly leaves. But that is not what catches my eye. It is what is gliding in between the tree's branches that do. It is a shark.

I recognise it as a Great White. I have come in close contact with those many times but now my blood freezes in my veins at its sight. My eyes are transfixed on its scaly, grey, torpedo body just drifting in and out of the canopy. It takes almost a minute for it to register into my brain. I am dazed with confusion. 'What is a shark doing in the woods? How is it flying? That's impossible.' These are all the thoughts that run through my head. I don't know if it is because of what is front of me or because of the strange air in the cave but I feel light-headed and dizzy. My knees buckle and I collapse to the ground (again).

Chapter IX: And Now From Flying Sharks to the Leafy Note

I rise up and stand, my vision is blurry and I am disoriented but I manage to stay upright. After a few minutes, my vision settles and I am able to see clearly again. I nearly faint again as I realise that the flying sharks are real. Luckily for me, they haven't spotted me yet. And I would prefer to keep it that way.

I creep slowly up to one of the pine trees, hiding myself and waiting for the shark to fly by. The sharks do not have any wings. They are just ordinary looking sharks except for the fact that they can swim in the air. I sprint from one tree to the next, concealing myself behind the trunk of the tree if a shark comes too close.

The sharks look as menacing, if not more, as the real world versions because now I can see the many rows of teeth, razor sharp, looking hungry. I take a step to my left as a shark glides past, unaware of my presence. But I hear a squelch. 'Ah, not again,' I moan quietly. I look at my feet, expecting to find it covered in a layer of faeces but I don't. I have stepped on a fish that had been floating just above the surface near my ankles. In fact there are so many more of them, their skin camouflaging them from the danger overhead. After ten years of marine biology, I recognise all the fish.

There are surgeonfish, all the different kinds from the Eyestripe to the Japan Surgeonfish. I also notice other fish such as Sargos and the Clown Trigger Fish. I am so caught up at looking at the fish that I don't notice it swim above my head, casting a dark shadow on me. My head, instinctively,

looks up and I stare into the white underbelly of a sting ray. It has probably seen me but takes no interest in me and just swims by.

It has taken me about what I guess to be about two hours to make it out of the *ocean woods*. I have managed to escape it unscathed but the woods have led me to another horror and I am facing into another lake. 'Out of the frying pan into the fire,' I weep. After my experience at the last lake, this sight scares me more than the sharks.

It is evening. Therefore, the lake seems to be showered in gold. I can see the sun just over the horizon, dazzling me with its orange rays. Even with all of this, the lake still seems horrid. I can make out a large metallic spider sitting in the lake, its eight long legs extending to the edges of the lake, possessively. 'It is probably real though, same as the Komodo dragon-like beast yesterday,' I reminisce. However, unlike the latter mentioned lake, this seems to be bustling with life.

Some of the surgeonfish have gathered above the surface to hunt for food. I think they are looking for insects in the water but I am proved wrong again. For a brief moment, I can see a hummingbird leap out of the water but that doesn't last long as the tame-looking surgeonfish turn vicious and scavenge meat from the poor bird's skeleton.

After finishing the meal, the only evidence of the bird is its skeleton and beak which float on the lake's surface like driftwood. After all of that, even the skeleton does not remain as in the blink of an eye the metallic spider, which now I realise is alive, has gobbled up all the remains and goes back to its static stance. As it does so, something

behind catches my eyes, a door. It is red painted door, in the middle of nowhere. Just then a parachute made from some leaves glides down through the foliage and lands at my feet.

I pick it up and I notice that the parachute was carrying a light load covered with the same leaf as its canopy. I rip out the leafy wrapping paper and I find a piece of bread on my hand. I know it has been freshly baked as I can still feel its heat ebbing through to my hands. I hadn't realised it yet but I am famished. My stomach is empty except for the bar of chocolate I had enjoyed at the staircase tree. I just my teeth into the soft, warm centre and I wash it down with a sip from my water bottle.

I feel so energised after it that I feel like I could take on a tiger. 'Wait that's just an expression. Please, don't send a tiger to maul me to my death,' I plead. I begin to discard the leaf when I notice that something has been written on the inside. I carefully join the ripped pieces and I can just about make out the words.

You are cordially invited to visit my floating forest which you find on the sea, tomorrow. Now get some sleep.
FYI Room 3 has a red door.
From Margaret

I am more confused now than I have ever been in my whole life. 'Who is Margaret? What is the floating forest? Where is the sea?' But I am too tired to ponder the meaning of the note. After my hunger needs are met, I fell sluggish.

The journey so far has been exhausting. All I want now is to lie down. I had been thinking of sleeping in one of the tree but the flying sharks quickly changed my mind. I walk cautiously, as if I am stepping on broken glass, towards the red door so as not to bring the attention of the spider.

I fish for the key given to me by Cecilia in my pocket and quickly open and enter the room. It is a room with a bed in the middle of it and without wasting another wink I jump on to the bed. The room again has the green luminous light bulb but the walls are a bit more colourful with all of them spread with a bright yellow paint. Before I know it I have dozed off.

Chapter X: And Now I Decide to Walk on Water

I wake up feeling fresh and full of energy. Sleep can do miracles for the body. I get changed into the other pair of clothes from my backpack. I neatly fold my worn clothes back never knowing when they may come in handy. I am ready to go and I open the door and step out.

My shoes suddenly feel heavy. I look down at my feet and I find that they are drenched with water. I am standing on water except for my feet; the rest of my body is dry and balanced carefully above the water. I take a step, testing that I actually can walk on water, before I fall to what may be my imminent doom. But I keep on walking. I cannot escape back into the room as the door has disappeared again like in the cave. It is only then that I decide to survey my surroundings.

And there it is like the note had said yesterday. It thought was mistake. But no, there it was the floating

forest. Not an island but a wooden ship overgrown with a jungle on deck.

To be Continued...

Chance

Mati Balinski

Neil sat in the living room of his fifth floor apartment in the city of New York. It was exactly a month since he had been fired from his old job at the Bank of New York and his hunt for a new one had been unsuccessful.

He was sitting on his couch eating some pizza while browsing through job offers on the internet. The TV was on to stop him from thinking of how his life had gone downhill in the last month. It all happened because the manager of the bank he had once worked for seemed to have spent more time trying to sieve through his work to find any mistakes, no matter how little they mattered rather than focusing on his job. It only took his boss two months to break him. His constant corrections, annoying remarks during conversations and overall arrogant behaviour all came to a stop with a single punch.

Neil sat at his desk working away on some reports when his boss came to work. He came around to Neil's desk and without asking for permission, closed down the reports that Neil had spent all morning working on. He looked at Neil and said 'Your work has been unsatisfactory Neil. I wanted those reports yesterday but because of your sheer incompetence I had to get others to complete them.'

'But I've been working on these all day, why didn't you tell me that they were done?' Neil asked.

‘Because I expect you to find out simple information like this Neil. You’re supposed to be a professional.’ Neil’s manager, Patrick, replied mockingly.

Neil had enough of the man by that time so, without any further thought, he got up and punched his boss with utmost power and ferocity. The man was lifted off the ground by the power of the punch and flew into a desk positioned behind him.

Once he managed to get back on his feet, he wiped off the blood coming out of his burst lip and mumbled out, ‘Neil, you’re fired. Pack your belongings and never come back here again’

Patrick then started staggering back to his office. Neil was packed in less than fifteen minutes and he didn’t look back once as he left the building. He was free of his boss but he began feeling the need for revenge to truly get back at the man who had put him through hell for two months of his life.

For the next month Neil followed a daily routine of job hunting and discovering new take-away restaurants in his area. He had a decent bit of money saved up thanks to his investment in Apple right after the great financial crisis of 2008 so he wasn’t too worried about getting a job soon but the lack of one left him with an eight hour hole in his daily plans and soon enough it felt like he was dying of boredom.

The day exactly a month after his firing Neil got a message on Facebook from an old friend of his, Nicolai, who told Neil that he was going to be in New York next week. Neil told him the address he lived at and told him to visit when he could, so they arranged to meet in four days. Neil

spent the next week preparing; he hadn't spoken to Nicolai in years so it would have been interesting to see how he's doing.

The time passed very quickly and before Neil knew it he heard a ring on his doorbell. It was Nicolai. He looked exactly the same as he did the last time they had seen each other, 5'9" and built like a mini Arnold Schwarzenegger. They talked for a few hours and it turned out Nicolai was in a bit of a pickle, financially and he had come back to America to seek a job with a large potential score.

Neil had no idea what he meant by that but he was intrigued by the name itself. 'The Big Score' seemed illegal but if it paid, Neil didn't have any problems with it. Nicolai said he would get a few mutual friends of theirs and we will meet in Neil's apartment at six p.m. next Saturday evening.

Neil didn't even notice the week pass by when he heard a heavy knock on his door. He had spent the day watching 'The Walking Dead' and hadn't even realised that it was already six. He opened his door and saw three men in the corridor, one of whom was carrying a large bag. The men walked in and revealed their identities. The first was Nicolai who led the other two inside. The two men turned out to be old friends of Neil's; Clifton and Roger.

They weren't too well off either after the recession and jumped at the opportunity of a life changing job. Neil invited them to the table which he had prepared a few days before. Each man had a notepad and pens set out for him. Neil brought out some drinks while the others made themselves comfortable. Nicolai took a whiteboard out of

his satchel and placed it on a tripod attached to the bottom of the board.

Nicolai took a blueprint out of his satchel and he stuck it onto the board. 'These my friends are the headquarters of the East Coast branch of The Bank of America' he said pointing at the blueprint with a marker 'as you know our good friend used to work in this exact building before his employers decided to cruelly fire him. The Bank is usually impenetrable but because of the bank only changing their security codes twice a year, Neil will be able to get us past any security doors in the building and the rest won't be too hard to organize.

'Now I have one question to all of you and you have to answer honestly. Are you willing to rob this bank in order to make enough money to never work a day in your life afterwards? If you don't, then please leave this house but if you do, then let's get planning before you change your minds'

The men spent the next few hours engaging in hard discussions about their approach to the bank and at 3a.m. their plan was deemed completed. Nicolai stood up and looked at the whiteboard. The blueprint was covered in arrows drawn in pencil and Post-it notes. He turned around and looked at the three men sitting at the table 'Now guys, we've spent a long time here and we all want to get to sleep but let's just look at the plan one more time before we leave.

'We start off here dressed as security men on a delivery.' he said pointing to the back entrance, mainly used by security vans. 'Neil will get us the uniforms because he

knows where they get them cleaned. Once we get in we'll use the old security codes, courtesy of Neil, to get us through the two sets of low level security doors before we blow up the high security door right before the staircase leading to the vault.

'I'll get the explosives so you don't have to worry or go about overpaying for low quality merchandise. Once we blow up that door, I'll set off a virus planted into the bank's security system which will make them unable to send out any signals to the police for more or less twenty minutes.

'Once we get down to the vault we'll need to blow up the wall exactly a metre to the left of the doors to get into the vault. Once we get in we will have about five minutes to grab as many valuables as we can. Remember, money is of lowest priority, we mainly want the gold and anything kept in the deposit boxes down in the vault.

'Once we pack our bags full of goodies we have to get out as fast as we can. I'm going to have two getaway cars outside. I'll drive one and Neil drives the other. They'll be kitted out with bulletproof tyres and windows in case the cops give chase but you have to go to the docks as fast as possible, my man there will put the cars into two containers and he'll shuffle them up so we can get out, get a van and come back for the loot. Capiche?

'Gentlemen, I now pronounce this meeting over. Go home, get some sleep and prepare because our task on Saturday will be one of a magnitude the likes of which has never been seen in this country.' The men around the table slowly got up and said goodbye to each other before slowly

heading out the door to prepare for what would be the biggest weekend of their lives.

Nicolai walked out of the apartment block and onto the road. He looked around until he found his car, a 1976 Ford Mustang, sitting pretty on the opposite side of the road. He dropped off his bag in the trunk and got into the car. He made himself comfortable and slowly turned the key in the ignition. The car made a loud rumble and he drove off to his destination, a back alley at the outskirts of Chinatown. The alley was dark except for the back of a restaurant which had a dim light bulb hanging outside of its door in case the employees came out for their break. There was nothing there except for a few bins and some rubbish strewn around the place which was being fought for by a few wild cats.

Nicolai looked around to make sure he wasn't being followed before moving a bin which was located around halfway down the alley. The dustbin revealed a short corridor with a white door at the end of it. Nicolai walked in and blocked up the entrance with the dustbin. He knocked on the door and a man looked out through a slit in the door. An Asian man looked out,

'What you want here?' he said with a heavy Chinese accent.

'I'm here to see Mr Chow' said Nicolai.

'Ahhhh. Good, good. Mr Chow has good gear for you Mr Nicolai,' the Asian man said, as he let Nicolai into a dark corridor which led to a large room which was separated in half by a steel cage, inside of which sat Mr Chow. The Chinese man was surrounded by all sorts of weapons and

ammunition. He was soldering something onto an AK-47 when he looked up and saw Nicolai. Immediately he turned around on his chair and picked up a satchel. He opened a small window in front of his workbench and put the satchel through it onto a small table on the opposite side of the cage.

‘Everything is there just like you wanted. That’ll be eight thousand for the explosives and I’ll give you the wiring and satchel for free’ he said with a slight grin.

‘Thank you my good man’ said Nicolai as he handed Chow an envelope. The Chinese man opened the envelope, counted its contents and handed the satchel over to Nicolai as he strolled out of the building. ‘Pleasure doing business with you Chow.’ A few minutes later police appeared and Chow was arrested for arms dealing.

Nicolai waited outside of Neil’s apartment in a security van. He drank a Red Bull as three men left the apartment building, it was Neil, Roger and Clifton all dressed in security guard uniforms. They got in the van and headed for the bank. The men were quiet during the journey, no one spoke until they reached the bank as Nicolai said ‘We’re here’ which broke the others out of their spell. They drove to the back of the bank and entered through the back entrance. They opened two sets of security doors before taking out the guard who was outside of the vault entrance.

Once the men arrived at the vault Nicolai planted the explosives. The men cleared the area and Nicolai blew a hole in the wall. They were very quick. They got in filled their bags with as much as they could carry and got out.

Suddenly as they were about to go up the stairs and out of the Vault section of the building somebody opened fire upon them. They looked as a S.W.A.T squad entered the room and killed Clifton. Roger opened fire and killed two of the S.W.A.T men before he was gunned down. Neil looked as Nicolai turned around and looked at him.

'I'm sorry old friend' Nicolai said 'They said I will be let go if I hand over the three of you dead or alive'

'Really?' Neil said as he began to slowly cry 'What did they give you?'

'Freedom' said Nicolai

'And death' Neil said as he raised his gun and emptied the magazine into Nicolai.

The S.W.A.T opened fire upon him, he got shot in the hand and he fell unconscious.

Neil woke up in a cold prison cell. His cellmate was standing over him.

'You alright?' he asked. 'You're talking in your sleep again, saying the name Nicolai over and over.'

'Sorry, it was just a bad dream.' He said as he looked upon his hand. His thumb was missing from that memorable night. He tried to take his chance in life. He tried and failed.

Midnight Run

Seán Cullen

November in Portland was what the locals considered one of the nicest times of the year; the leaves had already turned red after autumn and were hanging on the trees by their last thread. A crisp wind started to blow around November, reminding people winter is here for the next few months. The first snow had long since come and the locals were preparing for a cold winter.

Paul stretched and rolled out of bed looking at the bright, green alarm clock, the 10a.m alarm was about to go off any minute, which was too early in Paul's world; he usually didn't surface till around one o'clock. As he dragged himself out of bed, he thought of the miserable day that was ahead of him. Yesterday he got in a fight with one of the rugby players in grade eight. On top of that, his witch of a history teacher, Miss Keane gave him a week of detention for showing up late for class, which wasn't really fair because he was only off by no more than thirty seconds but in her world he might as well have been an hour late.

School started at three o'clock and ran all the way to eight o'clock with a half hour break for lunch, but with detention as well, Paul would be stuck in school till nine thirty. Most schools operate a nine to four day but for some reason when they were setting up the school fifty two years ago they decided on a three to eight day, and to this day the

school still operate on this system. Most of its three hundred and eight students didn't care because they got a chance to lie in bed. But when you had detention, school seemed to go on forever and when you got home in the winter, it was well past dark.

Paul usually enjoyed the walk to school in winter, and he sometimes even jogged if he wasn't tired. The walk took him across a field if he went the most direct way, at this time of the year there were nothing in the fields but the snow which covered the ground like a blanket and went undisturbed other than the odd footprint. This particular morning the snow was a foot deep, which was the deepest it has been all year and when you eventually got to school your shoes and socks were soaked through.

The morning crawled by for Paul, bringing with it hours of homework. After Maths, he made his way to the library for a free period before lunch, the library was empty as usual, other than the old librarian with a mole the size of a mountain between her upper lip and nose. There was a rotting armchair in one of the corners which Paul was planning to take residence in for the next forty minutes. The library was always a quiet place in the school and you only got the odd student in here looking up an odd piece of information for history class. Paul planned on starting some of his homework but because of his lack of sleep that morning and a late night last night, he dozed off.

Paul woke up to the slamming of a door, it was dark outside and the lights in the library were tuned off. The only light coming into the library was a slither of moonlight coming through the library windows. Paul rubbed the sleep

out of his eyes in an attempt to wake himself up. The clock on the wall showed eleven o'clock. He didn't know how had he slept for so long? There was no-one in the school at this time of the night and he got an eerie feeling. Paul was also surprised that none of the teachers noticed him, sitting in the middle of the library. He sat up and stretched, before pulling his bag on his back. The library door stood ajar and he pushed it open with his foot and walked out into the dark corridors.

There was not a soul in sight and his shoes made a squeaking sound on the freshly cleaned floors. Paul made his way down the corridor towards the entrance, looking into all the deserted classes and seeing books strewn across floors and burst pens left lying under desks creating pools of red ink that look like puddles of blood in the moonlight.

When he reached his locker, he stopped to drop off some books and pick up the ones he needed for homework. His locker door was missing the bottom hinges and the hinges that worked made a squeaking sound that had annoyed him for as long he had the locker. After stuffing all the books in his bag, he rushed towards the nearest exit so he could get home as fast as he could.

Unfortunately, at this time of the night, the main gates and entrance were locked making it harder than necessary to get out of the school. Paul started making his way to the gym where he knew there would be a way out, even though he had been in the school for four years, he still had trouble navigating it in the dark.

After one wrong turn, he found the blue double doors that marked the entrance to the gym. There was always a

lingering smell of sweat and BO that leaked in from the dressing rooms next door. Surrounding the edge of the gym about a metre and a half off the ground, were the windows the Paul planned on getting out through.

He dragged one of the chairs from the stage over to the window and put it as close to the wall as he could get it. He jumped up on the chair, opened the window threw his bag out and squirmed through after it. The outside air was freezing compared to the warm interior of the school. Paul jogged to the edge of the school grounds through mounds of snow.

Paul made his way to the road but he thought better of going home that way and headed for the fields, the entrance was about a two minute walk from the school. The paths were slippery and Paul nearly fell face first into the ground, twice but only just managed to stay on his feet. When he reached the field he hopped over the rusty fence and into field on the other side, bordering this field was a forest with large oak trees surrounding the perimeter, opposite the oak trees was a river snaking through the country side.

A sharp crack ran out from the edge of the forest interrupting the still night. Paul jumped about two inches out of his skin and looked over towards the edge of the forest. Voices started arguing and they got louder and louder until finally someone told them to shut up and the night was quiet again. Paul landed with his head buried in snow and fear coursing through his body. As he got up he let a groan of agony, the side of his head was killing him and making him feel very light headed and woozy.

'Who's there?' growled a voice from the forest.

Paul shot to his feet which made his head spin, he stayed close to the ground and started heading in the opposite direction, and he heard footsteps coming his way and decided to make a run for it...

BIOGRAPHY

The Bill Shankly

Conor Murphy

Liverpool are arguably one of the most successful and well-known clubs in world football. With eighteen league titles, seven FA Cups, eight League Cups, five European cups and three UEFA cups, among many other honours, the record stands for itself. The city of Liverpool also has something that stands above league titles, loyal fans. Their fans have often been called the best fans in the world, and are well known for their famous battle cry, 'You'll Never Walk Alone.' There is a noble triangle at the club which exists between the players, the fans and the manager. However, times were not always so bright at Liverpool. They were, at one stage just another struggling second division club in a poor north-eastern city, who had never won the FA Cup. However the 1959-74 period is a defining moment in Liverpool's history, and it was not just because the Beatles came to prominence in that era. It is because one man changed Liverpool Football Club forever.

William Shankly was born in the mining village of Glenbuck, Scotland on the second of September 1913, the son of John and Barbara Shankly. Bill had four brothers (John, Bob, Jimmy and Alec) and five sisters (Netta, Elizabeth, Isobel, Barbara and Jean). All of Shankly's brothers became professional footballers, 'All the boys became professional footballers and once, when we were at

our peaks, we could have beaten any five brothers in the world.' Shankly's father was a tailor and a trade unionist. Most men in Glenbuck were trade unionists and he developed strong socialist beliefs. Shankly summarised his belief's later in life when he said,

'The socialism I believe in is not really politics. It is a way of living. It is humanity. I believe the only way to live and to be truly successful is by collective effort, with everyone working for each other, everyone helping each other, and everyone having a share of rewards at the end of the day.'

Shankly became interested in football through his mother. Two of her brothers, Robert and William Blyth, played professional football also. Shankly rarely played competitively as a child, but was still very talented. The same was to be said for many young players from Glenbuck, as the small village produced near fifty professionals in a sixty year period. Bill left school at fourteen to work at the local colliery. According to Shankly, he earned two shillings and sixpence a day. However, this was not to last long.

At age nineteen, Shankly was playing junior football for Cronberry Eglinton as a wing-half. A Carlisle scout saw him playing and offered him a professional contract. Shankly jumped at the chance. A year later, Shankly made the switch to Preston North End for five hundred pounds. In many ways, Shankly was ahead of his time. He did not drink or smoke, and was a fitness fanatic. Even today many players suffer from alcoholism, although it is a smaller number these days. Shankly integrated his fitness beliefs into his managerial style later on. Many players struggle to look after themselves properly. At Preston, Shankly and Robert

Kelly, a former England international, formed a terrific partnership and they won a promotion to the first division in the 1933-34 season.

Over the next three seasons, Preston and Shankly flourished. The club signed a number of big-name players (mainly from Scotland) and managed to finish 11th, 7th and 3rd. In the 1937-38 season, Preston reached the FA cup final. The next season, Shankly was instrumental in setting up a penalty that defeated Huddersfield. He had an FA cup winner's medal. War broke out in 1939 affecting Shankly's international career, as a fifty mile travel limit was implemented by the government. Shankly joined the Royal Air Force and managed to play in numerous wartime league, cup and exhibition matches for Norwich City, Arsenal, Luton Town, Partick Thistle and once for Liverpool. It would depend on where he was stationed. Shankly was a keen boxer and fought as a middleweight in the RAF, winning a trophy when he was stationed in Manchester. Shankly met his wife, Nessie, in the RAF (she was in the WAAF and stationed at the same camp) and they married in 1944.

Shankly was capped four times for Scotland; each time was immediately before the war. Bill Shankly retired in 1948. At Preston North End he scored fourteen goals in 337 league and cup games. He also played in a record forty three successive FA cup ties.

Shankly moved into football management a year after when he took over at his first club, Carlisle. He believed in playing good, passing football, and never cheating. However, Shankly's early managerial career was

unsuccessful. He left Carlisle a couple of years later complaining about a lack of resources. It was the same for Shankly at Grimsby (1951-54) and Workington (1954-55). In 1956, Shankly became a part of Andrew Beattie's management team at Huddersfield Town, who had just been relegated from the First Division. He later replaced Beattie as manager. Shankly was instrumental in bringing one of the best strikers in English history, Dennis Law, to the club and holding onto him in his time there. However, Shankly failed to get Huddersfield back into the first division, finishing 12th, 9th and 14th respectively. Shankly once again struggled with a board that lacked ambition and sold his best players with no money for replacements. He decided to accept an offer from another second division club, who he made into one of the most successful clubs in the world.

Bill Shankly took charge at Liverpool in December 1959 and went on to win the second division, the first division three times, the FA Cup twice and the UEFA Cup once. When Shankly first joined Liverpool, though, they were in a period of decline and lounging in the second division. The club had been scuffing along in the Second Division for five years. Morale was at rock bottom, the Anfield ground was literally falling apart and Liverpool had not won anything for a generation and never won an FA Cup.

Shankly made drastic changes in his first year. Shankly instituted a new fitness regime. He watched what the players ate, drank and banned smoking. This involved keeping a diary on the players, detailing their fitness and health. His diet assessment ideas were ground-breaking. He

concentrated on the simple skills: passing, dribbling, passing again, faster and faster every time. Another one of his famous ideas was the eternal 'This Is Anfield' plaque which never fails to intimidate opponents. It was erected to;

'Remind our lads who they're playing for and to remind the opposition who they're playing against.' He moved on twenty four players from the club and brought in players such as Ron Yeats and Ian St. John. He once explained to Ian St. John;

'If you're not sure what to do with the ball, just pop it in the net and we'll discuss your options afterwards.'

Shankly knew that camaraderie was important at the club. He started bus rides to Melwood (the Liverpool training ground) which helped to form more bonds of the pitch to help on the pitch. Shankly introduced fitness training and to keep players fit. Shankly was ahead of his time in this respect. With Shankly's new ideas and new squad, Liverpool was promoted to the top flight in his first full season in charge. Liverpool managed not only to stay in the league in their first season in the first division, but they finished 8th also.

A lot of teams today suffer from what is known as 'Second Season Syndrome.' This rule implies that if you have a good season against the odds in your first year in the top flight, you will struggle in your second season and most likely be relegated. However Shankly's Liverpool did the impossible and won the league title in their second season in the first division. In the next season Shankly led Liverpool to their first ever FA Cup. There was certainly no

third season syndrome! Shankly and Liverpool seemed to be a match made in heaven, and Shankly alluded to this when he stated that;

‘Liverpool was made for me and I was made for Liverpool.’ The next year resulted in another league title for Liverpool and Shankly. Liverpool had progressed at what seemed like the speed of light and Shankly’s progression needed to slow down at some time. The late sixties were probably Shankly’s only unsuccessful time in his reign as manager and it resulted from what his assistant, Bob Paisley, described as his ‘one failure.’ This was reluctance by Shankly to drop his long-serving players who were past their best. Despite having the public persona of a ‘tough guy’, similar to that of his favourite film star James Cagney, Paisley said that Shankly was ‘a softie at heart.’ This is probably why Shankly delayed dropping his senior players. However as those players started leaving in the early seventies, Shankly began to rebuild his team. He brought in players like Kevin Keegan, Emlyn Hughes and Ray Clemence. Upon Keegan’s arrival, Shankly instructed him to;

‘Just go out and drop a few hand grenades all over the place son!’ The signings proved to be a success. In the 1972-73 season Shankly succeeded in bringing his third first division title to Anfield. In the same season Shankly Liverpool beat Borussia Monchengladbach to win The UEFA Cup. The next season, Shankly’s last, Liverpool beat Newcastle 3-0 to win the FA cup and beat Leeds in a controversial Charity Shield final. The FA Cup final was Shankly’s last game in charge of the club, and Liverpool’s

second FA cup victory. On 12 July 1974, at the age of sixty, Shankly retired from Liverpool. He described it as being 'the most difficult thing in the world, when I went to tell the chairman. It was like walking to the electric chair. That's the way it felt.' Probably his only regret was that he never won the European Cup. He felt 'tired from all the years,' by the end. The club's new position was given to Bob Paisley, a former Liverpool legend who had been a part of Shankly's staff.

But Shankly soon regretted his decision and tried to continue his involvement with the club, mainly by turning up for team training at Melwood. He said he still wanted the involvement as the club had become his life. However he stopped going to Melwood because he felt there was some resentment towards him and people were asking what he was doing there. Shankly felt unwanted and began to resent the club, although he still attended matches, sitting in the stand away from the directors and staff. When he was invited to travel with them to the away leg of the 1976 UEFA Cup Final in Bruges, he was put up in a separate hotel. Shankly felt humiliated and said he was much more welcome at other clubs, including Liverpool's great rivals Everton and Manchester United. Manchester United's manager, Tommy Docherty told a Liverpool director: 'Aye, Bill's welcome here'. He wrote: 'I have been received more warmly by Everton than I have by Liverpool. It is a scandal that I must write these words about the club I helped to build'. Shankly had much more respect for Everton. When he was managing Liverpool, he once said;

‘If Everton were playing at the bottom of the garden, I’d pull the curtains.’ From Liverpool’s point of view, Shankly had retired and the club had to move on. Shankly did not understand that by turning up for training at Melwood, he was effectively undermining Bob Paisley, who had succeeded him as manager. Tommy Smith recalled that when Shankly was the manager he never ran training and would only speak to Paisley, Joe Fagan, Rueben Bennett and Joe Saunders (the famous ‘boot room’) about what needed to be done. But, as a visitor at Melwood he began to intervene and Paisley’s initial pleasure on seeing him soon turned to polite embarrassment. Eventually, Paisley had to point out to Shankly that he didn’t work there anymore and was undermining him.

It is assumed that Shankly wanted a seat on the Liverpool board. However, Shankly had never got on well with the board of any club he managed. There were several resignation threats and a statement made by Shankly that: ‘At a football club, there’s a holy trinity – the players, the manager and the supporters. Directors don’t come into it. They are only there to sign the cheques’.

In Stephen Kelly’s biography Shankly is described as ‘the ultimate obsessive.’ It is a pretty accurate description. Shankly had few interests outside of football and was fanatical about Liverpool, and only ever wanted to talk about football and be involved in football. Shankly’s activities outside of football consisted of; spending time with his family, playing cards, gardening and his wife Nessa could always rely on him to ‘clean the cooker when Liverpool lost.’ The Shankly family would go on a week’s

holiday to Blackpool every year, and always stayed at the Norbreck hotel. His attitude is probably summed up in his most famous quote; 'Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure it is much, much more important than that.'

Four months after his retirement in November 1974, Shankly was awarded an OBE. Shankly stayed in his semi-detached house at West Derby, near the Everton training ground. After Shankly's death in 1981, Nessie lived there alone until she died in August 2002.

Shankly stayed busy after his retirement and kept in touch with football. He worked for a local radio station, Radio City 96.7, where he presented his own chat show and worked as a television pundit on their football coverage. He took up an advisory role at Wrexham and helped Ron Yeats as an advisor at Tranmere Rovers. John Toshack also recalled how Shankly had been great help to him when he took over at Swansea in 1978. Toshack successfully guided Swansea from the non-league to the first division. He also managed to keep himself fit. He had been all his life and therefore even in his sixties five-a-side football was no bother to him. He also bought a share in Everton, who of course he respected a lot more in later life.

Bill Shankly died in the early hours of the 30th September 1981, aged sixty eight. He died from his second cardiac arrest in four days. Shankly had his first heart attack on the morning of the 26th September, and was admitted to Broadgreen Hospital. He was stable after the first cardiac arrest, but his condition deteriorated suddenly.

On the day of Shankly's death, training was cancelled at Liverpool and Everton's training ground. The Labour Party conference stood in a minute's silence for a man who had always been a socialist. Sir Matt Busby, the former Manchester United manager, was so upset that he refused to take any telephone calls from people asking him for a reaction. Liverpool chairman John Smith, who had not always been on the best of terms with Shankly, summed the tributes from the world of football up with a simple but fitting memory: 'In my opinion, he was the most outstanding and dynamic manager of the century'.

Liverpool erected fifteen-foot high cast-iron Shankly Gates in front of the Anfield Road stand. The gates are inscribed 'You'll Never Walk Alone'; they were opened by Shankly's wife, Nessie, at a low-key ceremony in August 1982. They are one of the most historic parts of the memorable stadium. In 1997, a seven-foot tall bronze statue of Shankly was unveiled outside the stadium.

In the 1990s Preston North End started a complete rebuilding of their stadium, Deepdale, to convert it into a modern all-seater stadium. When the former Spion Kop end was replaced by a new stand in 1998, it was named the Bill Shankly Kop and was designed with different coloured seats providing an image of Shankly's head and shoulders.

Shankly was made an inaugural inductee of the English Football hall of fame in 2002, in recognition of his impact on the English game as a manager. Shankly's attitude on life and football can be summed up with the following quote; 'If you are first you are first. If you are second you are nothing.'

CRIME

Gangster Squad

Aaron Hempenstall

It was 1999. My team of three were in the process of robbing a major bank in North Alaska. The robbery was going well; we managed to enter the bank as planned.

When we entered we pointed our guns at all who were in the bank, including the cashiers behind the desk. Mike, also known as M, as we called him in the robbery so the hostages would not know our names, and I held our Kalashnikovs at the frightened hostages while Steve went around back to the vault, equipped with twelve pounds of C4 to blow off the hinges of the six inch steel vault which was thought to contain up to \$6.6million. This part of the robbery went to plan. It was the next part that got messy.

I went around back to help Steve load up the money into three XL sports bags, which we brought with us. The money was nearly loaded, with the take amounting to almost six million dollars. Mike let out a catastrophic yell, 'Lads, the cops! Grab the bags and go.'

We all bolted towards the door, money spilling out of each bag, hundreds at a time. We rushed to our getaway vehicle which was a matte black BMW M3 with black tinted windows and snow chains on the tires, to get grip in the loose, powdery Alaskan snow. It was parked around the back of the bank just outside the fire exit door.

We reached the car with only half the projected amount, about three million, due to the early arrival of the cops. This had only allowed us to half fill two of the three bags, also the sloppy bolt for the getaway vehicle lead to the loss of a few thousand more.

We had hired a getaway driver to drive us from the bank to a helipad. The driver was an ex-TV presenter on a well-known car show: 'Top Gear'. His name was Richard Hammond.

We began our escape from the bank as soon as the last person was in the car, which so happened to be Steve who was a lot heavier than the rest of us; but the man knew his explosives. The car lurched to life, as we exited the bank parking lot the, cops were not far behind us.

The cops quickly began to spray bullets in the direction of the car's tyres. Steve, Mike and I smashed the back glass of the car with a few shots of our Kalashnikovs. This allowed us to shoot back at the approaching cops. Steve made a small explosive charge with the remainder of the C4 and attached it to a dozen rusty nails that lay on the back seat of the car. He threw his deadly looking device out the window and yelled to Mike, 'Shoot the bloody thing! They're gaining on us, you fool.'

Mike, with one clean shot of his gun, detonated the explosive, causing nails to fly through the air and into the tyres of the unsuspecting cops. This caused a huge twelve car pile-up. We watched it in the mirrors of the car.

The scene of crashed cop cars quickly vanished as the car progressed onward to the planned location. Our car was

in bad shape after the confrontation with the cops, but we managed to make it as planned.

We arrived at the location, which was an abandoned beat-up old Colgate factory. Nearly every window in the building was smashed; it had no doors and a leaky roof. It was in bad shape but for my team and I, it was the best location to hide a helicopter and it was one of few places the cops would never suspect bank robbers to go.

Anyway, I had previously arranged for a helicopter to be placed here. I went around the back to fetch the helicopter while Mike, Steve and Richard Hammond listened to the news on the radio. It was about the robbery. The news man said 'There was a robbery today in the Alaskan National Bank. It is thought that three men were involved in this robbery, one of which is thought to be black, while the other two are thought to be middle-aged white men. Luckily no one was killed or injured in the robbery but some victims are mentally disturbed. One victim said, 'It was the most terrifying time in my life.'

'The total take of the robbery is thought to be in the reign of three million dollars. Police are asking for anyone who has seen the robbery or with any information about the robbery to come forward. Any information may help in the arrest of the men.'

Hammond had a look of relief on his face as he was not mentioned in the news report.

I continued my journey to the warehouse where the helicopter was waiting. The helicopter was a beat-up machine, if it's possible to call it that. When I reached it, it was covered in a black cotton cover. I pulled the cover off

the helicopter to reveal a disappointing shell of a once military transport helicopter. The rotor was covered in rust, the wind screen to the cockpit was cracked, and the landing skid was weak and crumbled. When I placed my foot on its step, due to the years of rust, the step broke. The back rudder was stiff to the touch and the stabilizer bar was in bad shape. It was fair to say it was not up to government safety standards but it was what we had for the job at hand.

I climbed into the death trap and mumbled to myself as I tried to recall the helicopter lesson I had gone to a month before the robbery. I tried to remember the instructions the flight teacher gave me. I looked blankly at the abundance of buttons, switches and knobs. I mumbled to myself for another fifteen minutes or so, until finally, I got it. The blades began to rotate and the helicopter hovered slowly up and down, each downward motion causing a slight impact with the ground.

I let a yell out to the rest of boys to load the copter with the money so we could get the hell out of there. Steve and Mike came with the two Sport bags of money. Hammond was nowhere in sight. I wondered where he was until Mike told me he had left with his cut of the money as he felt it was too risky to travel with us. 'Can you blame the lad?' I thought. The minute I saw the helicopter I would have sooner taken a bullet to the head, but it was the only machine we had and the cops had road blocks on all major roads. So if I wanted the money, I had to risk my life.

I sat in the cockpit with Steve, as Mike chilled in the back with the money. I began the take-off procedure and bit by bit the blades spun faster and faster. The helicopter began

to inch up off the ground. We all thought about the condition of the helicopter and whether or not it would make the journey to the planned drop off point.

Men of Mayhem

Lee Whelan and Chris Tiernan

Once upon a time, there was a psychopathic, deluded, maniacal man by the name of Billy.

He lived in Orange County, California. He was involved in the biggest cartel in the state. He worked for drug lord, Julio El Manos. Billy was smart, violent and insane. He would betray anyone, even his own mother, to get what he wanted.

It was a sunny Monday morning in Sandy Shores trailer park. Billy woke up to the *sweet* sounds of victimised screams, gunfire and police sirens. As he opened his eyes, all he could smell was cheap beer, meth, and beside him on his locker, the joint he had started last night.

Billy groaned as he used most of his energy to get up out of the broken stained mattress. ‘Uuuuggggghhhh,’ he groaned to himself. Stumbling over to his dirty kitchen, he poured himself some stale coffee mixed with some moonshine. He looked out his window and observed the chaos that was happening outside. As he walked over to the door of the trailer, he raised his leg and kicked it open, and a beam of piercing sunlight shone into his red drowsy eyes. He raised his arm to his face and blocked the sun from his eyes. ‘Welcome to paradise,’ he said. Billy ran out to his

Camaro, hopped in and took off down the road to the gun shop.

He kicked the doors of the shop open and stormed up to the counter.

‘I want an AK47 with a high powered scope, extended mag, and a Remington 700 AAC-SD.308 Sniper rifle.’

The store clerk turned around and took down the rifle and AK47. ‘Now, you know there’s a waiting list for these types of weapons. So you’ll have it by next week,’ the clerk said.

Billy shouted at the clerk, ‘Ahh, to hell with this! Just give me the guns.’

The clerk looked at Billy and replied, ‘No, I told you already, there’s a waiting list.’

Billy jumped on top of the counter top and kicked the clerk straight to the face, knocking him backwards against the wall. Blood poured down the man’s face. Billy ran towards the man and gripped his throat, lifting him off the ground, while repeatedly hitting him in the face and knocking teeth out of his mouth.

‘Now listen to me, GIVE ME MY GUNS OR I’LL DECAPITATE YOU!’ Billy roared as he choked the life out of the frightened gun salesman.

Billy dropped the man to the ground, covered in blood, stepped over him and began to help himself to the guns he wanted. Taking the guns, he turned away from the desk, smiling, saying, ‘If only he had given me the guns, none of this would have happened.’

Shoving the door out of his way he walked towards his car and threw the guns in the back seat, hopped in and drove off leaving only a pile of dust behind.

Billy pulled up to the warehouse and honked the horn, the gates suddenly opened and he drove in. Standing there was Glen, the man Billy would be working with for his next job for Julio El Manos. Billy rolled down the window of his car and shouted at Glen.

‘Well, are you getting in or we going to sit here all day? We have a job to do, amigo.’

Glen ran over to the car put his guns in the back and got into the car. They pulled out of the warehouse and started to make their way over to the deal.

‘Wait, wait, wait! Please tell me you have the meth, Glen,’ Billy moaned.

‘I-I do, Billy. It’s in the bag behind us.’

Billy replied, ‘Maybe now we can get a move on.’

The two men drove down the dusty road, on their way to sell the bag load of meth on the back seat. It was worth about 1.4 million dollars.

The men pulled up onto the footpath a little bit down from the warehouse to decide on a plan.

Billy began to talk it through with Glen. ‘Okay, here’s what’s happening. You’re going to walk and start the deal while I’m up in high grounds across from the warehouse. I will start to take all security out with the sniper. Once that’s finished we go in guns blazing, rob the meth, take the money, kill everyone and go. Got it?’

‘Yes, Billy, loud and clear,’ Glen said

Billy shouted, ‘Good, then let’s go!’

Billy jumped out of the car, grabbed the guns and headed for the roof opposite the warehouse, while Glen took his guns, hiding them in his jacket. Glen grabbed the bag of meth and walked towards the main door. Billy on the other hand was on the roof preparing his rifle with the suppressor and scope, loading it up and giving the go-ahead for Glen.

Glen banged on the door of the warehouse and took a step back.

The scared little man lay tied up in the boot of the car, panicking and panting. Streams of cold sweat ran down his face as his heart thundered violently. He was gagged, so screaming was useless. His mind was racing. Death was upon him and he knew it, and all he could do was lie there tied up.

Walter walked away from the rotten, cut-up corpse with blood on his face and his butcher knife. He was wearing a dark red jumpsuit and black leather gloves and there was bits of brain scraped along the heel of his combat boots.

‘In with the new...out with the old,’ he said smugly as he approached the car.

He banged his fist on the boot of the car and the muffled noise from inside went dead silent. Walter then walked to the front of the car, opened the driver’s seat, opened the glove compartment and took out two Desert Eagles both equipped with silencers and a photograph of a man in his mid-50s. Tanned, grey-haired, with thick black glasses, wearing an expensive shirt with a name sewn across the

chest pocket. JULIO EL MANOS. Walter was puzzled, he had heard of this name before.

Walter strolled to the trunk, silenced Desert Eagles in both hands. Blood still splattered over his face. He banged his guns off the truck, laughing, and as he opened the trunk he pulled out the picture.

The tied-up man's eyes widened.

Walter pulled the tape from around the man's mouth and began to interrogate him. 'Wanna tell me about Julio? I heard there's an important deal taking place down south...kinda interesting, don't ya think?'

'Nah, not really. I heard the only product their dealing is a load of useless...no good for anything but the housewives of America. Not that interesting, don't ya think?'

Walter chuckled.

'So this is how it's going to work. You see I don't like when people decide to become cheeky little...' he said, as he rubbed his gun across the man's face. 'Here's the deal. You mess me about and you'll end up like her over there.'

'That doesn't seem like a bad idea,' replied the man

'Very well then,' Walter said as he leaned over the man.

Walter took his gun, placed it at the man's knee and pulled the trigger. Blood projected from the man's knee as the bullet pierced through the skin, cracking through the bone before leaving through the other side.

The man lying in the boot of the car with his knee just after being blown, screamed in agony.

Walter looked at the man and said angrily, 'Now you are going to tell me about this deal.'

'What?' the man replied.

'Say, *What* one more time, I dare you! I double dare you!' screamed Billy.

The man replied, 'Okay, it's in Orange County.'

'A bit more specific, please,' demanded Walter

The man said nervously, 'What?'

Walter took his gun and pushed it into the man's wounded knee, as hard as he could, twisting the gun too, and said, 'Where?!'

'A red warehouse, not too far from the town.'

'Thank you,' replied Walter as he shot the man in the face.

Walter wiped all the blood from his face and guns, threw the rag in the boot and closed it.

A modified Black Shelby GT-500 with black tinted windows skidded uncontrollably, swaying side to side before the wheels caught grip on the dusty road and took off at high speed in the direction of Orange County.

Billy and Walter stood face to face, simultaneously aiming their rifles at each other.

'Who are you and what you doing here, boy?' Billy hissed.

'Well, you see, sir, I was violently massacring a bunch of low-life thugs when I realised that I should ask about this deal, seeing as ripping Julio El Manos apart was already my main objective. So I continued entering these small time delinquents into a world of pain, which was very pleasing, if I may say so, but anyways I got into my car and well..., here I am now,' Walter said smugly.

‘That doesn’t really answer my question, now does it? I said - Who are you?’ Billy shouted.

‘Oh yes, I’m very, very sorry, sir. Where are my manners? My name is Walter and, quite simply, I’m here for the same reason you are.’

‘Well...the way I see it, you help me and I help you. And then it’s a win-win situation, isn’t it!’ Billy roared.

Glen walked into the warehouse with the drugs. Two bald, identically built henchmen approached Glen and began to search him. Once he was clear he walked ahead towards the office to meet with Julio El Manos. Glen walked slowly towards Julio opening the bag to reveal the meth.

Julio smiled at Glen and said, ‘Suppose you’re looking for your cash now?’ as he lifted the brief case onto the table. ‘1.4 million dollars, as you requested.’

Glen took the briefcase and walked through the door of the office. He started to pick up speed as he was getting nearer to the exit.

One of Julio’s henchmen took out an AK-47 and began to shoot at Glen.

Glen took cover but looked down to find a bullet wound in the centre of his chest; blood poured down as he cried, ‘Shit...no, no! I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die!’

‘Did you hear that?’ Billy hissed.

The two men ran over to the side of the warehouse roof top, loaded up their snipers and began to take out Julio’s men. One by one his men fell, Billy fired a shot out, the bullet whizzed through the air and pierced the flesh of a

man. The blood squirted from the man's head as he dropped dead.

Billy began to laugh, 'Oh, wow, did you see that?'

Dead bodies lay all around the surrounding area of the warehouse. Billy walked to his vehicle and took out the AK-47 while Walter took out his two Desert Eagles.

Billy headed over to the doors and strapped a C4 to them. The doors were blown straight off while Walter walked in guns blazing and killed every living thing in sight. Bullets sprayed the warehouse, ripping apart anything in its path.

Billy looked over to see Glen lying up against a crate. He dashed towards him. 'What happened?' he shouted.

'What does it look like? I'm shot for Christ's sake,' Glen moaned.

'Yeah, I can see that. Just keep some pressure on it and don't move. I'll be right back,' Billy shouted as he ran up the stairs to Julio's office.

Billy stormed into the office to find Walter standing over Julio with the Desert Eagle rammed down his throat, screaming, 'You've been on my list for quite some time, Mr El Manos, and it's time to deliver the lambs to the slaughter!'

Walter prepared to shove a bullet down his throat but Billy ran over and grabbed Walter's arm.

'No! We need him alive...just for the moment.'

Walter, frustrated and annoyed, pulled the gun out of his throat.

'Just keep guard here and make sure no one interferes with our work,' Billy said.

Billy then walked over to Julio's desk, opened every drawer to find what was inside. In the third drawer he found a bottle of Jack Daniels. He then ran down to Glen who was already half-dead and handed him the bottle of whiskey.

'Here, put that on your wound.'

Glen poured the whiskey on his wound and Billy proceeded to take out his pistol. He held the gun to Glen's head and pulled the trigger. Glen's lifeless body slid down the crates until it hit the ground.

Billy walked away and headed back up to the office but when the door opened Billy realised that Julio was dead on the ground, surrounded by a pool of his own blood. He stormed into the room only to be confronted by Walter holding a Desert Eagle to his head.

'I'm sorry, Billy, but it has to be this way. You're a danger to this society,' Walter said

'You little...I'ma rip your arm off,' Billy shouted

'Well, you see, Billy, I have you in this situation and you won't be getting out of it. You're a bad man Billy and I kill bad people,' Walter whispered into Billy's ear as he began to tighten his finger around the trigger.

The bullet left the barrel of Walter's gun and entered Billy's skull. The body hit the floor with a hard bang.

Walter walked away into the morning light.

The police arrived at the warehouse the next morning.

'Jesus, Frank, this wasn't a murder, this was a bloody massacre,' Jerry said.

ACTION

Test Group TBS - Origins

Conor O'Neill

The building stood on its own, tall, grey and ordinary. It wasn't the outside that mattered though. Nobody noticed it squashed in between the gallery and the offices. People walked past without even acknowledging it - why would they?

It was a warm day, the sky was blue and the sun was out. Nobody even paid attention as the black van drove around the back and into the underground car park, the shutter doors closing behind it.

Two men got out of the driver and passenger seats. They wore heavy dark blue armour with black fabric under it. They were both the same height, same build, walked the same way and sounded the same through their helmets' voice modifiers; not that they said much. The blue helmets covered their entire faces. They had tiny vents on either side of the mouth and the eyes glowed a deep blue.

They ushered a group of people out of the back of the van. Various men of various races, age, height and weight. A few were talking amongst themselves in hushed whispers but quickly shut up when the men in heavy armor took the guns off their backs.

They looked like assault rifles. They had the trigger, the stock, the barrel, the magazine, the grip and the iron sights.

What was truly unnerving though, was the jagged teeth of the chain saw on the front of the gun. One was still coated in dried blood, though it was difficult to see on the grey body of the gun.

They marched the men in single file through a brightly-lit white corridor and into what seemed to be a waiting room. Twenty chairs lined the walls around the room, one for each man. The men with guns waited for them all to be seated, then stepped outside and the door locked.

The men all glanced at each other, then around the room searching for cameras. One finally spoke up. He wasn't a very unique person. He seemed like every average man: slight build, short hair, a little stubble. He even had an average voice. He was very pale though.

'So who else here got grabbed?' he asked with a shaky voice.

Most of the men dragged their chairs over and sat down with him and they began talking. That left eight men looking at each other. None of them moved. After what seemed like hours of nothing, the door opened and one of the men came in and took two men out.

One of them had long dark brown hair. He was slightly shorter than the other man, but he made up for that by being bulkier. He had blue eyes, with dark circles under them. He had a slight beard that covered a little of his slightly pudgy features and kept looking around, taking in his surroundings. He walked with some degree of confidence, glancing back to make sure the chainsaw wasn't going to cut through him every so often.

He had a broad chest and shoulders with a bit of weight in the middle. He also had big, long arms and strong legs. He was wearing a white t-shirt with worn, dark blue tracksuit bottoms and some badly worn out runners that were once white.

The taller man was almost the opposite of the shorter man. He had short, lighter brown hair, with brown eyes. He was clean shaven with less pudgy features. His eyes were fixed firmly on the back of the man's head who was leading them, like he was boring a hole through it. He didn't walk with as much confidence. He had a skinny body, built more like a twig. He had a smaller chest, skinnier arms and legs. He had no excess weight and his yellow t-shirt hung off him loosely and his jeans were being kept up by a belt. He had brand new white runners.

They were led into an empty room and the door closed behind them, while the men in blue stood and looked at them. The one on the right pointed at the other side of the room and the other two men looked at the wall.

A disembodied voice started speaking. 'Gentlemen, welcome to the Experiment TBS. I am sure you have a lot of questions but let me start off. What are your names?'

The voice seemed to radiate confidence and stir something in their stomachs, it filled them with reassurance and courage. It filled the empty room and seemed to linger.

The shorter of the two men spoke first. 'Why do you want to know our names? You might have forgotten you sent your goons to kidnap, like, fifty of us!' he retorted.

‘There are twenty of us, you twit,’ corrected the taller man with a mumble.

‘A good question,’ replied the voice. ‘I do not want to know your names. Forget your names. Your life, your family, your friends, pets and whatever else you did. You have new names now. The shorter of you two, on the left, you are now called November. And you on the right, Mr. Tall, you shall be called Tango. Now please follow my two *goons*, as you called them, November, to the first stage of the experiment.’ The voice crackled and died.

November looked at Tango and Tango stared back. He had paled slightly. They turned and looked at the other two men but didn’t move when the door was opened and gestured at. The gun-wielding men looked at each other and shrugged. They both pulled a handle on the side of their guns and the chainsaws roared to life as they began to advance on November and Tango.

November was as white as alabaster now. ‘WOAH! WOAH! WOAH! WAIT! HOLD UP!’ he bellowed. ‘I’ll come, okay? Just don’t stick that dam thing in me.’

He walked forward, slowly, with his hands up, arms shaking.

Tango joined him and the men lowered the guns and the chainsaws rattled to a halt.

As November got up to one of them he grabbed the helmet and brought it down in to his knee with a crack. He howled in pain as the man, who he just attacked, stood there and looked at him. He could feel him smiling.

‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?’ screamed Tango. ‘THEY HAVE GUNS! WITH BLOODY CHAINSAWS! ARE YOU INSANE!?’

The voice crackled back into life. 'Excellent, I like you, November. A fighter is just what we are looking for, although you should think first. You, however, Tango, you don't seem as useful now. You might prove yourself in future though. But for now, please sleep.'

November stopped cradling his knee as he heard the word *sleep* and he glanced at Tango. He looked worried. The door slammed shut and there was a hissing sound. The world spun and they both felt sick. They collapsed and the last thing they saw was the other men strap their guns to their backs while walking towards them before they passed out.

It had been a hard three weeks, but the Doctor had done his job. Two men had taken longer to work on than he thought. He could finally move onto the other eighteen. He gave a detailed report of the two new men that he had in a file amongst other things. He admired his work and gave himself a smile before returning to work.

'I could snap his neck right now,' November thought to himself. He didn't know why he didn't like the Doctor, he had helped him recover after a fight had resulted in a head injury and amnesia. He was a professional, after all, so he thought it best to not kill fellow employees. He turned and marched out heading towards his destination.

He couldn't remember what happened exactly, but a fight didn't sound right. Apparently his partner, a man named Tango, had tried to help him and also had a head injury. He was struck from behind by an iron pipe. He was told he was lucky to be alive.

He almost walked straight into Tango when he turned one of the corners. He was nothing but skin and bones, his ribcage standing out against the tight black fabric covering his body. November wondered if he was skin and bone? He doubted it. He had more meat on him so he must have slimmed down over the past few weeks. He was hungry now.

They walked in silence into an empty room. They walked across it, their footsteps echoing slightly. They dropped their reports and evaluations and whatever else were in the files into the chute on the other side. The disembodied voice spoke.

‘Welcome back gentlemen. Glad to see you recovering. It has been a hard few weeks on you pair, so you won’t be getting back into the field right away. The only orders I have for you right now is to start eating plenty of food, bulk-up and train every day to return to your previous state of fitness. I will speak to you again in a month. Good luck.’

November turned and faced Tango. ‘I don’t like you very much,’ he said.

‘Likewise,’ replied Tango. They nodded and left.

After two weeks of eating, practically non-stop, constant training and workouts, November and Tango looked a lot better than they had. November had progressed faster than Tango. He had a good broad chest, strong arms and toned legs. He had lost the weight in the middle and it was replaced by muscle, though it still needed work.

Tango was still skinnier than November. He had to eat nearly twice as much for lesser results. His chest had

broadened, his arms were bigger and his core was strong. His legs weren't doing so well. He skipped a few leg days so he could eat more.

Today was the first day they would train together. They were taught various fighting stances, locks, how to counter locks and how to make best use of their respective attributes. November was taught to use his legs more, to kick and to move fast. This was his strength, but he never really listened and still loved to use his fists. He didn't know Tangos but he was sure it was as good as Novembers, probably his arms.

The time came and they were called out of their quarters. They both walked together to the training area and when they entered, there were eighteen other men standing in pairs around the room. They all looked familiar to November and Tango. Why? They didn't know. They walked to their usual places they went to when they were ready to stretch out. Surprisingly, they ended up back to back in the middle of the room and the eighteen men.

'Gentlemen, there has been a change of plans. November and Tango, here, are to be eliminated. Eighteen against two seems fair enough. Subdue or kill them.'

Once the voice stopped November and Tango started pacing around, back to back, in a tight circle, just as they had been taught: maintaining as much visual contact as they could. They didn't even realize that they were back to back the entire time.

The first man to move wasn't remarkable in anyway. November struck out with a palm-strike that shattered his

nose and may have killed him. He didn't care. They continued circling. Then everyone charged.

It was a mosh pit. Nineteen men, all dressed in the same black fabric fighting each other. Tango and November were separated.

November had to get back to him. He was still his partner, after all. He struck a large man in the face with a kick and he fell down with a yelp. He was grabbed from behind and he rolled forward, crushing the short skinny man under him. He feigned getting straight up and instead rolled right with a leg sweep, dropping three men who quickly got up. He smashed the first one's knee caps with a boot, jabbed the eyeballs of his next attacker, then was brought to the ground by two men. They pinned him and a bald man stood over him and raised his boot.

Tango took the first two men who charged him into a lock that looked unnatural. He had their heads under his arms, while his arms clutched their throats. He jerked and their necks snapped. He struck out with an elbow, dislocating the hinge of another man's jaw and the man dropped. He looked at his last six opponents and summed them up. He needed November.

The smallest man charged and he kicked out. The man caught it and flipped him over his head. He landed hard on the floor with a thud. His breathe left him. He rolled over and countered a grab for his collar. He was fast. He was up and the man was down in a second. He kicked the man's ribs and left him breathless. He turned and saw November go down.

He ran and dove at the man standing above him, driving his boots onto his shoulders. Then he somehow leapt off him and landed awkwardly. He turned and punched the man holding November down on his right hand side.

Another man jumped him. November grabbed him and threw him off.

'Thank you,' he said as they returned to their back to back position.

The man Tango kicked wasn't moving, his head had cracked off some weights.

'Any idea how to take out our twelve opponents quickly enough to leave us time to get out of here?' November asked.

'I do have an idea actually,' replied Tango.

'And this idea would be do able, yes?'

'Very do able. But we don't have guns, do we?'

Tango was now facing November's opponents, November charged them and so did Tango. For a few seconds, Tango's men were surprised to have been allowed this window and it took them a few seconds to take their opportunity.

Those few seconds cost them though. Tango snapped one man's neck, threw one into a rowing machine and had one in a lock that could break his arm.

November had just run in and hit one man hard in the jaw and he flew off his feet. He lashed four quick kicks into another's leg, as his leg went down, he brought his knee up to meet his face. He picked up a dumbbell and beat the last man quickly and turned.

The last six stopped their charge and looked at each other. They heard a scream and Tango kicked his captive forward, who tripped over the body of the first man and landed in an awkward heap.

It had been twenty on two; now it was six on two. The larger group didn't like their chances.

'Gentlemen, stand down. November, Tango, amazing work. I knew you would pull through. There is no point killing or injuring the last six unnecessarily. They don't stand a chance.'

November smirked.

'It is unfortunate a few of the men have expired but clearly they were not strong enough. The last six of you, leave. November and Tango, remain.'

The voice died and the men shuffled off, defeated.

'I still don't like you,' said November.

This statement was met by a swift punch to the side of the face. He staggered and glared at Tango.

'Likewise, but I just want...' He was cut off mid-sentence by November's boot. It found his ribs and he went down. Suddenly Tango was on top of him, throwing punches anywhere he could hit. He had to admire Tango's defense was good though, and he had to shake the man's hand after the lock he found himself him.

Tango got one leg over November's head and pulled him back, then used his weight to bring him down. As he rolled, Tango kicked and wrapped his legs around his torso and one arm around his neck. He had won this fight. He held it for a few seconds and let go.

November sucked in air. 'I think we need to work on our whole relationship if we are to survive all this, don't you agree?' asked November.

Tango straightened up and stretched out. 'Agreed, but I think liking each other is going to be a challenge.'

Before November could answer, four men in blue came in. They had their guns out and safeties off.

November and Tango glanced at each other and allowed themselves to be escorted out.

Betrayal

Daire O'Neill

Chapter 1

It was a warm evening in late July, the 27th to be precise. There was a light cool breeze in the air as a red Citroen C4 pulled up on the path in a quiet estate in the suburbs of Dublin. Two men came out and walked to the back of the car. One of the men was smaller than the other. They opened the boot and inside were two blue sports bags and one red sports bag.

'You're sure this is the right house?' asked the tall man.

'We've been through this Dom. Number 47 is the right house, 45 and 49 are both decoys,' replied the short man.

'I know. I just don't want to mess this up, and don't say my name, they might have bugs,' Dom said. 'What if they try and escape in their cars or if they hear or see us?'

'As soon as they turn the key, the C4 in the bonnet blows the hell up. And as far as being seen or heard goes, we better just be careful,' replied the short man.

Dom then took the red bag, gave it to the other man, and then took the two blue bags for himself. They crept up to the side gate where the short man opened the red bag. He pulled out what appeared to be a radio. It had a small screen on it with some buttons on the bottom; there was also a camera on the back. He held it up to the gate. On the screen you could see tiny lasers which were usually

invisible to the naked eye; the only way they could be seen is if a leaf slowly floated down through them. The alarm was triggered by life forms, the size of humans.

The man tapped on a few buttons and lines of numbers started rolling down the screen ending with: 4, 8, 15, 16, 23, 42.

‘How long is that thing gonna take?’ asked Dom, ‘We’re sitting ducks out here.’

‘Just give it some time,’ replied the small man.

Five minutes later, the device beeped and Dom stepped forward to pick the lock on the gate. Less than a minute later, they were walking around behind the house. On the patio behind the house, they each took a blue bag, opened it and removed a remote controlled car with a sensor and a camera on it. The short man put what appeared to be a piece of plasticine on the top of his car, then proceeded to drive it down the drain and under the house. Dom drove his car straight up the gutter and on to the roof.

The men then took out more of the plastic blobs, and threw them all over the house. The men crept back to the car, got in and silently drove away. As they were driving, the short man hit a button on the remote and a huge column of flames flew up into the sky. In the rear view mirror, they could see a man on fire trying to get to the hose but he burnt to a crisp before he could make it.

The men drove to a park. They stopped the car and went to the boot. This time they took out a container full of petrol. Dom opened the container and started pouring petrol all over the car. They each got changed and put their old clothes in the car. The short man took out a cigar, lit it,

took a few puffs and then threw it in the car, and ran away as fast as he could to the other side of the wide park where Dom was standing. They felt the heat surge towards them as the car blew up in a mass of fire.

‘Well, that went well didn’t it?’ said Dom with a grin on his face.

‘Yeah, it did,’ replied the short man. ‘Do you need a lift home?’

‘Nah, can you give me a ride to the nearest bus stop though?’ asked Dom.

‘Yeah sure, I’m parked just over there,’ replied the short man.

‘Thanks, Seán.’

‘No problem.’

The men walked over to a battered, old, blue Ford Galaxy and got in. Seán turned the key and drove through the estate beside the explosion as the sounds of fire, police and ambulance sirens started blaring through the night.

Dom smiled. ‘That was a lot easier than I expected.’

‘Yeah, I thought it would take a bit longer,’ replied Seán. ‘Aw, shit! Call my phone. NOW!’

They had pulled around the corner and saw a road block, Seán did a U-turn straight away, but a policeman jumped in a car and followed them with the sirens blazing. Seán frantically changed Dom’s caller I.D. to ‘Mum’. He then pulled over, rolled down his window and waited for the policeman.

‘Sir, why did you turn around and drive the opposite way when you saw the roadblock?’ asked the policeman.

‘My mother called me and said there was an explosion and that she was extremely scared and that she wanted me to come back,’ replied Seán, calmly showing the policeman his recent calls.

‘Fine, but next time don’t suddenly do a U-turn,’ replied the policeman grumpily. ‘Drive safely now.’

Seán started to drive away slowly while trying to figure out the safest way out of the area. He kept under the speed limit to avoid any unwanted attention. Finally he drove out through a field. They kept driving until they reached a bus stop. Seán pulled up on the path.

‘You’re sure you don’t want a lift home?’ he asked.

‘Nah, I’m grand. I’m meeting Sam, ‘cause he needs help with a *big* job,’ Dom replied.

‘Ah grand,’ Seán replied, ‘Actually, before you go have you talked to Carlie recently?’

‘No I haven’t, have you?’

‘No. Should we just continue as normal?’

‘Yeah, I guess, I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘OK, I’ll see you tomorrow,’ said Seán, as he drove away. ‘Goodnight.’

‘Night!’

Chapter 2

Dom rode on the bus for about twenty minutes. When it finally pulled up in front of an apartment block called Chipley Hills. Dom stepped inside the lobby glad to be out of the heat. He strolled over to elevator and pressed the up button. Waiting, he pondered what job Sam needed him for; he normally did not work with him. Maybe his partner John

is sick. He heard a ding and stepped into the lift to go to the twelfth floor.

Seán drove home to his semi-detached house in a nearby estate. He silently pulled up in the driveway, and crept through the front door. He heated up the dinner his wife, Mary, left out for him, ham fillet with mashed potato and beans.

He plopped a teaspoon of cranberry sauce on the ham, grabbed a knife and fork and feasted. After he ate, he placed his dishes in the dishwasher and slipped into bed after setting his alarm.

Dom stepped out of the elevator, turned right and strolled down the fancy corridor. He paused outside of Room 42, checking his phone to make sure it was the right room, he then rapped on the door and waited. The door slowly creaked open.

‘Hey man, how’s it going? Come in, have a Guinness,’ said an exuberant Jamaican man, leaving the door wide open as he walked to the fridge.

‘Hey Sam. I guess I can have a beer, but why did you drag me down here?’ replied Dom, as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

‘All in good time, my friend, all in good time. Don’t worry,’ said Sam as he handed Dom a glass of Guinness.

‘Wow, you have quite the arsenal here!’ exclaimed Dom, as he peered at all the weapons on the wall and in bags. He saw all sorts of weapons, explosives, assault rifles, knives, armour, ‘Does Michael know you have these?’

'Yeah he does, these are all the guns from the base, that's what the job is. Have you heard of the NHQ Op?' inquired Sam.

'No, should I have heard of it?' asked Dom.

'I'm not sure. Only a few people in the gang know of it, but tomorrow everyone will know. The NHQ Op. is the set-up of the new headquarters. Its near Seán's place. I'll show you in a sec,' explained Sam.

'So these guns are all from the armoury? Wow, we have a lot of guns. So what's the job anyway?'

'Setting up the new H.Q.'

Dom groaned. 'Ugh, it's going to be a long night. Guess I better start, what's first?'

'Can you bring the van out front? Its parked in space...' said Sam, trying to remember where he had parked the van. '231. I think.'

'You think?'

'Well, it's in the two-thirties. A black van with clean, blacked-out windows. It shouldn't be too hard to find,' explained Sam. 'You will be grand, man. Don't worry.'

Dom finished his Guinness and went down to the car park. He made his way to Level 2 and looked for the van. He strolled around the corner, but stopped in his tracks. Blue and red lights danced on his face. He saw the police looking at a black van with blacked-out windows.

'Shit!' cursed Dom silently. He sneaked away from the car park, and rushed upstairs to tell Sam. 'Sam, we gotta hurry up, the police are all over the van.' He explained as he burst through the door

'Ok man, I have an idea.'

Chapter 3

*BEEP*BEEP* *BEEP*BEEP* *BEEP*BEEP*

Seán groaned as he woke up. He rolled over in his bed and saw his wife was already up. Checking the time, he realised it was almost noon. He had a quick shower, got changed, and rushed down for his breakfast; the smell of French toast filled the house as he cooked his breakfast. When he finished cooking, he devoured his toast while sipping on a piping hot cup of tea.

*BEEP*BEEP*

His mobile vibrated as he received a text from Dom.

‘Meet me outside.’

Seán rose from the comfort of his chair and sluggishly walked to the bottom of his drive-way. He saw Dom leaning against the pillar at the end of his driveway.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Seán surprisingly.

‘Good morning. I’m here to show you the new HQ, but first, can I have some coffee? I’ve been up all night,’ replied Dom.

‘Since when do we have a new HQ?’

‘Since about six hours ago.’

‘Really? Is it nearby and why did we get rid of the old one? I was just starting to like it.’

‘Yeah, it’s nearby, we got rid of the old one cause Michael thought the police were on to us, and can I please get some coffee? I’m knackered.’

‘Oh yeah, sorry, come on in.’

The two sauntered into the house. Seán filled the kettle with water then put it on to boil. When it popped he put it in to his coffee machine.

‘What do you want?’ he enquired.

‘Can I have a double espresso cappuccino please?’

‘You sure? That’s really gonna wake you up.’

‘That’s the point; I’m almost at the stage where you just spontaneously collapse from exhaustion as if you just slammed into a brick wall.’

‘Ok then, one double espresso cappuccino coming right up, one sec...here you are.’

Dom took the coffee, and drank it in three big gulps. ‘Aw, that was lovely, thanks. Do you want to head over?’

‘Yeah sure. Let me just grab my bag.’

The two walked out of the house and around the corner. Parked outside number seven were two large moving vans. There were about ten men lugging furniture into the newly sold house. Dom and Seán walked into the house, and into the kitchen. The leader of the gang was leaning against the counter.

‘Hey Michael how’s it going?’ asked Seán.

The man sighed. ‘I’m tired.’

‘Well, this house is fu-’ Seán started to say.

‘Don’t curse in this house, I don’t want people annoying me by cursing just because they can!’ exclaimed Michael.

‘Okay, okay. Sorry, won’t happen again.’ Seán hurriedly apologise, worried he might have annoyed Michael. ‘Well what do you need me to do? I can help you set up the HQ, if you want.’

‘Come on, I’ll give you the grand tour. Dom, can you finish the weapons with Sam?’ asked Michael.

‘Yeah sure, I’ll see you in a few minutes.’ replied Dom.

Chapter 4

Seán and Michael headed upstairs and through the frosted glass double doors.

‘This is the conference room.’ explained Michael. ‘It has a projector and a laptop, installed to explain jobs when there is nothing to do and maybe watch movies or something.’

‘Nice,’ replied Seán.

‘This is where we will be discussing and organising jobs. We can use Power Point or something on the PC to explain it, we have a few smaller conference rooms across the hall as well.’

They went downstairs to the back of the house. ‘We have a kitchen and sitting room here, and we have the main part of the H.Q. out in the back garden.’

They walked out of the house, through the slightly overgrown mess of a garden and into the wooden shed at the back. On the floor was a trapdoor. Michael opened it and climbed down a stainless steel ladder. Seán hesitantly followed, wary of the unknown.

At the bottom of the ladder, the small vertical tunnel expanded into a vast room, which was occupied by small groups of people busy sorting out the room. On one side by a wall, was Dom and Sam, with a few other people hanging a deadly arsenal of guns on the wall, making sure that they were all even and that none were loaded.

There were some people organising some small offices around the room. There was also a printer and a fax machine in the corner printing some pages into a tray near a closed metal door.

‘Wow, this place is brilliant,’ exclaimed Seán.

‘Yeah,’ sighed Michael. ‘Anyway, I have a job for you so come on. You too, Dom!’

The three men climbed back up the ladder and proceeded to the upstairs room in the house with the projector. Michael turned on the laptop and projector and loaded a PowerPoint called Sam Grayson. Seán and Dom sat down around the conference table.

‘Okay, Sam Grayson is apparently barking up the wrong tree, and the person who he annoyed wants him out of the picture. Not dead though.’ explained Michael. He clicked the mouse and a blueprint came up on the screen. ‘So this is his house. He has private security because he is worried about the threats on his life but as I said earlier, our employer doesn’t want him dead. I recommend you knock out the guards, sneak into the house, take Mr.Grayson somewhere and give him something to think about. Any questions?’

‘Eh, how many guards are there?’ asked Dom.

‘There are two guards in each of the four towers on the corners of the estate and one guard at the gate,’ replied Michael. ‘Anything else guys?’

‘No I don’t think so. I guess we’ll go do some planning.’ Seán stated.

Dom and Seán left the conference room and headed downstairs. While they were going down the stairs, they engaged in a hushed conversation.

‘Do you think we’ll be able to contact Carlie?’ asked Seán.

‘I don’t know. She hasn’t contacted me in a week and every time I call her, her phone is off. I guess we can just leave her a message on her phone about the job.’

‘Okay, now, where are we going to plan?’ asked Seán.

‘I guess in one of the offices in the basement downstairs,’ replied Dom, as he led the way through the garden and down the ladder in the shed.

They made their way to one of the small offices throughout the room. Inside the office was a laptop, a whiteboard, a corkboard and three office chairs. The two men sat down and got to work.

Chapter 5 – two months later

On a dark, damp September night, a lone jeep crept up an old country road towards a country estate. Dom and Seán were inside going over the plan one last time.

‘So we’ll use tranquillizers on the eight guards, starting on the north tower, then the east, south and west. Then I’ll hack the security system so that all the cameras are on a feedback loop,’ started Seán.

‘Then I’ll head to the gate pretending to be working with a delivery company and knock the final guard out. Finally, we break down the door, storm up the stairs and take Mr.Grayson to the warehouse for a talk.’ finished Dom. He sighed. ‘Are you ready?’

‘I guess. Let’s do it.’

They stopped the jeep just before the top of the hill. They both took a sniper rifle which was modified to shoot

tranquilizers from the back of the jeep and stepped out of the jeep. They took aim on the north tower.

‘I’ve got the guy taking a smoke,’ stated Dom.

‘Okay, on three,’ Seán exhaled. ‘One. Two. Three. Fire!’

They both fired and watched the two guards fall quickly to the ground. They turned immediately to the east tower. Looking at the guards, they took aim.

‘I’ve got the guy wearing the green hat.’ Dom told Seán.

‘Okay – One. Two. Three. Fire!’

Both men fired and stared in disbelief as neither guard fell. They fired another dart each, but again neither guard fell. Dom peered at the estate, hoping that the guards had not been alerted to their presence. Seeing nothing unusual, he turned to Seán. A look of horror dawned on him as he saw a dozen trucks blazing down the dirt road towards them.

‘OH SHIT! Seán, we gotta go. NOW!’ shouted Dom as he ran to the jeep, jumped in and started the engine, leaving Seán standing on the hill. ‘SEÁN! Come on.’

Seán came to his senses and sprinted towards the jeep, while the trucks blasting towards them opened fire on them. As soon as Seán was in the truck, Dom drove as fast as he could away from the estate. He crossed a barren road to a car park. He stopped the car as fast as he could and jumped out. Seán followed, rushing to break into a car to try and shake their pursuers. Seán started the car and drove away as soon as Dom hopped in. They drove onto the motorway and started to head into town.

Dom started to text Michael: MISSION COMPROMISED.
HEADING INTO TOWN ON MOTORWAY

He then turned to Seán. 'Where are we going? We can't go back to the H.Q.'

'I don't know, maybe we can shake them in the city but it's risky,' Seán replied worriedly.

'Wait, wait pull up over there.'

'What, the abandoned apartments?'

'Yeah, we can get the car to drive with some bricks, it might trick 'em.'

'Okay, it might work.'

Seán drove the car over to the building and got out, leaving the engine running. He sprinted as fast as he could to a pile of bricks and picked one up. He started to head back to the car, but a better idea popped into his head. He dropped the brick and walked over to a homeless man.

'Do you want our car?' he asked the homeless man.

'What? Are you serious?' the homeless man asked.

'Yeah, take it, there's almost a full tank of petrol, and the engine's running so just take it,' Seán said as he opened the door for the homeless man to get into the car. The homeless man stumbled into the car giddy with excitement, and drove off just as Dom and Seán's pursuers drove around the corner.

'Hide!' exclaimed Dom. The two men quickly ran behind the closest wall, put their backs against it and sunk to the ground, hoping that their pursuers would follow the man in their car instead of stopping. They were in luck.

As the trucks drove away, Dom and Seán crept towards the stairs, when they were sure that the jeeps had turned off the road that the apartments were on, they bolted up the stairs as fast as they possibly could. When they reached the

roof, their hearts were pounding. Dom furiously punched the keys of his mobile as he texted Michael: MANAGED TO SHAKE PURSUERS. ON TOP OF ABANDONED APARTMENTS ON TOLO STREET. NEED PICKUP ASAP!

‘Hopefully help is on the way but we should probably barricade the roof entrance just in case.’ Dom told Seán.

‘Okay, I think I saw some wood and bricks over there.’ replied Seán before cracking under the pressure. ‘Man, this is chaotic, how did we get into this mess? It’s so crazy, I don- I don’t want to die here. I...I want to live my life, I want to be with my wife.’

‘It’s okay Seán, help is on the way,’ said Dom trying to calm his friend. But he was not sure if he believed the words he was saying. Coming to his senses he knew that he had to remain positive. He quickly glanced around, noticing a couple of nails sticking out of a nearby wall before he turned back to Seán. ‘Come on Seán, we are going to live, go get the logs, I’m calling for backup.’

‘Bu-but we can’t risk the mission.’ Seán stammered.

‘Our lives are in danger; we have to risk breaking our cover,’ Dom said calmly as he pulled his phone back out and dialled 999.

‘Hello, Emergency Services. What’s your emergency?’ a voice asked.

‘This is police officer, Dominic Jefferson. I need to talk to Carlie Thompson immediately.’ Dom replied.

‘Please hold.’

Chapter 6

‘Hello, is this Dominic Jefferson?’ said a deep, scruffy voice.

‘Yes? Who is this?’ asked Dom.

‘This is Officer Simon Phillips. I took over from Carlie Thompson.’

‘What do you mean took over?’

‘She has been missing for over two weeks.’

‘WHAT!’

‘We know that you were undercover for a mission , but we can’t find any of the case files, Officer Jefferson. You need to tell me what your mission is; how long you’ve been undercover and how dangerous your mission is? Where can you meet me?’

‘Listen, even though I would love to sit down, have a cup of coffee and talk about the mission with you, it will have to wait. My partner and I are in an extremely dangerous situation and need to be picked up. We’re on top of the abandoned apartment building on Tolo Street, and we are being hunted down by a convoy of trucks.’

‘Hunted down? Listen son, you need to tell m...’

BOOM!

Dom dropped the phone as he saw a pillar of smoke and fire rise up in a swirling fashion a few blocks away. It looked as if the blazing inferno was a tornado wreaking havoc on the road. He instantly knew that their pursuers knew they had given them the slip. He heard sirens fill the air as the fire brigades, ambulances, and police cars made their way to the explosion. He looked over at Seán who had a strange look on his face; it was a mixture of shock, fear and horror. They made eye contact...for the last time.

Dom stared in utter disbelief as Seán fell; the bullet passed through the sides of his temple and he heard the

crack of the gunshot as Seán's limp body hit the floor. Dom dropped to the floor and crawled over to Seán's body.

'OH NO!' screamed Dom, in anger. 'I'm sorry man.'

Dom was distracted from his mourning over Seán when his phone started to ring. He looked at the caller I.D. - MICHAEL

'Michael, where the hell have you been? The mission's completely ruined. They knew s-somehow! And they chased us down towards Tolo Street, and...and S-Seán...he's dead,' stuttered Dom. 'There was nothing I could do. They just killed him, r-right in front of me.'

'Don't worry Dom, it'll be okay,' replied Michael.

'It will?'

'Yeah, 'cause soon, I'll kill you too.'

Chapter 7

'Has anyone here heard of Officer Jefferson before, or his partner?' asked Officer Philips.

'No I don't think so, sir,' replied Officer Phillips' assistant. 'There's no record of them in the system.'

'Officer Thompson must have hand-picked them. Will someone please find the case files. Also, someone get me Officer Thompson's computer,' requested Officer Phillips.

'Sir, her computer is gone along with everything in her desk, it's empty,' an officer told Officer Phillips

'Damn-it, what's going on here? Let's get a med-evac out to Tolo Street, and hope they are still alive.'

Dom fought back the tears as he raced against the clock to fortify his position. He started to use any timber or bricks

he could find to construct a makeshift wall in front of the only door that lead to the roof. He knew it wouldn't hold up against explosives, but he hoped they didn't bring any.

He was still finishing his wall when he heard the screech of tires down below. He sprinted across the roof to hide as far away from the door as possible. The door started to shake as someone tried to shove it open. Dom could hear talking coming from behind the door and could barely understand it.

'Hey Simeon, you got the C4?'

'Right here.'

'Brilliant, give it here. Okay, I'll put a brick, here, eh here, and here. There that should do it, everyone stand back.'

Dom put his fingers in his ears and turned away as the charges exploded, but immediately screamed out in pain when a piece of shrapnel from his barricade got imbedded in his leg. He could just about make out someone talking;

'Here lads, you can go back to the jeeps, I got this.'

Dom turned around and saw Michael standing in front of the blown up door, with a pistol pointing towards him. 'Nice barricade you had there, shame I had to blow it up.'

'Why the hell do you want to kill me Michael?' asked Dom, as he limped towards Michael.

'Because you and Seán,' Michael gestured towards Seán's body, 'betrayed my trust. Turns out your both police scum. You thought you would get away with it didn't you? Well, you're going to pay the ultimate price. I bet you and that other piece of scum over there wished ye never took this mission? I thought it would be harder to kill ye, but Seán was simple so I'll bet you will be too.'

'I'm going to kill you!' screamed Dom, consumed with rage.

'I would like to see you try, but you're useless. Just another piece of police scum!' replied Michael arrogantly.

'AAAGH!' screamed Dom as he punched Michael. Michael stumbled backwards into a wall, dropping his gun. Dom noticed the nails again, however this time he also noticed a wheel. He guessed it turned the nails.

Dom suddenly snapped back to reality as he was punched in the face by Michael. He almost fell off the side of the building as he stumbled backwards, but he regained his balance and saw another punch coming. Quickly, with all of his strength, punched Michael's fist and pushed it back towards the wall where it was brutally impaled in the lowest nail.

'You scum-bag!' screamed Michael as his face filled with pain.

Dom took this opportunity to hit Michael's hand upward, impaling his arm and hand into the other two nails. He quickly spun the wheel hoping his hunch had been right. As he turned the wheel, Michael's arm was twisted back down behind his back into an excruciating arm-lock.

'AARRGGHH!' screamed Michael as he flailed his left arm at Dom.

Dom took this opportunity to handcuff Michael's left arm to the pipe running across.

'Where the hell did you get them! You know what I don't care just let me go so I can kill you. You're going to die anyway.'

'What? How?'

'You made the top spot on the gang's most wanted. So you're going to die, be it here or in twenty years. You'll never get away.' replied Michael smugly.

Dom limped over to Michael's gun and picked it up, 'How long have you known?' he asked in a small voice.

'What? I'm telling you that you're gonna die and all you say is 'How long have you known?' Well if you must know about three weeks now, and about two weeks ago I kidnapped your supervisor. Carlie, is it?' laughed Michael. 'Been keeping her in the strong-room. She's been quiet but we got her files too, so when we threatened her family she decided to talk.'

'I'm going kill you!' stated Dom as he raised his voice, trying to believe his words.

'Oh yeah?' replied Michael, as he tried to trip Dom up by sweeping his legs under him. But Dom caught his leg, held on it, and smashed his foot down on Michael's knee-cap. The crack was sickening. Michael looked up in pain at Dom. Seeing the ferocity in his eyes, fear crept over Michael. He could see Dom wouldn't hold back, he could see he was going to die.

Dom pointed the gun straight at Michael.

Michael gulped.

Dom cocked the gun.

Michael shut his eyes knowing that he was drawing his last breath.

Dom put his finger on the trigger. 'I can't do it, you're not worth it.' said Dom.

'Ha, I thought you we-' Michael started to say before Dom clubbed him on the back of his head with the gun.

Dom limped back towards the centre of the roof, where he had dropped the phone. 'Officer Phillips, are you still there?'

'Yes, I am son. Hold on tight the medevac's on the way.'

'What about Seán?' Dom choked on the words.

'He'll be taken care of,' replied Officer Phillips. 'You did good today, son. You made the right choice.'

The Choice

Tony Duggan

My eyes fluttered at the sun beaming down, blinding me from my surroundings. The taste of salt on my lips and the cold water brushing up against me sent shivers down my spine. My head was pounding in a dense rhythm of my heart beat, my stomach full of aches and pains, churning in, one on the another. My lungs were made of iron, barely moving, not letting in any air.

I should be dead, I thought.

I turned over in the golden sand and spewed up a pale colourless liquid that was the contents of my stomach, mixed with a line of blood that was dripping from my mouth. It was a trap.

Another wave crashed over me and the shock made me jolt forward and land in a sitting position. I was on a rocky beach in the middle of nowhere with an old wooden cabin on a hill in the distance.

They knew I was coming.

I stumbled to my feet and for the first time saw the massive gash on my right leg, spanning from my knee to my lower abdomen, and a deep stab wound under my left armpit, in-between my ribs, inches from my heart.

It all happened so fast.

I started to walk towards the cabin. I found it hard to stand. I collapsed multiple times, holding my side, trying to stop the bleeding before I made it to the door.

I couldn't stop them.

Slamming my bloody fist on the maple frame, I slouched against the door, desperately twisting the handle. Hoping the door would open. My blood took all the grip off the handle and my body weight shifted and I fell sideways into the railing around the house.

Six on one.

The door opened as I screamed out in pain and an old man in his eighties came out and looked at me. There was no shock in his face, just blank plain wrinkled look and a spring of humour in his voice. He said, 'You look like your having a bad day,' with a slight smirk.

I hadn't tried to talk yet and when I did all I could do was gargle a cough and spit out blood

He was meant to be my friend.

The old man closed his eyes, put his hand to his face shook his head. He said, 'You better not get me in trouble.'

He struggled to pick me up and dragged me into the house and sat me on a lime green cushion chair near an open fire. The heat coming off it was already starting to bring feeling back into me but that brought the pain too.

Five years. We'd done everything together

The old man walked over, handed me a cup of hot chocolate and said, 'My name is Bobby, and I will be your doctor today. I have had years training and spent twenty years in the army fighting everyone's wars, for no reason.

As he looked at me my hand gave out and I dropped the cup. My head was fuzzy and spinning. My vision started to blur. It felt as if the pressure in my head was building up constantly. It was going to explode. The feeling in my body was gone again

I should be dead.

I lost all senses and went blank.

I awoke to the aroma of chocolate and varnish as I lay on a bed in the corner of the room. The cabin empty and quiet, as if no one had ever lived there.

I will get them back.

I had been stitched up well. The bandages were soaked in a light blood.

The old man walked in the door with a hunting knife in one hand and a dead rabbit in the other. 'Oh, you're awake, you bad man. What took you so long?' he asked.

I found my voice and replied. 'How long was I out?'

'About six days,' he said, while starting to skin the rabbit with his knife, slicing down the fur over and over with ease, as if he had done it a million times.

I looked down at my body and asked, 'You did this?'

He answered with, 'Beat you up? No. I just helped you back on your feet.'

I smiled and said thanks, thinking the man must have been through a lot to have that sense of humour in a situation like this

He made coffee and sat in his chair and said, 'Right, what happened?'

I looked at him and said, 'It's a bit of a long story.'

He gave out a bit of a laugh and said, 'I am an eighty-nine year old man, living on my own in a cabin I built in the middle of a beach that no one comes to, I think I have time.'

So I explained to him what happened, how we were a league of mercenaries that took down high level targets and made a lot of money doing so. We became very well-known and had a lot of business until we stepped on the wrong government and they put contracts out for each one of us to be killed off. I was the most expensive at ten million euro. No one could get to us. We were too good as a team, until I was double-crossed.

We had planned a meeting to take down the people who had the hit out on us. I walked into the house and they attacked me. I had no chance to react, their swords flew and scraped by me. With no protection, they won. I was backed into a corner near the window when my best friend came over, shook his head and said, 'You know I like money,' and threw me out the window.

All I remember seeing then was rocks and the sea and...then I woke up.

I looked at him and he looked me, in the eyes, and said, 'Don't do it.'

I was puzzled and asked, 'What?'

He looked down and said, 'I have seen many deaths in my day and I know what it looks like when someone is set to kill. But don't do it. You're dead now. Go live the rest of your life in peace. You're young, in your thirties, you can have a real life. A happy one.'

I was a bit offended by how he thought he knew me so I said with cheek, 'What? Live my life alone, like the sad old man you are?'

I immediately felt bad. He had just saved my life and I was acting like he was some scum off the street.

'No,' he said. 'I have lived my life by the sword and gun. I have killed, taken away lives that could be alive now, happy with families. Once I even had a love but she got away because of my desire for money. If I had one choice it would be to live life without money and just have her. When I was with her everything was different. I would spend days just lying there, barely talking, just in peace and tranquillity. Love is real you just have to find it.'

Just then the thought of my wife and kids popped into my head and how much I missed them. Hugging my little girl, and shaking my boy's hand. Watching them as they made cakes with their mother, my beautiful wife.

The old man continued talking. 'A great man isn't about his life achievements but how he sees the world and his thoughts. Many men can be rich or famous or have things that everyone seems to desire, but how many do you think have a clear mind to think and have their own ideas and see the world for what it is? With its true beauty? You only get one life, don't waste it. Live it.'

I took time to just look at his face in detail. It told you he had been through it all, a man with a life spent well.

I asked him why he was in a cabin in the woods on his own.

He sighed and said, 'It's all that's left for me. I am a feeble old man with nothing to show for this life other than the

lives I have taken from others. I have been down your path and it is a lonesome one. I have had a long life, one that I am thankful for, but I have wasted it. If I was to die now that is it. My life would be over and it's just another day. If there is one gift I can give you it is the gift of life. Not to just be physically alive but be free.'

What he had said really got me thinking. Just sitting in this cabin with fresh air made me feel better. But then I felt my mood suddenly plummet. 'I have to,' I said. 'I can't live my life constantly looking over my shoulder. I will get rid of them all and be done with it.'

He looked at the half-skinned rabbit in his hand. He had forgotten to keep skinning while he was talking and said, 'Do what you must but you're never done with these things. It's never really over. Our nature has killers in us. You say you will be done but you're going to end up like me, with regrets that will play on your mind, heavily, for the rest of your life.' He started to boil the rabbit. 'I will give you a good meal and send you on your way,' he said.

I felt like I let him down.

After I ate I felt my strength return and was back to normal. I stood up with a bit of a tingle in my leg but still sturdy. He asked me how I was going to find them so I told him about the abandoned safe house in the middle of nowhere and how to get to it.

He looked at me and said, 'I know my way around by now. I know of this place and used to wonder what it was used for. It's about four hours walk to the nearest village and a week on foot to your location.'

I nodded and started to leave.

When I got to the door the old man said, 'Wait!' and he handed me a ancient samurai sword, a tin shield and a luger P08.

I said I couldn't take them but he laughed. A more a saddened, dull laugh than before and said, 'You might as well have them. It's all I have left and I have no use for them now. I haven't got long left now. A month, a week, a day. Who knows? But you may be the last person to see me alive and I know you're looking at me as a useless old man who doesn't know what he is talking about, but one day you will understand. One day you will be old too, if you're lucky, and you will look back at everything and wish you listened. I might not be important but you will remember me,' he said. 'The gun only has one bullet, by the way.'

I accepted the weapons and nodded to the man, who now had a tear forming in the corner of his eye. He blinked and it fell in slow motion and splashed on the ground before he turned and walked into the house, closing the door.

I walked for about four hours, as Bobby had said, before I reached the first town. It was small, dirty and filled with dark shadows, looming at every corner, watching you with their small beady eyes as you passed by. The rain started to lash down, soaking every inch of skin I had. It was blinding.

I stopped outside an old shop with a black canopy sheltering it from the rain. I was just recuperating, getting ready to go again, when something pulled on my leg. I looked down at a man so covered in dirt you could hardly distinguish him from the wall. He was covered in rags that looked like they had been through generations. His face was

in a permanent sulk from years of depression and hardship. He looked at me and asked if I had any spare change.

I didn't.

His expression was so pitiful that I had to help him. The rain was now slicing down sideways and starting to hit the man. I took my shield and handed it to him and said, 'This will protect you from the rain.'

There was a glimmer in his eye as if he had never been shown kindness before in his life. I asked him why he was homeless and he said, 'It's a story not to be welcomed.'

I said, 'I will listen until the rain stops.'

He looked as if he had never told anyone before what he was about to tell me. He held his breath then blew out hard and said, 'Okay, I had a good life at one point but drugs got in the way. Me and my best friend were in fierce trouble with some bad people. We owed them money all the time and once I had a bad trip while my friend was trying to stop with the drugs and live a proper life. But I needed money. We were in his house and I asked to borrow some but he wouldn't give it to me because he was saving up to buy a car. I don't know what came over me but I took the biggest knife I could find and stabbed him repeatedly. There was so much blood everywhere. He kept screaming, 'Stop!' and begging me. But I just stabbed over and over. Midway through I stopped and looked down at what I was doing and freaked out. I went to the door to call for help but as I opened the door I saw all the blood dripping off my knife so I returned and finished the job. That's how I live my life now. I just think over and over of what I have done and why I must be punished. It was like an outer-body experience. It

wasn't real but yet it is. And I must now lay waste to my pitiful existence. There could be an amazing person in this world now but instead I am here living on the street doing nothing with my life.'

The rain had stopped and the man just looked up and said, 'Thanks for listening.'

When I made it to the next town it was slightly brighter and everyone seemed to be happier in a strange relentless sense. I stopped off in a nearby hotel and sat in the reception and ordered food. There was three businessmen on the phone talking to people they probably didn't know or like but yet smiled at everyone. The echo of the old man's words played in my head; how these people were not happy, they were just pawns wasting their lives chasing money.

A little kid about nine years old sat down beside me and his mom opposite him. He looked at the sword in my hand and said, 'Is that real?'

I nodded but didn't speak.

'What are you doing with it?' he asked.

I sighed and said, 'It is for me to practice with.'

He laughed and said, 'Are you going to kill people with it? Because I am really good at killing people in my games. I like to shoot off their heads so they explode and go everywhere. I get extra points for doing that.'

It made me think at how we view the act of killing now, and how kids are brought up to think it is all a game. That when they grow up and war is just a push of a button, but on the other end there is death, destruction and loss. The pain that is suffered is unknown to the pusher. War is too

easy now. There are no battles and blood everywhere, just quick and silent.

I said, 'Those games are silly and you shouldn't be playing them. You should study and become smart and save lives. Isn't that right?' I said as I looked at his mom.

After a second or two the boy interrupted and said, 'She can't hear you. She is deaf and blind.' But he said it without any bitterness in his voice.

I was interested at this and asked how he was able for this, sounding very rude as I did so.

He looked at me with surprise and said, 'Don't feel sorry for her. She has a great life and will continue to do so as long as she is alive. It is everyone else you should feel sorry for they are not happy, but we are. Me, my mom and my dad are a happy family and we will stay like that forever because all we need is each other.'

He was smart for a kid his age, so innocent and full of happiness.

But that will change as he gets older, I thought. He will see the world isn't made of gold but more a dark dust coal.

I smiled and said, 'Well I am happy you see the light.'

The kid took twenty euro out of his pocket and put it on the table and said, 'That is for your lunch. You give the impression of a good man.'

Before I could decline his offer he had taken his mom's hand and walked off.

My meal came and the money was taken off the table. Karma was on my mind and just then a man sat down beside me and started to cry. It looked like he had been crying for his whole life: eyes glinting with water; red

marks down the side of his face from constant rubbing; nose with mucus hanging from it. He looked at me and asked me, 'Have you ever loved anyone?'

I answered with a low inconspicuous, 'Yes, I love my wife and kids,' in fear of drawing too much attention to us.

He was getting louder and louder. He then asked, 'Have you ever lost anyone you love?'

'No,' I answered. 'I have not. I have been very fortunate.'

He had this darkness surrounding him, pushing him down like he needed to get something off his chest, so I did what I could by asking him what was wrong. He said, 'I never thought I would love her so much. I thought love was just a game that people play to get in the pants of girls. But I do I love her. So much it hurts to think of life without her. She is not perfect but that's what I love about her. The way she gets angry for no reason or doesn't understand my taste in music, or even when she makes loud noises in her sleep that keep me awake all night. But that's what makes me so close to her; the things she only does around me and how when we are together nothing else matters. Just us two against the world. We could lie down and not talk, just be together in each other's arms. And how beautiful she looks when her eyes are closed. Now she is sick in hospital and the doctors say they don't think she will make it.'

His breathing was strong and came in chunks of pain. His voice was dead and monotone, with no emotion, as if emotion was for children.

He continued to talk while anxiously playing with his hands. 'If she dies my life will have no meaning. I can't go on with someone else. There is no one like her. She is the only

one for me. I think of her every day. Her face is the only thing worth thinking of. When I am sad or angry or alone, she is the only thing that keeps me sane. If there is a god, please let her live. I don't care about anything else. No money or beauty or fame, just her life. You can have mine, just let her live.'

He was beginning to talk to the sky in desperation. Then his phone beeped and without hesitation he took it out looked at it while starting to sprint away.

My only thought was for him to have a happy life.

When I got outside there was an empty taxi sitting in front of me with no driver. This was my chance. Walking would take too long. I leaped into the taxi and started to hotwire it. Before long it revved into action and I heard a loud scream behind the car saying, 'Hey, stop! What do you think you're doing?'

I put my foot down so hard it nearly went through the floor. I skidded around the corner with the smell of burning rubber spreading in the air. The screech echoed in my ear. I knew where I was going and didn't let my foot off the ground the whole way.

The safe house that had been my home for many years was now about to suffer my incursive blitz of anger. They were once my friends but that has only shown me there weaknesses.

I am coming.

Please I don't want to die.

They are going to die in fear.

I stood by the fence watching the shadows move through the lights. I silently moved in the long grass to the hidden

escape exit and climbed in, squeezing down the pipe and crawling along the stone bricked passage with the moss and spiders thriving in it, until I got to the basement of the house. I hauled myself up through the rusted fence and put gun down the back of my trousers, with the samurai sword at the ready.

It was 8p.m. sharp.

They will all be having dinner.

I creep through the large house, like a lion stalking its prey, until I get to the dining room, where I hear talking. I take a deep breath.

My foot busts into the door with force and my first friend was standing right in front of me, with a look of bewilderment on his face as my sword took his head off in one clean swoop. Two others were in the room and screamed out in distressful anger. They drew there swords and looked at me with a shade of red in their eyes.

John, the smallest one, ran at me with his sword spinning in his hand. I blocked it with ease and sidestepped as the second flash of the sword flew by. I ducked under the third and used my left hand to wind him. Then my blade crushed into his chest, in between his ribs.

There was a short silence as he looked at me and then fell over, my sword still in him. I stepped back just far enough to keep me in one piece, as Jack came in with a swift slice upward, grazing my side. We had eyes locked on each other. He knew I was good and I knew he had a bad left eye.

He went for the right and I dived under it, taking out his leg as he fell to the ground. He dropped his weapon. I turned to get up as his fist crashed down on my temple.

By the time my hand covered it he had laid into my nose, multiple times. I fired off a right hook to his jaw, disorientating him. I got on top of him and started to punch him in every place I could.

He was trying to cover up but I was too quick. My hands were beginning to go numb. Blood was starting to appear on every conceivable part of him and his attempts to block were getting weaker the more I hit him.

Then there was a sharp pain in my side as I looked to see an unknown face. A knife lodged in my lower left side. A scared expression on his face.

I took the knife out and lashed out at him, the knife opening his arm from palm to elbow; blood spilled to the ground as he cried out in pain.

I leaped with speed and took him down and went to stab him as his hands came to meet mine, trying to stop me from pushing the knife into him. He was strong but the wound on his arm prevented him from stopping me. The knife slowly pushed down into his neck, the tip beginning to pierce his skin.

‘No! Please stop! Please, just stop! I am too young to die!’ he said.

But it was too late. The knife had gone the whole way through, scraping off his spine. Blood littering the ground, the light in his eyes went out as he turned limp.

I looked at him and for the first time wondered who he was. He was only young, starting his life. But now it was over because of me. I had nothing against him but he had fallen victim to another’s quarrel.

I turned back and slit the throat of my onetime friend and stood up in time to see Frank pointing a gun straight at me. The first bullet opened a wound in my right lower leg. I reached behind me to grab the luger and as I pulled it out another shot hit me in the right shoulder, taking me off my feet and sliding across the ground.

I scrambled as fast I could to get behind a nearby pillar as more shots echoed around me. I heard him sprinting towards me and as I turned my head to look up, the gun was pointed in my face. My arm deflected the gun and the bullet hit the ground. Some chippings hitting me in the face, opening a straight cut.

I punched up with all my might, hitting him with a blow to the groin. He groaned as I took him off his feet and slammed him against the wall. With a strong head-butt I cracked his nose, and then smacked him with an upper-cut that pushed his head back. His arm flailed around, smacking me across the face, but I kept at him, throwing fists any chance I got.

It ended up a blood bath, us pounding at each other until one of us gave in. But he wouldn't go down.

I ducked under a left hook only to get caught by a right upper-cut to the nose. I felt it break in more than one place. I put all my effort into punching his ribs, until I felt them snap. But at the same time he was smashing the back of my head with everything he had. I moved to the side and he missed my head, and I threw my whole weight behind an uppercut to his temple.

He went flaccid, dropping to the ground. I leaned over him and put my hands on his neck and cut off his air supply. I waited until he stopped breathing and got up.

The room was one big pool of blood. My old sparring partner walked in and looked around and said, 'They were never any good anyway.' Then his eyes darted towards me and said, 'You see, if they had listened to me and hung your head about the mantel, this wouldn't have happened.'

He took a knife out from its scabbard - the one I gave to him for his birthday - and he moved with a speed that I could never match.

I had to take him to the ground.

His first swipe I didn't see coming. It opened my hand from palm to finger and then came back down cutting across my body, blood splashing onto his face. But with his next assault, I blocked the blade and elbowed him in the face and kned him in the ribs. He threw the blade in the air, distracting me, allowing him room to bring his right foot to my face. Blurring my vision. Then he punched me in the stomach and lifted me off my feet, hurling me to the ground. The blade was in his hand again as he went to stab me.

I caught it just before it entered my neck but he was stronger than me and I couldn't stop it entirely. Closer and closer it got to my neck. I shifted all my body weight so the blade slit my neck from under my chin to my ear, then I punched his left eye with all my force. I knocked the blade out of his hand.

He started rain punches down on me, from everywhere. Too fast. I couldn't stop them. There was so much blood in my mouth, it felt like I was choking.

And then his hands fastened around my neck and started to squeeze. I tried to breath but I couldn't. My desperation for air was overwhelming. I started to hit him with everything I had, looking for a soft spot. But he was too sturdy. My face was going red, my ears where ringing, my head was spinning and hazy. Everything started to seem unreal, like a dream world.

I stopped hitting him and my arms fell flat out on the ground. I had given up. There was nothing I could do. All my senses were shutting down.

But then I felt the gun right under my left hand. I picked it up with what strength I had left and aimed it at his heart. I pulled the trigger.

CLICK.

An empty chamber echoed around the hall.

I saw his eyes stare at the gun and then meet mine with fury, as I pulled the trigger a second time.

The shot blasted into him and the fury disappeared from his eyes. It became shock and then remorse. His grip loosened and I took in as much air as I could, as if it was my first time breathing.

Then my best friend walked in with a smile on his face and said, 'I have been watching this on the camera and I have to say I am very impressed indeed. I thought you would be dead long ago. But here you are, all bloody and partly alive. For now, anyway. I would just like to take this opportunity to tell you it was never about the money there

was no hit on our head. I just wanted to get rid of the competition so I set you up. And, oh, how well it worked! Everyone believed me. It didn't work out too well for them from the looks of things now, but I have got what I want. No competition and a load of money.'

I stood up, using the wall to support me. I looked at the ground and said, 'I would have done anything for you. I would have died for you.'

He chuckled and with a scary smile said, 'It's a good thing you are alive then. I wouldn't want to disappoint.'

He walked over and put his hand on my neck and took out a jewel incrustated blade with the engraving A PERSON WILL LIVE FOREVER IF HE LIVES HIS LIFE WELL.

He looked at me and shoved the blade into my abdomen, leaned into my ear and whispered, 'Your father didn't leave you. I killed him because I knew you would be great, just as he was. And I wanted a companion. This blade that is in you now was meant to be your 18th birthday present.'

He let out a puff of a laugh and said, 'Happy Birthday.'

He turned to go but I tugged on his shoulder and when he turned back to me I pulled the blade from my body and thrust it into his chest, separating his heart in two. All he could do was gag and cough up blood and collapse.

I fell to the floor unable to move, my mind just idle and useless. Then I heard an ambulance in the distance.

Who called them?

They say when you die your life flashes before your eyes but I don't think that is true. I think it's that you take a real look at your life and what it means and how you have lived

it. Everything that is important to you, and those people who are the ones who made your life what it is. Just them.

I started to think of my kids and how I would never get to see to them again, or how I would miss their birthdays and Christmases. All I wanted to do was make sure they were safe and had a good life. And my wife too. I remembered her as I would stare into her bold, chestnut eyes with inconspicuous irises that blend in so well it overwhelms. Her beauty so pure that not even Portia could rival it; her faint, faultless eyelashes that when fluttering puffed you away like a hurricane and brought you to your knees in awe. And the smell of her VIP 212 that always enticed me when she would walk past. Her weird sense of humour that would always bring a smile to my face.

I thought of the old man and what he said about how to live life, and not waste it. And in a pool of my own blood, I began to reflect on my choices, as I drifted in and out of consciousness.

Have I made the right choice? Is this the end?

I expelled a single tear. It slid calmly down my face, traversing all my imperfections and the choices that lead me here, the tear turning crimson with blood.

I am still young.

The ambulance men rushed in, appalled by the chaos. They saw me and rushed over as the blackness consumed me.

WAR

Reporting For Duty

Oskar Puszcz

So, they thought I was finished, didn't they? Well they might just be interested to know that I have made three hits in the past seven days, and I wasn't spotted.

Vietnam was a challenge. Not a lot of cover or vantage points, but I'd done what I was there to do; to fight for my country and assassinate generals.

I was discharged just because I caught a bullet in the leg from return fire. I was keeping cover in an old tree house, I was looking out for Vietnamese patrols nearby and informing my general about their location, but the sunlight reflected off my scope and gave away my position, a few moments later I found myself being shot at from all angles. I was lucky to make it out alive, my ghillie suit blended in well with the dark green bushes. I spent several weeks in the field hospital and later I was discharged from duty.

It was nice of them to find me a job as a security man in my local mall but what about all the things I did over the past three years in the war? The times I had to lie unmoving in the dirty Vietnamese soil for hours every day?

They didn't think I was unfit for duty when I was left alone deep in the heart of enemy territory with my sniper and a few rounds of ammunition. The times when I had to wait for darkness to fall so that I could make my way back to our camp.

A doctor declaring I was mentally unstable and that war wasn't my thing? I was born a cold-blooded killer.

Well I was going to prove them wrong!

Last night I cleaned and tested my weapon. It worked perfectly. I paid a lot for it, only the best sniper was good enough for my purposes. I can't afford to miss a shot not when I'm exposed out there in the bushes.

When I went back to camp I saw sad and petrified faces, I knew they needed my help. I went straight to see the commander to ask him to let me return to the sniper unit. The commander was surprisingly happy to see my face, he knew what I was capable of and he knew I could help win this war. I went back out to the woods. I scouted the area and my position on the map; I knew this was the perfect spot.

I lay back, deep in the woods no more climbing trees for me now as I had a damaged leg but I was fine as I was.

From down the track came the sound of approaching enemy soldiers. I knew exactly what my target looked like and I'd waited patiently for him. Slowly they came into view. My target was at the back of the group of five. I held my breath while they slowly passed, chattering away. Then he came, the straggler of the group I slowly raised my weapon and whispered "Psst!" he turned around slowly, facing the direction of the sound. The others had obviously not heard me, but he had.

His eyes opened wide in astonishment as the bullet struck him cleanly between the eyes. He let out a scream, his group ran back to see what was troubling him. I then quickly got up and ran away deep into the woods.

No one saw me, no one heard me. That made four kills this week, and they thought I was finished.

High Value Target

Adam Ledwidge

‘Three. Two. One. Execute!’

That was the last thing I heard before the door charge went off, making my ears ring, followed by Brett saying ‘GO! GO! GO!’

At that moment, training kicked in.

We were getting our gear ready for the operation. Our briefing was short and simple, yet technical at the same time. We all knew the room-clearing drills; the only problem was none of us knew the layout of the inside of the house. But we were trained for this kind of scenario.

I spent the final few hours going over my gear making sure I had everything ready to go. On my chest rig, I carried twelve P-Mags for my rifle, each holding around thirty rounds each. Door charges were next. I carried some back-up door charges for the demolition guy in our squad whose job is breaching. A bolt-cutter was on my back, a couple of glow-sticks on the upper part of the front of my chest rig. We used glow-sticks for marking areas; if a room was cleared a glow-stick would be placed at the foot of the door. Flippers were attached on a carbineer to the side of my chest rig, as for this operation. We would be jumping into the ocean. Last thing on my check list was to check if my

push to talk communications were working, picking up all the frequencies well.

My rifle was next to check. Like most others in the squad I used a HK416. On the 416 I had an IR (infra-red) and a laser designator, holographic sight with a x4 magnifier, which could be flipped on a hinge to the side of the rifle if I didn't need magnification. The rifle had a Sure Fire Suppressor on it and a fore grip to help manage with the barrel lift when I let off a few rounds.

Pistol, check. My pistol was a Sig Sauer P226.

Helmet: blood-group patch was attached to my helmet including two lights, an IR strobe and night vision goggles.

I then lay on my bed listening to Red Hot Chili Peppers until it was time.

23:30. Time to go. I put on all my gear weighing around one hundred pounds, and lastly I attached a Garmin GPS to my left wrist, above my watch, to help me navigate. No one was talking, just the odd nod of the head signalling, 'Let's do this.'

This was it. We were told it would be a fifty per cent chance he would be there, forty per cent chance it was some Arabian drug trafficker and ten per cent chance it was some Taliban member high up in the ranks.

I heard the helicopter engines roar into life. We were based on a ship off the west coast of Africa at an undisclosed location. We would be dropping off the coast of Somalia. Cramming into the helo (helicopter) was always a pain; trying to get everyone with all their gear to fit in a little metal box is not fun. After around forty minutes the

shudder of the helicopter became second nature. 'FIVE MINUTES.' shouted the pilot.

I looked out the window; complete darkness. My adrenaline began to pump, running over everything last minute in my head. 'TWO MINUTES, CHECK GEAR.' shouted Brett.

Brett made sure my gear was secured to my body and I made sure his was too. We didn't want our gear falling off in the ocean. The rope master opened the door and I was hit with a cold, salty wall of air. We were jumping four miles off the coast so no one could hear the rotor noise from the helicopter. 'GO!'

We all took a leap of faith into the dark abyss beneath us, suddenly plunged into the freezing cold ocean.

As soon as I surfaced, I got a face full of water spray created by the helicopters rotors. I took a quick look at my Garmin GPS to see which way we had to swim. We all began to swim, not too fast, not too slow, we were pacing ourselves. The ocean was surprisingly calm, no big waves, just the odd cross current you would get caught in for a few meters forcing you to redirect onto the correct path. The moon was behind us for the whole thirty minute swim acting like a natural torch.

We reached the shore. Silence. We all stopped for a couple of minutes to sort out our gear and to attach night vision goggles to our helmets. It took my eyes a while to adjust to the bright green haze of the night vision goggles but I grew immune to it.

The target building was around six kilometres away and between us and it was a barren wasteland and a small village. From here on out, it was hand signals only, no talking.

We were walking through the barren wasteland like watchdogs, responding to every sound we heard. The town came into sight. I began to hear dogs barking. They must have heard or smelled us. As we got closer to the town I could start to make out windows on houses. The town looked dilapidated, dogs still barking. When we reached the edge of the town, everyone took a knee in a small circle. Brett was point man so he began to lead us toward the target building. I was second in line, meaning I would enter any door we pass through behind Brett. The town was silent, everyone sleeping. Our IR lasers were tracing every building and window. The target building came into site. It stood out from every other house in the town. It was a large, three story house with a very large wall on the outside. The only entry point was a steel gate to the south of the building.

After constant weaving in and out of cars and rubbish on the road and foot paths, we reached the gate and stacked on the door. Brett stood on the right side of the door while everyone else lined up behind me on the left hand side. Brett nodded and I nodded back. He made a clenched fist and hit it off his helmet several times signalling breach. The man behind me prepared a door charge. He went up to the door and felt the edges to see what side the hinges were on, then placed a strip of explosives on the side with the hinge,

unwinding the wire with him as he stood back in line. Brett spoke, breaking the silence, 'Three. Two. One. Execute!'

That was the last thing I heard before the door charge went off, making my ears ring. Then Brett said, 'GO! GO! GO!'

At that moment training kicked in. Brett charged through the door sticking to the left hand side of the court yard, we all followed right behind him. The court yard was lifeless, only a few old rusty chairs in the centre. We stuck to the left wall of the court yard, slowly making our way to the front door of the house where the power supply for the house was. As soon as we reached the power supply, the demo guy cut the power, leaving the house in complete darkness. The door was very thick steel, with a heavy duty lock on it. The racket our entry made in the court yard was bound to have woken up some of the occupants in the house, so we got a move on. The demo guy attached two charges to the door ensuring it would be blown off its hinges. We all stacked on the door, my adrenaline began to pump and each second began to feel like an hour. Brett nodded signalling breach. There was a concussive force off of this charge. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. The door came flying off its hinges; sending embers flying everywhere, followed by everyone gliding through the door faultlessly.

When we entered the house, Brett stopped, having a domino effect on the squad, making us all stop. There was a deafening silence in the house. We had to clear three large rooms on each floor. During our sweep of the second room on the first floor the silence was broken by what sounded

like two men rustling in the room down the corridor we hadn't cleared yet. Brett looked shocked. We all froze, and tension began to build within the squad. We didn't know whether to let them come to us or whether we should go to them. Brett decided we should move up on the targets. We were like ghosts, moving swiftly and silently down the corridor. The door to the room where the men were was open, making our job easier. We stacked up at the door, one man behind another. I tapped on Brett's shoulder signalling we are all ready. We stormed the room. The two men were not expecting us. They were on the floor before I could even get in the room; Brett dropped both of them in the blink of an eye. I began to identify the bodies, neither of which were the H.V.T (High Value Target).

I took pictures of their faces, well, what was left of their faces. Brett placed two rounds perfectly in each targets head. Fragments of brain and skull littered the blood soaked floor.

There was nothing interesting in the room, just a dresser and a large bed. We did not know where in the house Mullah Abdul Ralha was; the high value target. As we proceeded up the corridor to the stairs, Brett took the clip out of his 416 to make sure he had enough ammo.

Brett and I went up the stairs first, my eyes were beginning to ache from looking through the NVG (Night Vision Goggles) for so long. We were walking like blind people up the stairs, making sure our feet were planted before we made another move as we were so fixed on what would be around the corner. There was a deafening silence falling on the house. We could hear nothing. Brett and I

stood halfway up the stairs, scanning the corridor upstairs. There was not much in the corridor, just a bucket, a mattress on its side up against a wall and a few sheets on top of that. We began to hear faint shuffling, like someone was sliding their feet along the floor. It was very loud in the silent house, followed by a distinct sound of a light switch clicking: 'Click, click. Click, click.'

Then I remembered we had cut the power and someone was trying to use it and it was not one of our guys. Brett and I did not want to move in case we startled the unidentified person. The shuffling began again, getting increasingly louder and louder. Then, 'POP! POP!' followed by a loud clatter of someone falling. Brett charged into the room. I was close on his tail. We were confronted by three women, barley dressed, screaming, holding each other. Brett grabbed them and hauled them into the corner of the room. I stormed on and entered a few rounds into the target's chest, finishing him off.

The screaming was overwhelming. Brett hit the women with the stock of his rifle to shut them up. Lights were restored in the house and I positively identified the body as Mullah Abdul Ralha.

Brett and I were in awe. We had been searching for this guy for around six years, now that hunt was over.

I took several photos of what was left of Ralha's face. There were two entry holes in the left hand side of his head where Brett must have shot him as he peered through the door, then six entry holes in his chest where I was confirming he was dead.

The rest of the house was searched. We stripped the house down looking for intel but found very little. Just a few diaries and hard drives, and lots of his children at the far side of the house on the third floor.

Blood red smoke was thrown in the court yard and I signalled over the radio to the heli-pilots we were ready to roll out. The helicopters landed with a thunderous roar and Ralha's remains were thrown into the AH-60 Blackhawk. Our ride back to the carrier was quiet, no one really spoke.

At this point you would probably think it's all over but when we got back to Virginia it took twice as long; debriefing, mission reports and sorting out all that we found in Ralha's house.

That was an account of one of many missions I have carried out yet there are hundreds more that no one can ever know about.

DRAMA

An extract from:

The Forgotten Army of Nicolas Harney

Mark Richardson

BACKGROUND

'The Forgotten Army of Nicolas Harney' is a play about a homeless man living on the streets of Dun Laoghaire. Through rhyme, he tells the touching, humorous tale of how he got to where he is today. The streets have taught Nicolas a lot about appreciating life and how priceless your family, friends and health are. He has learned the cold, harsh reality of the world. He tries to reconcile the coldness he once felt internally due to the death of his father, night after night as he sleeps in cold shop doorways. The audience are invited to listen to Nicolas's story as he takes them on a journey of thought and wonder into his life.

SETTING

The play is set on a gritty old grey street, covered in litter. At this point in the play, in the corner of the stage lays a considerable amount of ripped, soggy cardboard and on top of that a brightly coloured, tattered sleeping bag. There is a white polystyrene cup in front of the sleeping bag, smudged in black fingerprints, containing a few measly copper coins, appearing solid at the bottom of the cup. The stage is gloomy and grey, the sleeping bag being the only real

source of colour. Where we are joining the play; there is a tall, scrawny figure looming large centre stage. His clothes are dark in colour, covered in dirt. His physical features are rigid, his hair short. He exerts confidence as he speaks in a thick inner city Dublin accent, through rhyme.

CONTEXT

We join the play at various points in Nicolas' story. In the following parts of the play he talks about his home life, his school life and how he feels living on the streets. The tempo in his voice changes drastically throughout the play relative to what he's talking about. In the first segment we pick up the play as Nicolas has just become acquainted with his audience and set off to begin his tale. He constantly makes eye contact with the audience and tries to connect with them; he wants them to feel what it's like for a man like himself.

Nicolas Harney

I was born and raised in a town called Balrooney, by me ma Trish and me da Roody. My da left when I was four, him and me ma selfishly couldn't settle a score and what's more, the bastard left me brother Lar, Me and me Ma poor! Every day for three months I sat and waited for that lad to walk back through that door, cause from that day on, living at home was like being in the front line of a war.

Me ma and me brother were constantly at each other's throats, as I would sit there quietly not letting me feelings come afloat! Lar was like me father figure, the one I wanted to resemble when I got bigger. Despite the fact he tormented me ma, he was good to the family, he made up for me long lost da.

Growin' up was tough in Balroony, I didn't have any mates at the start, No-one would talk to me. I'd get teased and bullied in the Balroony School, no-one thought I was one bit cool, they'd push me around and make me the fool, I can still hear their prepubescent voices callin' out 'yih ugly mule'. I hated that school...it was things like that as well as me da leavin' which enlightened me how people can be cruel.

From a young age I realised that to fit in I had to follow the crowd, even if that meant being obnoxious and loud, I'd slag the smart kids and sometimes even beat them around...believe me, I'm not proud. It still troubles me mind. I vowed to me self after that I'd always stay kind and

never blind, to the way I was treatin' other people, because
I of all people know that words can be lethal.

When I was young I was ignorant, free and cheery, I never pictured me self livin' on the streets of Dun Laoghaire. It ain't as hard as people think, but then again, everyone has those days when they're drivin' to the brink. On the streets I learned life's true meanings; your life is priceless, love one another and respect people's feelings. I watch people pass me every day, the majority of them don't even look or say 'hey', but that's okay, they're just disillusioned: they think only bad men live on the street, that's their confusion. But me Berty, Beckham and Joe Soap are all the same, and I hope you understand that before you label me with a name.

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