

**NOT SUITABLE FOR
YOUNGER READERS**

ROBERT MUCHAMORE



HOME

**THREE THOUSAND KILOMETRES OF JUNGLE
TWO BOYS
ONE WAR
NO WAY HOME**

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Authors Note:

This is a draft of a complete novel. It has not been copy edited and so contains many small errors and mistakes. I hope you enjoy it anyway!

1. MAPS

On a map, central Africa seems the same as anywhere else. Countries, rivers, cities, railway lines and roads. But these countries barely even exist. Governments are powerless. Roads are grown over. The cities are sewers and the railway tracks all got stolen and melted for scrap.

Only two things really matter: guns and food. There are plenty of guns and not much food. If you don't have both, you won't live long.

2. CORRUPTION

The heat whacks you in the tunnel between the plane and the terminal. Fifty miles off the equator, your lungs need a few breaths to get used to it. My little brother, Adam, had himself in a state thinking he'd left his Gameboy on the plane. Half his stuff fell out of his pack when he unzipped it to check. All the other passengers had to step over him while he scooted around picking everything off the floor. Dad was way ahead. You always got the sense he'd be miles in front before he missed you.

'It's in there,' Adam said, standing back up.

He'd checked a thousand times already. He was more worried about losing the Gameboy than about all the injections before we left. Truth told, I was the one scared of injections, even though I was fifteen and Adam was only eight.

The airport was in a right state. It smelled like rotting food and piss. The carpet was all threads and crumbling black rubber. There were a few broken chairs and the TVs that showed flight information were either busted or stolen. All the shops were boarded up, but a woman in a headscarf sold fizzy drinks off a stall built from plastic crates.

We caught Dad up. He was smiling, shaking the hand of an airport guide.

'Mr Leconte, we meet again,' Dad said. 'These are my sons: Jake and Adam.'

'Ah Haaaa,' Mr Leconte beamed. 'Two handsome fellows.'

Mr Leconte shook our hands. His gut hung over his belt and his peach coloured shirt was covered with dark sweat patches. I'd learned the language from my parents, but the city dialect was a bit different. Mr Leconte rattled off words faster than my brain could grab them.

'You're almost as big as your Father,' Mr Leconte said, looking at me.

It was only true if almost as tall meant thirty centimetres shorter. My Dad was massive. When I was little Dad told me he could have been a heavyweight boxing champion if he'd wanted to. I believed him until Mum heard about it; she practically fell off her chair laughing at the thought.

'Boys, luck is on our side today,' Dad said. 'Mr Leconte is the man I always hope to meet when I get off the plane.'

Dad had warned us that getting out of the airport with your luggage and dignity intact was tricky. There were soldiers, police, customs and military police, plus the people working for the airline and the baggage handlers. Most of them were trying to steal your stuff or get a bribe. If you got the bribes wrong you ended up paying a fortune, or you didn't pay enough and got put in a five hour queue waiting to be strip searched. An airport guide knows who to pay and how much to pay them. With a bit of luck, you're through customs and out the door in a few minutes.

Nobody bothered to hide the fact they were taking bribes. Mr Leconte's first trick was five dollars in the palm of an airline employee. This got us access to a small staircase, which led onto the tarmac where the bags were being taken off our plane. The jet engines turned gently, wafting the sickly smell of aviation fuel through the boiling air.

Once our bags emerged, Me, Dad and Mr Leconte grabbed two each. Mr Leconte gave a few bank notes to the baggage handlers. We crossed the tarmac, passing under the tails of three more jets, before going onto another staircase. By the time we made it up, my arms felt like they were coming out of their sockets.

Two government soldiers stood at the top of the stairs. Soldiers were everywhere in the city, wearing identical green uniforms, with cheap rubber boots and sunglasses. These two had M16 assault rifles slung across their chests. One soldier put our bags on a trolley. The other one palmed fifty dollars from Mr Leconte.

This part of the airport was deserted. It was built specially for the President and VIPs. There was air conditioning, fancy halogen lamps and TV's showing a dubbed episode of Friends. Adam jumped on top of the luggage cart. Dad wheeled him towards the customs gate.

Mr Leconte waved money at a man standing in front of an x-ray machine. Judging by the braids and stripes on his uniform, he was someone important. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it started getting heated.

'What's the problem?' Dad asked.

'I always pay him a hundred dollars,' Leconte said. 'Today he wants a hundred, for each of you.'

'You can have one twenty-five,' Dad said angrily. 'And that's daylight robbery.'

The customs man looked at Dad as if he was something he'd scraped off his shoe.

'There's a four hour queue to get out of the main exit,' the customs man said, casually. 'Pay me three hundred, or go back and stand in line.'

'I know the Minister of the Interior,' Dad said. 'I could make life very difficult for you.'

The customs man gave Dad a giant smile, 'I also know the Interior Minister very well. I am even better acquainted with my Brother in Law, the President of this country.'

Dad couldn't trump that. He looked furious.

'What about two hundred gentleman?' Mr Leconte suggested, trying to smooth things over.

The customs man eyeballed Dad:

'No. This man dared threaten me. Now he must pay four-hundred dollars, or we will begin carefully inspecting his luggage.'

'Two fifty,' Dad said.

The customs man clicked his fingers. A soldier sitting behind the x-ray machine stood up and pointed his gun at Dad. Adam looked frightened and started sniffing.

'OK, OK.' Dad said. 'Four-hundred dollars.'

Dad reached in his pocket and handed over the cash. I told Adam to stop balling and pushed the trolley through the gate.

‘I think the customs man is drunk,’ Mr Leconte said. ‘Normally he’s very reliable. You’re a good client Mr Pascal. Forget my fee this time and I’m sorry for the unpleasantness.’

‘Not your fault,’ Dad grinned.

Dad patted Mr Leconte’s shoulder and tucked a roll of banknotes into his shirt pocket. Then he looked at his Rolex.

‘Twenty-one minutes to get out of the airport,’ Dad smiled. ‘Not a bad way to spend six-hundred dollars.’

Six-hundred dollars local currency was about forty pounds.

We piled our luggage into a battered Toyota taxi for the short drive to the cargo terminal. Dad let me sit up front next to the driver. He put his arm around Adam in the back.

‘What are you upset for, little soldier?’ Dad asked.

‘I thought that man was gonna shoot you.’ Adam sniffled.

‘Bullets bounce off me,’ Dad said. ‘I’m made of steel.’

Dad thumped his chest. Adam broke out in a little smile.

‘We should have gone to Disneyworld again,’ Adam said. ‘They never try and shoot you there.’

Dad’s huge laugh boomed around the inside of the cab.

‘Bloody Disneyworld. Never again,’ Dad laughed. ‘Forty bloody minutes in a queue for a ride that lasts thirty seconds. That place made me absolutely *insane*.’

Dad squeezed Adam and kissed his cheek.

‘Don’t you want to see your Grandma? And play with all your cousins?’

Adam smiled for Dad, but neither of us wanted to be here. Mum said she’d never go to Africa again. The last time she came, her wedding ring got stolen from the hotel room and some guy attacked her in the street. I don’t remember the trip, I was only a baby. Adam wasn’t even born.

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Dad was in the import-export business. His company bought up empty space on container ships and sent junk to Africa. Poor man’s gold, Dad called it: worn tyres, used shoes, clothes, old fridges and microwaves, date expired tins of food.

You might throw away your hair drier, food mixer or whatever. It’s too much bother to get them repaired. But in Africa, there are men who strip all this stuff down and make it work again. Fill a container up with the right kind of junk, send it to Africa and you can make serious money.

Dad got rich off junk. He got a different Mercedes every year. Mum drove a big Range Rover. Me and Adam went to public school and we were always going abroad on holiday.

The business worked out of a semi-derelict warehouse at the back of Kings Cross station, in London. When I was little, I used to love running around inside. The roof leaked and I had to wear wellies because the

floor was all muddy. People turned up all day long; from dustmen with collections of small electricals they'd found on their route, to huge lorries filled with cans of food.

The woman who drove the forklift used to let me sit on her lap as she picked the pallets out of the trucks. At one time my biggest ambition was to be allowed to touch all the levers and drive the forklift myself.

Course, by the time I was old enough to drive it, playing in a cold, muddy warehouse wasn't my idea of fun anymore. At fifteen I had this big fantasy about how my life would go. I'd pass all my A-levels, study business and economics at university, then get a job at a merchant bank that paid big bucks. I'd wear handmade £1,500 suits, have my own executive box at the Arsenal and be married to a stunning babe who was resident DJ in a nightclub. I'd give Adam my share of the junk business when Dad retired; I wouldn't need the money.

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The tails of the cargo planes poked over the opposite side of the terminal building. The taxi driver piled our luggage on the pavement. It was a single storey building a couple of hundred meters long, but one end had burned out in a fire. A few families lived amongst the wreckage, in homes built from charred scraps. Two raggedy kids sat against the terminal wall, begging.

'Why can't they live in houses?' Adam asked.

'Probably farmers,' Dad explained. 'There's a war between the government and rebels from the east. Soldiers destroy farms and steal all the food. The farmers that don't get killed run away to the city, but there's no work here and nowhere for them to live.'

Dad went in his trousers, peeled a five dollar note off his roll of cash and handed it to Adam.

'See if that cheers them up.'

The beggars were about Adam's age, but he probably weighed more than the pair of them. Adam was scared to go near them for some reason, he tugged my hand.

'Come with us, Jake.'

The beggars looked worried as we approached. Loads of people must have given them a hard time. Adam reached out with the note and the bony little faces lit up like it was Christmas, Easter and pancake Tuesday rolled into one. One kid swept the note from Adam's fingers and ran away. The other one scratched around on the concrete, picking up about fifteen cents in coins that people had dropped around him. When the boys were about ten metres away, they stopped running and waved at us.

'Thank you Sirs.'

Then they disappeared into one of the little shacks.

'How much is five dollars in English money?' Adam asked.

'About forty pence,' Dad said. 'It's enough to buy half a sack of rice. They'll eat well for the next few days.'

'Then what?' Adam asked.

Dad didn't answer.

People rushed up to Dad as soon as he stepped inside the cargo terminal. A couple of guys grabbed our luggage. Before I knew it, half a dozen sweaty men were shaking my hand and patting my shoulder. Adam got it even worse. One guy picked him up and started carrying him around to some office women who gave him kisses. The look on Adam's face was priceless. In England, Dad was a wealthy businessman and people respected him, but here it was like he was a pop star.

Once things settled down we got taken through to Dad's office. Two guys sat at one end with their heavy boots on a glass topped coffee table. They both held glasses of scotch. Dad introduced us.

'My bodyguards, Tim and Banky,' Dad explained. 'They'll keep us safe while we're staying at Grandma's.'

The two guys crushed my hand as they shook it. They looked like absolute nutters. They both wore black fatigues, and had machine guns, hunting knives, pistols, ammo belts and grenades hanging off every place you could think of and probably a few you couldn't. Adam was in love. He squeezed between Tim and Banky on the sofa and started pointing at all the weapons asking what they were called and what they did.

Dad got a satellite phone out of his desk. It was about 3 times the size of a normal mobile, and would work anywhere on the planet. You could get normal telephones in the city, but they were so unreliable you used a satellite phone if you were rich enough to have one.

Dad threw me the handset.

'Call your Mum. It's five quid a minute, so cut down on the rabbit.'

The number was in the speed dial. Mum picked up after a couple of rings.

'Hey Mum, it's me, we're here.'

'At Grandma's?'

'No, were still in the city. The flight from Paris was delayed five hours.'

'How's Adam?'

'He slept most of the way. He's hanging off my waist wanting to talk to you. I'll put him on.'

'OK Jake. See you in three weeks. Keep safe.'

'No worries Mum. Love you... Here's Adam.'

3. FLIGHT

Dad's company had three small cargo aeroplanes. They were Douglas DC3s; mirror finished, with Air Amanda logos and beautiful women with giant afros airbrushed on the sides. Amanda was my Mum's first name. The planes were over sixty years old, with a propeller engine under each wing. Dad could have afforded newer planes, but he was a complete DC3 nerd. He had loads of books on them at home, there was a mahogany model of one on the desk in our study and he even belonged to the DC3 owners club.

It was a buzz standing on the tarmac looking at Dad's planes. I'd only seen pictures before. They were probably the cleanest, best maintained things I saw my whole time in Africa.

Our plane was packed with cargo, waiting to leave. The pilot was this old white guy with a beard. Dad sat next to him in the front with Adam on his lap. I got into a battered jump seat behind the pilot. All the ancient switches and dials were lit up, and there was this great smell of old leather and oil. Banky and Tim had to make the best of it amongst the pallets in the cargo bay.

Outside, someone pulled the blocks out from under the wheels. The pilot started the engines. After a few metres taxiing, he turned onto the runway and opened up the throttles. The runway was full of cracks. The plane juddered over every one. I put my hands over my ears to cut out the noise.

It got smoother once we were off the ground. We had to stay low, to avoid the jets coming in and out of the main terminal. The city beneath us was a desperate place. Millions of shacks built out of timber and plastic sheets, open sewers and mountains of rubbish everywhere. Within a few minutes, the city was gone and all that lay ahead were thousands of miles of jungle, broken occasionally by farming villages and giant square holes cut out by logging companies.

The little plane stayed well below the clouds. The scenery was amazing: huge birds circling over the canopy of trees, mountains with giant waterfalls spewing into rivers. It was so beautiful it did my head in. I was finally starting to like the idea of Africa; experiencing a different way of life and meeting Dad's family. Most people would never get a chance to see stuff like this. I felt guilty that all I'd done was moan that we weren't going to Spain or Florida.

'I need to go,' Adam said.

There was no toilet on the plane. Dad had brought an empty plastic Coke bottle. Adam stood in the corner behind Dad and peed into it. He was shaking himself off when there was a grinding noise, like a car missing a gear. I looked out the side of the plane in time to see the right propeller shatter and a ball of flame blasting back under the wing. My guts shot into my mouth. About ten buzzers and alarms started going off.

'Extinguishers,' the pilot shouted.

Dad pulled on a lever above his head. A sea of white foam squirted out around the engine, quenching the flames almost instantly.

'Shit,' Dad laughed, holding his hand over his chest. 'My old heart can do without too many of those.'

'Think we hit a bird or something,' the pilot said. 'Are you boys OK?'

We were both shaken up. Adam got back on Dad's lap and gave him a hug.

'Can we fly on one engine?' I asked.

'We can even take off with one engine with a long enough runway,' the pilot said. 'Although we're much slower. It's safest if we put down at the nearest airstrip and get one of the other planes to fly up with a mechanic.'

'How do we know if it's safe when we land?' Dad asked. 'There's a bloody war going on down there. If the rebels are controlling that area, they'll steal the plane and probably kill us as well.'

'You've got Banky and Tim, and it's mostly government controlled until you get much further east,' the pilot said.

'I've heard stories about DC3's flying thousands of miles on one engine,' Dad said.

The pilot weighed it all up:

'I suppose the chances of rebels ambushing us at an airstrip are a lot greater than the chances of the other engine failing; besides your sons look tired. Let's finish the journey and sort out the aeroplane in the morning.'

With one engine the plane was quieter. It felt skittish, like it was fighting against the wind. The pilot calculated the journey would take an extra hour on one engine, two hours altogether.

The sunset over the jungle was about the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Deep oranges and purples flooding over the scenery, but the transition from bright sunlight to blackness only took a few minutes. We'd been travelling for twenty hours, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

I was woken up by Dad shouting. There was no engine noise, just air rushing against the outside of the plane.

'I'm trying to restart it,' the pilot said.

Dad hammered a gauge with his knuckle, hoping it wasn't telling the truth.

'There's no pressure in the fuel system,' Dad said.

The pilot was frantically rocking switches and pulling levers. Banky's head came in through the cockpit door.

'Is that the other engine gone?'

'We're working on it,' the pilot shouted. 'No need to panic yet.'

'Adam, I need you out of the way,' Dad said 'Go and sit with Jake.'

Adam scrambled onto my lap and put his arm round my neck.

'How long can we stay up without engines?' I asked.

'We're not that high. Ten, maybe twelve minutes,' the pilot said. 'I don't think we'll be able to restart. There's three parachutes in the back. If anyone wants to jump, they've got to do it in the next four minutes or we'll be too low.'

'But there's six of us,' I said. 'Why only three parachutes?'

'It's a cargo plane,' Dad said. 'Two crew, one passenger.'

'There's a chute for the two boys,' the pilot said. 'Third chute is between you and the two bodyguards. You'll have to draw lots.'

Adam's fingers dug into my back. I don't know why it took so long, but it only hit me now that most of us were going to die. I had this image in my head of my class coming back after summer holidays. My desk is empty and my form teacher is telling everyone that I'm dead. I started to shake all over.

'What about you?' Dad asked.

The pilot smiled, 'The Captain always goes down with his ship. I'll keep this crate up for as long as I can; try and ditch somewhere flat. You never know, we might get a miracle.'

We heard this rushing noise from the back of the plane. Dad opened the door into the cargo bay. Banky and Tim had put on parachutes and opened the rear passenger door.

Banky jumped out. Tim gave my Dad an arrogant wave and followed him into the blackness. Me and Adam were standing behind Dad. We both worked it out instantly: Dad had to pick one of us to get the last parachute.

'Jake, come here.' Dad shouted.

Dad grabbed the parachute. I couldn't look back at Adam. I put my arms through the shoulder straps and Dad fastened the harness around my stomach. I wondered why he'd picked me, Adam was the littlest.

'Don't pull the cord straight away.' Dad said, placing it in my hand. 'If you don't build a bit of speed first, the parachute will tangle up. But don't leave it too long. Count to about six seconds after you jump, then pull.'

'OK,' I said.

It was hard to speak. There were tears round my eyes, but I was too shocked to sob.

'Adam, come here,' Dad shouted.

Dad had a plan. He got Adam to jump onto me, wrap his arms around my shoulders and lock his feet together behind my thighs. Our noses were almost touching. Dad stripped his belt out of his trousers. It was big enough to go around both our tummies. Dad strapped us together so tight we could hardly breathe.

'Grip each other as tight as you can. If the rush of air gets between your bodies, it will tear you apart.'

I nodded.

'Have you still got the cord in you hand?'

'Yes Dad,' I said.

'How many seconds Jake?'

'Six seconds,' I said

'Try and bend your knees when you hit the ground.'

'What about all the trees?' I asked.

'You've just got to hope for the best.'

I couldn't see where I was going because Adam's head was in the way, and I could hardly stand with all the weight strapped to me. Dad shoved his Swiss army knife in the back of my shorts.

'You might need that,' Dad said.

The pilot shouted in from the cockpit, 'Going below safe parachute height in about fifteen seconds.'

Below a certain height, you smash into the ground before the parachute has time to slow you down. I stood in the open doorway, the air was pushing me back inside.

'Good luck boys.'

I saw Dad's face for the last time as he kissed us both on the cheek.

'Look after each other. I love you.'

'I love you Dad,' I shouted over the wind

'Five seconds to go,' the pilot shouted. 'Get them out of here, now.'

It was pitch black. I'd die if I stayed on the plane, but I still didn't have the guts to jump. Dad gave me an almighty shove and I started to fall.

I was absolutely shitting myself. It was dark, the wind blasted my ears. Then I realised, I'd forgotten to count. How long had it been? Were we going fast enough?

'Pull it now you idiot,' Adam shouted, 'It's already eight seconds.'

I yanked the cord. It seemed to take forever, but the silk spilled out behind my head. It felt like we were being jerked upwards, but that was the chute slowing our rate of descent.

Now all I could think about was the ground. I'd seen loads of war movies and people who parachuted into trees always seem to end up getting strangled. I couldn't see what was below me, but in the middle of the jungle, crashing into trees seemed like a good bet.

I felt my trainer hit something, then it was like we were getting sucked into tunnel of leaves. Adam was screaming in my ear. I felt this sharp pain like someone had torn off the back of my head. I was out cold.

4. TREES

It was light when I came around. Adam must have hit the release. The parachute was trapped in the leaves about ten metres above. The back of my head surged with the most unbelievable pain. I ran my hand around. There was a flap of loose flesh hanging off the back of my head and dried blood soaked through my t-shirt. I'd also got burns across my back where Dad's belt snapped.

I turned my head a bit. I was about two metres off the ground, suspended awkwardly between branches. There was no sign of Adam, but the trees cut out most of the light and it was tough to see. I grabbed one branch with both hands, then pulled my legs off the other one so I was dangling by my fingers. I let go and tried to land upright, but I'd lost loads of blood and there was no strength in me. I rolled up on the ground, coughing.

My legs and arms started tickling. Hundreds of insects crawled onto me. Spiders, beetles, flies, giant millipedes, ants. I was desperate to get up, but I was too weak to move. Then they started getting in places. In my ears, up my shorts, down my back.

I don't now how long I was out for. Adam pinched my cheek to wake me up.

'Are you dead Jake?'

I could hear him, but everything looked blurry and my mouth wouldn't move.

'Jake.'

'Jake... Please wake up.'

Adam sounded really desperate.

'Please wake up Jake.'

I moved my lips and croaked.

'Aaaa.'

Adam smiled a bit.

'You look terrible.' Adam said. 'I tried to find the plane.'

'It's not near here,' I said.

The plane was going at nearly two hundred kilometres an hour. If it crashed five minutes after we jumped out, it would be fifteen kilometres away.

Adam gave me a bit of help to sit up. He started flicking all the bugs off me.

'What's around here?' I asked. 'Did you find any water?'

'Nothing,' Adam said, 'There's trees wherever you go. There's this massive yellow snake up in the branches.'

I leant against a tree trunk and tried to stand. It was roasting and I felt all light headed. I wouldn't last long without something to drink. I dug Dad's knife out of my shorts. It had a tiny compass in the side, as well as a little saw and a blade.

'Pick one direction and try going in a straight line,' I said. 'Hopefully we'll find a path or something.'

'Downhill is easier,' Adam said. 'And it usually leads to water.'

'Who says it leads to water?'

'I learned it at Beavers,' Adam said.

'We'll move as fast as we can. I'm not gonna last long in this state.'

'But what if they're coming to rescue us? Adam asked. 'Shouldn't we stay here?'

'Nobody will come looking out here. Even if they did, how would they spot us under the trees?'

In mature jungle, the giant trees suck all the light and goodness from the soil. Only a few mosses and fungi grow in the creepy spaces between trunks. Adam had to help me move. I found a walking stick, but I was still all over the place. I started wondering if Adam's best chance would be if he went on his own. He'd cover loads more ground without me.

I was so out of it, I don't know how long we walked. I gave up flicking off flies and ticks, there were too many of them. Everything looked like green and orange blurs. My muscles all felt tight and hard. The only thing in my mind was the pain and thirst. Every step was a fight with part of myself that didn't want to carry on and it seemed to keep getting bigger.

There was no water and no sign of rain. More earth, more wood, more steps. Adam's voice begging me to keep going. The jungle went for thousands of kilometres. It felt hopeless: we could be days away from human contact.

Late afternoon we finally reached a dirt road. It was about a truck's width and it was all the excuse my body needed to give up. I collapsed. I ran my hand over my hair and it was dry. My body was too dehydrated to sweat and my skull was hot to touch. I looked for Adam, he was all blurry.

'I'm gonna pass out.'

I rolled on my side and heaved like I was throwing up, but I only managed a dry rasp.

'You better go along the road,' I said. 'Try and find someone before it gets dark.'

'There's tire tracks in the dust,' Adam said. 'We could stay together. Cars must go down here.'

'There's no point me holding you up any more,' I said. 'You'll be as sick as me if you don't get some water soon.'

Adam stood in front of me and put out his hand. I couldn't work out what he wanted.

'Shake hands,' Adam said.

So I did. It seemed weird, I'd never shaken his hand before. Occasionally we hugged, but mostly we got on each others nerves. I was in such a state, Adam was sure I'd be dead before he found help. He thought shaking hands was a proper, grown up, way to say goodbye.

I crawled to the edge of the road and watched until he disappeared around a bend. The last few steps, all I could see was his arm swinging. Once he was gone I slumped into the dust.

When I closed my eyes everything turned white. It felt like all my energy was getting sucked into a hole. I'd seen it on TV; like when people come out of a coma and they describe death as this white light that's calling them. I thought dying would come as a relief, but once I saw the light I was desperate to fight it.

I sat back up and opened my eyes. Every time I felt myself start to drift out of consciousness, I jammed my finger into the cut on my head and the pain and nausea sparked me up. I tried to keep my mind occupied. I started humming a tune. I couldn't work out what it was for ages, then I realised it was the music from the Thomas the Tank Engine video Adam had when he was about three. He'd put the damn video on and watch it over and over, until it made me want to scream. I hated that music, but I couldn't get it out of my head. Then I started imagining I had bottle of Sprite in my hand. Really cold, with all condensation dribbling down the side. Twisting off the plastic lid. Tiny bubbles hitting my top lip and gulping the fizz down my throat.

That's when I heard an engine. I was half convinced it was my head playing tricks. I tried to stand up but I couldn't, so I crawled into the middle of the road and laid on my belly. They either had to stop or run me over.

It was a Subaru pickup. Dents, cracked glass in the windscreen, a sprinkling of bullet holes and bald tyres with repair patches everywhere. The driver was going at about 30 kilometres an hour, which doesn't sound fast, but looks it when you're spraying up dust and jamming into a pothole every few seconds. I thought they were gonna run me over. There was only a couple of meters between me and the radiator when it stopped moving.

A man got out the drivers side of the cab. He looked about seventeen. I found out later he was called Ben. He had army boots, a rifle on his back, camouflage trousers and a filthy Madonna t-shirt full of rips and holes. The passenger was smaller, wearing full camouflage with a pistol drawn. They both looked around, suspecting an ambush. It was only when the smaller one spoke that I realised it was a girl.

'Where did you crawl out from?' The girl asked.

'Water,' I croaked.

'He's worthless Sami,' Ben said. 'I should have squished him. Lets roll.'

Sami walked up. She put her boot on my head, rocked it to one side and inspected the cut.

'He wont last long in that state,' she said. 'Might be kinder if we finish him.'

'Who gives a shit?' Ben laughed, 'Waste of a bullet. Someone's left him out here to die for a reason. He's probably a government traitor.'

Sami crouched down low and pressed the pistol against my temple. She looked about a year older than me. She had big round eyes with curled lashes. It was tough to believe she was about to kill me.

'Looks like the end of the line Mr Traitor,' she said.

'Don't,' I begged. 'Give us some water.'

She got a plastic bottle out of her jacket and rattled the water inside.

'How bad do you want it?' She asked.

'Please,' I gasped.

She unscrewed the lid and tipped some of the water into the dust. I'd have cried if there'd been enough liquid in me to make a tear.

'Spilled some,' she giggled. 'What will you do for me?'

'Anything.'

'Come on Sami,' Ben shouted. 'Were vulnerable out here. Stop messing.'

Sami smiled at me, 'Lick my boot, traitor.'

I crawled forward and ran my tongue up Sami's boot. It was all dusty and smelled like she'd stepped in animal shit or something. She laughed, then handed me the plastic bottle. I drank the whole lot down in three massive gulps. I needed a lot more.

'Screw it,' Sami said. 'Help me load him on the back.'

'You've got to be kidding me,' Ben said. 'He's worthless. What can we do with him?'

'I don't know. He's only a kid. I can't kill him and leaving him here to die is even worse.'

'Fine, give us the pistol and I'll do it,' Ben said. 'We've got to get out of here, we're a sitting target if the army turns up.'

'No. Help us lift him on the back.'

Sami put her hands under my armpits and started dragging me. Ben dashed over and grabbed me by the ankles. I got tossed onto the open rear platform of the pickup, amongst cans of petrol and sacks of food.

They got in the cab, stuck the pickup in gear and tore off. Every bump in the road threw me off the dusty metal floor. Sami slid through the back window of the cab while Ben was still driving and sat near my head.

'So who are you mystery man?' She asked, not expecting an answer.

She undid my G-Shock watch and put it on her arm. Then she went in my shorts and found the knife. She picked out all the different blades and looked impressed.

'That must have cost some serious dollars, traitor,' she said. 'It was worth picking you up just for that.'

She pocketed the knife. Then she cradled my head and tipped more water in my mouth. Half of it missed, because the pickup was jerking everywhere. I coughed a couple of times. She found a piece of fruit in one of the sacks, crushed it in her hand and dribbled the pieces into my mouth. I hadn't eaten for a whole day, it tasted amazing. Then she got a plastic tub out of her jacket and let me suck grains of cooked rice off her fingers.

'My plane crashed,' I gasped.

'I didn't see any plane,' Sami laughed. 'You must think I'm soft in the head.'

The pain was still hell, but my mind felt clearer after a drop of liquid. I knew I had a chance.

'I lost my brother,' I said. 'He walked the way you came. Did you see him?'

Sami shrugged, 'I saw a little guy.'

'He's eight,' I said. 'In a green striped shirt.'

'Yeah.'

‘Can we go back for him?’

‘I should have already killed you,’ Sami said. ‘Don’t push your luck.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Back to our camp. You’re gonna be asked a lot of questions, so you better drop that dumb aeroplane story and start making some sense.’

We turned off the main road into a clearing not much wider than the car. Sami jumped out the back. She moved loads of branches and swung a giant log out the way, revealing another road. I doubt I could have lifted the log, she had biceps like Popeye. Ben drove the car a few meters, then they both got out and replaced the log and everything so the road was hidden again. Sami got back in the cab.

The road was steep; a thirty degree slope. A couple of times the Subaru lost its grip and slid downwards. Ben had to roll back and attack the path at speed. I grabbed the sides of the pickup, frightened I’d get flung out. A can of petrol fell on my guts and my back slammed the metal a couple of times. When the road got too narrow, there was a spot for the pickup to park under trees alongside a truck and a Nissan 4WD. Ben and Sami picked up palms and branches and covered the car with them.

They loaded themselves up with food sacks from the pickup.

‘It’s a kilometre to camp,’ Sami said. ‘Mostly uphill. You up to it?’

‘I’ll try,’ I said.

‘We’ll I’m not carrying you,’ Ben said. ‘And now you know where our camp is, we can’t let you escape. So if you don’t make it...’

Ben made a gun with his fingers and pointed it at my head.

‘Bang.’

5. CAPTAIN

The rebel camp was built around the administrative office of an abandoned copper mine. It was long concrete shed with a corrugated metal roof, surrounded by the shacks where everyone lived. These were made out of scrap: clapboard, wood, plastic sheeting.

I got washed and bandaged by a woman called Amo and her twelve year old son, Beck. They gave me a bowl of hot mashed banana and what looked like white sausages. The cut in my head still killed me and I was covered in insect bites, but it was nothing compared to a few hours earlier. When I closed my eyes the white light wasn't there. If I fell asleep now, it wouldn't be forever.

The sun had gone and the only light came from a couple of flickering candles. I'd been dumped on the floor in the concrete building. Everyone who lived on camp sat around me. Nine People, twelve if you included the little ones fighting sleep. The discussion was about if I should be allowed to live.

Leading the no voters were two guys standing against one wall called Don and Amin. Muscular chests, glazed in sweat. Don said I was a security risk. He offered to take me outside and strangle me. He looked hard enough to do it as well. In fact, he looked hard enough to do it, laugh while he was doing it and never have a twinge of conscience for as long as he lived. Every time I looked their way, their eyes were drilling into me. It was like getting touched by death.

Sami, Beck and Amo reckoned I was harmless; even if they didn't believe I'd jumped out of an aeroplane. Beck was a nice kid, maybe a bit limited in the brains department. He went round with his shoulders slouched and this dippy grin on the end of a skinny neck.

Sami wasn't so much on my side, she was on her own side. Everyone was digging at her, wanting to know why she'd picked me out of the road. I don't think she understood herself. I mean, one minute I was licking shit off her boot, then she's picking me up and feeding me. She had a tough look on her face, but when everyone was having a go at her, she looked close to crying. The others, including Ben, seemed happy to sit back and watch.

It was a lively debate, but this was a fighting unit, not a democracy. The man whose opinion mattered kept his mouth shut. Everyone called him Captain, even Sami who was his daughter. He was the oldest in the room, probably about forty. He was far from the toughest. In fact, he had a few grey hairs and the thick lenses in his black framed glasses made him look like a nerd, but he was smarter than the others and he was a natural leader. You know like in school, all the teachers have the same power to give you detentions and stuff, but some teachers run their class like clockwork and others are kind of a joke; you mess about in class never bother doing their homework. Captain had the same quality as a really tough teacher. When he spoke, it was like everyone took a little breath and had a think about it. I don't think anyone made him the leader, he was born that way.

After half an hour of everyone shouting over each other, Captain got off the floor. The others all shut up. I had my hands clamped tight under my armpits, jiggling my feet. One word and I was a corpse.

'I'll speak to him in my office,' Captain said.

I gasped with relief.

Captain's office was at one end of the building. It looked like the miners had left in a hurry. There was a chair and filing cabinets, faded pictures of copper products on the wall and even a disconnected telephone.

'Sit down Jake,' Captain said.

Captain struck a match and lit a gas lamp. He went in his desk drawer and pulled out a cloth pouch; the kind mechanics use to keep spanners in. He unrolled it on the desk in front of me. There were pliers, a scalpel, a bottle of acid, some knives and what looked like a miniature hand drill. He burrowed down into one of the pouch pockets and held up a tooth between his thumb and forefinger.

'The fellow this tooth belonged to sat where you are right now. He told me lies and died an unpleasant death. So, it will be to your advantage if you tell me the complete truth... Who are you? Start with your name and age.'

I couldn't get my eyes off the tools, imagining all the ways they could tear me apart.

'My name is Jake Pascal,' I stammered. 'I'm 15.'

'Where are you from?'

'London, England.'

'How did you get here from London?'

'By aeroplane, it crashed.'

Captain smiled, 'Still sticking to the aeroplane story?'

'It's the truth. I swear.'

I did think about making up a more believable story, but I knew so little about life round here, I'd only make a fool of myself.

'So where are all the other passengers?'

'My Dad's bodyguards parachuted out. My brother parachuted with me. My Dad and the pilot must have crashed in the plane.'

'Only five on the plane?' Captain asked. 'What kind of plane was that?'

'A DC3.'

Captain seemed to think he'd caught me in a lie. He drummed the pliers on the edge of his desk and smiled.

'A DC3 all the way from London. That's a long way for such a little plane,' he said.

'No, not all the way.'

'So, tell me *exactly* how you got here.'

'Air France from London to Paris, then another plane to the capital and then the DC3 from the cargo terminal.'

'What is the time zone difference between London and here?'

'There isn't one,' I said.

Captain furrowed his brow, searching for another way to catch me out.

'What's the name of the river that runs through the middle of London?'

'The Thames,' I said.

'Give me your training shoe.'

I slid my Nike off my foot and handed it over. Captain pulled out the tongue and read the size label.

'UK size, European size,' Captain said. 'Give me your t-shirt.'

I handed the bloody shirt over the table. Captain inspected the label sewn in the neck, then showed it to me.

'What is this word Jake?'

'Marylebone,' I said.

Captain read part of the label. His English wasn't bad.

'Size: small man. Made in Turkey for BHS Limited, 129-137 Marylebone Road London, NW1 5QD, England.'

He threw the shirt across the desk at me, then rolled up the torture stuff and put it back in his desk.

'So,' he said, smiling. 'You really did fall out of the sky and you've not been sent here as a government spy.'

I smiled with relief, 'No way.'

'So, you want to go home?'

'Course. Maybe I should recover here for a day, then you can take me to the police or whatever.'

Captain laughed noisily, 'You think it's that simple? We drop you at the local airport and they fly you home.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'Things don't work like that here.'

'I realise you're rebels and you don't want to be caught,' I said. 'You can point me in the right direction and I'll walk.'

'We're a guerrilla unit operating deep inside government territory. There's no police force here, just us rebels and the army. The army will ask you for identity papers, which you don't have. I doubt they'll believe your aeroplane crashed; everyone without papers makes some sort of excuse. They will assume you're an anti-government rebel. If you're lucky, the army will shoot you on the spot. If you're unlucky, they'll beat and torture you until you give the location of this camp away.'

I wasn't sure how much to trust Captain.

'So how can I get home?' I asked.

'We're cut off from everyone except a few other rebel units. The only way back to the capital is by road or aeroplane. There are army roadblocks every few kilometres. The nearest landing strip is at an army base 400 kilometres away, but it's under heavy guard.'

'So what can I do?'

'You can stay here with us. We'll feed and protect you. You can do chores around camp. Once we trust you, you will be expected to fight, the same as everyone else.'

'But I don't want to stay here. Maybe I should take my chances with the army.'

Captain suddenly looked serious, 'You've seen our camp. If the army locates us here, they'll kill us. We can't allow you leave here alive.'

'So, what? I'm stuck here forever?'

'No,' Captain said. 'At the moment were cut off from our allies in the east, but the situation changes all the time. When there is an opportunity for you to leave without endangering our security, I promise not to stop you.'

'How long will that be?' I asked.

Captain shrugged, 'Could be a few weeks or a few years. It could be never.'

'Jesus,' I said. 'And what about my brother?'

'How old is he?'

'Eight.'

'We have allies who might have taken him in, and there are a few civilians who might look after him, but it's most likely he was picked up by the army.'

'And they'd kill him,' I said.

'Perhaps. Although his youth might save his skin. The army often makes captured children do their dirty work. Portering, cleaning dishes, digging toilets, that sort of thing.'

'Can I try and find him?'

Captain shook his head, 'I'll put out some feelers to see if anyone knows anything. But the chances of seeing your brother again are not great... I'm sorry.'

Back in the main room, Captain told everyone his decision. All the neutrals pulled into line, but Don and Amin still looked unhappy. Captain called them over.

'Boys,' Captain said. 'Take Jake to your hut. Make sure he's kept busy and if he tries to escape, kill him.'

Don grabbed my shoulder, 'With pleasure.'

Don grinned like he'd been given a new toy to play with.

'Be firm, but don't go mad,' Captain said. 'He's been through a lot and he's still weak.'

Amin twisted my arm behind my back and pushed me to their hut. It was a small shack with an earth floor, two sleeping mats and a cooking stove. There were empty beer bottles everywhere. They took off their boots and the tiny space filled up with the warm stench of feet.

'On the floor,' Don said.

Before I had a chance, Don bundled me down and dug his knee in my back. I don't think he'd washed in his life. The B.O. was gross. He bound my wrists and ankles with strips of cloth.

'Try running now,' Don laughed.

They laid on their sleeping mats and fell asleep quickly, leaving me on the bare earth. Cockroaches the size of credit cards clattered around in the dark. If I rested my head on the baked earth, the cut was agony. I managed to wriggle around and find some clothing. I picked it all up with my teeth and made a soft pile. It stank of sweat, but at least I could put my head down.

6. LESSONS

Dad was on the golf course; it was a hot day. I liked golfing with Dad, even though I sucked. Trouble was, Dad always bumped into his cronies and we had to play as a four. They'd bore the arse off me, going on about mortgages, gardens and wine. The bears were different, the blue one kept hitting the ball into the clubhouse and the yellow one was dancing and complaining that its nose was sunburned. There was a red one in the trees, but I don't remember what it was doing. It was one of those dreams where you wake up and smile a bit as you think about it.

It took a second to remember what was going on: drowning in sweat, the pain in my head, a million insect bites dying to be scratched; cloth tearing into my wrists and ankles. There was a tiny set of lizard eyes glowing a few centimetres from my nose. I moved, trying to get comfortable and it scampered away, feet scratching the earth.

Two days earlier I thought I was something. A bright kid, rich background. I had good mates. Mum gave me plenty of money, so I always had whatever CD's and games I wanted and cool clothes. If I laid awake at night, it was usually worrying about an exam the next day, or because I'd fallen for some girl. But now, for the first time in my life, I had real problems. If I messed up here, I wasn't gonna get detention or get shouted at by Dad. I was going to die.

The two slabs of muscle sweating and farting on either side of me didn't care if I lived. I had no way home. Dad was dead. Mum probably thought I'd been killed in the crash. I was trying not to even think about Adam; but trying not to think about something always makes it worse. He might be fast asleep in a friendly house, or dead; or that very moment some drunk soldier could be slicing lumps out of him.

I couldn't take it. I felt like a tiny helpless speck. I wanted to cry, but I'd get slapped if I woke up Don or Amin. The same thoughts churned over and over and always led to the same conclusion: I wished I'd stayed on the plane and died quickly like Dad.

...

It didn't feel like I'd been back to sleep long. Don jammed his big toe in my ribs.

'Move it.'

There was no window, but plenty of light came through the gaps between the wooden sides of the hut. Don untied my ankles, then moved up to do my wrists. His face twisted into a wild look.

'Idiot,' he bellowed. 'How dare you?'

Don cracked my cheek with his fat palm, then he pulled the pile of clothes out from under my head.

'What is this?' He shouted.

As soon as I saw them, I couldn't believe I'd been so dumb. My head was still bleeding. The clothes were covered in it. Don dragged me outside by my ankle. He kicked my thigh, jammed his heel in my belly and dumped the clothes on my face.

'Wash them,' he shouted.

He could have hit much harder if he'd wanted, but it was still enough to sting up my face and give me a dead leg. As he untied my wrists, he spat in my face.

'You better get clever, or I'll wait until Captain goes out and slaughter you like a chicken.'

Don pulled down the front of his shorts and started pissing on the ground beside me. Shaking with anger, I bundled up the clothes and limped off. I didn't know where to wash them. I walked to Beck's hut. He lived with Amo and his toddler sister, Becky. The front of the hut was a giant wooden flap, propped open with a chunky branch. It made a comfortable space that was shady and caught the breeze on the rare occasion when there was one. Amo had a wood burning stove going. She was cooking dough balls, plantain and tomato. Beck was lying inside with his shirt over his head to keep out the sunlight.

'I've got to wash these for Don,' I said.

'Do you know the way to the stream?' Amo asked.

I shook my head. Amo nudged Beck with her elbow. He stirred into life.

'Help Jake wash those,' Amo said.

Beck sat up and wiped drool onto his t-shirt. He had his usual mile wide grin. It was like his mouth had been stapled into position.

'Have breakfast first,' Amo said. 'How do you feel?'

'A bit weak. I didn't sleep much.'

Amo took the pan off the stove and everyone dived in with bare fingers. I had to move the food between fingers and blow on it to stop it burning, but I was starving and it tasted good. Don walked by. He caught sight of me and came storming over.

'I told you to wash my clothes,' he shouted. 'When I tell you to do something, you do it *fast*.'

I reckoned I was on for another beating, but as Don reached under the flap to grab me, Amo scorched his arm with the hot frying slice. He flew backwards, stunned by the pain. Amo reared up to him.

'Stop trying to hurt him,' she shouted. 'You think it makes you look like a big man to hurt a sick boy? Every woman knows you only act tough because you have a tiny penis.'

Beck collapsed backwards onto his sleeping mat, howling with laughter. I tried to keep a straight face in case Don made trouble later when Amo wasn't protecting me, but I couldn't manage. Don stormed off and we finished eating. Amo unwound the bandage on my head.

'It's made a scab now,' she said. 'Leave the bandage off, it will heal faster if the air gets to it.'

She grabbed my wrist and looked at the marks down my arm.

'Do you get lumps like this when the insects bite you at home?' Amo asked.

'There aren't many insects in England, it's too cold.'

‘Perhaps you’re not used to them. Wash in the stream when you do the clothes. Afterwards I’ll give you some ointment to stop the itching. And you better take a malaria pill.’

I swallowed a yellow pill and washed it down with water. Amo gave Beck a handful of soap flakes.

‘Give Jake some,’ she said. ‘Help him wash the clothes and clean Becky too.’

Beck gave his little sister a piggyback ride to the stream. It wasn’t far, but it was all over rocks and I’d left my trainers with Don and Amin. I didn’t dare go back without the clean clothes. My feet weren’t tough enough for the ground. I soon had blood pouring out my heel.

It was hard to see the stream through the dense trees, but you could hear water rushing as you got close. The trees broke over the pool and the sun was merciless. It felt like staring into a light bulb. The water dropped five metres off a cliff into a pool about two metres deep. From the pool, it trickled into a shallow channel a few metres wide. Bushes branched over the pool and brightly coloured birds perched in the trees overhead. It looked like something out of a shampoo commercial.

I swam into the middle with my clothes on. Tepid spray from the falling water misted my face. Two days of grease and sweat soaked away. Beck stayed close to the edge, he couldn’t swim.

‘Look out for water snakes,’ Beck shouted. ‘They get crazy when they drop over the waterfall.’

After a minute cooling off, I swam back to the edge. Beck waded in up to his thighs. Becky was splashing about at the edge.

‘Want to swim?’ I asked.

Becky put her arms out for me to pick her up. I swam into the spray with her and she started to giggle. Then she slapped her hand against the water and splashed my face, which she thought was the funniest thing in the world. Beck had started washing the clothes. I couldn’t let him do all my work, so I swam back to the edge. Becky wanted me to carry on playing. She gave me an evil look when I dumped her back on the edge.

I rubbed the soap flakes in and scrubbed the stinking clothes underwater. It was hard getting the blood and filth out. Even when we finished, the clothes looked like stuff my Mum would have thrown in the bin. On the way back to camp we passed Sami. She had two empty plastic cans in her hand.

‘Morning traitor,’ Sami said. ‘Feeling better?’

‘Head still hurts,’ I said. ‘But nothing like yesterday. Thanks for sticking up for me last night.’

Sami shrugged, ‘If I left you to die, that would make us as bad as the army. Help me carry the water.’

‘I would,’ I said. ‘But my feet are killing me.’

I showed Sami my bloody heel.

‘I wasn’t asking,’ Sami said nastily. ‘I was ordering you.’

‘I can help you Sami,’ Beck said. ‘Jake can take Becky and the clothes.’

Sami grabbed my nipple and twisted it hard. I yelped in pain.

‘Traitor will learn to do what he’s told,’ she said.

I grabbed an empty can off Sami and started back towards the stream with her.

‘How did the boys treat you last night?’ She asked.

‘Really bad.’

‘Good,’ Sami said.

‘What’s so good about it?’

‘Captain has to be a politician,’ Sami said. ‘He keeps his position by making everyone happy. Don didn’t want you here, but he’ll be fine as long as he can bully you. And you’re a soft, rich boy. Don and Amin will make you a man. If you’re not tough, you’ll be like Beck: another useless mouth to feed.’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘But what if *I’m* not happy?’

‘Nobody cares about you,’ Sami laughed. ‘If you work hard and become useful, you might start to matter.’

‘What’s with Amin?’ I asked. ‘He never says a word.’

‘He’s deaf. He speaks a little, but it comes out weird and only Don can understand him.’

We’d reached the stream. Sami waded into the water in her boots and camouflage.

‘Take drinking water from the middle,’ Sami said. ‘If you get it from the edge it’s all cloudy.’

The can held about twenty litres. Once it was full it weighed a ton. The extra weight made the ground even more brutal on my feet. We struggled back to camp; at least I was struggling. Sami didn’t even slow down.

‘Move fast,’ Sami shouted. ‘You see what I mean about you being weak? I was going to carry both cans. You struggle with one.’

I was too out of breath to answer. When we got to camp, we took the water inside the main building and poured it into a plastic barrel.

‘Do you know your way back to the stream?’

I nodded, ‘Yes.’

Sami dumped her empty can at my feet. The plastic boomed.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘It will take three more cans to fill up the barrel and it’s your job to make sure it’s always full. If I catch Beck helping you, I’ll drain the barrel and you’ll start from scratch.’

‘OK,’ I said.

I wasn’t sure I had the strength to do it, but I wouldn’t win an argument with Sami.

‘Can I ask you one question first?’

‘If you have to,’ Sami said.

‘You know when we were at the side of the road? Something made you change your mind about killing me. What was it?’

‘I already told you, traitor. If I killed you, it would make us no better than the army.’

I shook my head, ‘No, you were going to kill me. The end of your pistol was touching my head and something changed your mind.’

Sami looked down at her boots, ‘Have you ever seen the Disney movie, *The Fox and the Hound*?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘When I was little’

I was a bit surprised Sami even knew what a Disney film was.

‘You frown like the cute fox when the big dog gets angry,’ she said. ‘I felt sorry for you.’

I cracked up laughing. Sami looked furious and booted the two empty cans towards me.

‘If that barrel’s not full whenever I come here, I’ll make Don beat you.’

I went back and got my trainers. Don and Amin weren’t around, thank God. My feet hurt, but at least with trainers on I didn’t get any new cuts. I tried carrying two cans together, but I wasn’t used to the heat and I was weak from all the blood I’d lost. Once the barrel was full, I stumbled around to the shady side of the main building and collapsed in a heap. Nobody stayed indoors in the daytime, it was too hot.

Beck found me after a bit.

‘I hung Don’s clothes out to dry,’ he said. ‘You better not lay around in here. You’ll get pounded if Don sees you.’

I sat up, ‘My head hurts.’

‘You can come hunting with me if you want,’ Beck said. ‘It’s cooler under the trees, but I’ll have to kill you if you run away.’

I laughed, Beck was about half my size.

‘I wouldn’t know which way to run,’ I said. ‘But just out of interest, how would you plan to kill me?’

Beck pulled a big knife out of a pouch over his shoulder. His eyes scanned a tree about ten meters away.

‘Red parrot,’ Beck said, pointing. ‘Longest branch, second bird from the end. See it?’

‘Yes.’

Beck hurled the knife into the tree. It thudded the wood. A cloud of birds erupted into the air, all except the dead one pinned to the longest branch by the knife.

Beck grabbed branches and clambered into the tree. He twisted and pulled his way deep into the leaves until I couldn’t even see him. He emerged at the thick end of the long branch, shuffled along with his legs wrapped round it and retrieved his knife. Then he dropped about four metres to the ground, landing in a cloud of dust and standing straight up. His grin was even wider than usual.

‘Fancy your chances?’ Beck grinned, holding the knife in my face, before wiping the bird blood onto his shorts.

We walked deep into the trees. It seemed every fly in the world wanted a piece of me. God knows how Beck knew his way amongst thousands of identical looking trees.

‘What are we looking for?’ I asked.

‘Mostly monkey,’ Beck said. ‘Everyone is my friend if I bring back a monkey.’

He stopped by a palm and raised a leaf. The underside was crawling with featureless white blobs, like giant maggots.

‘Hold the sack open for me.’

Beck snipped off the palm, folded the white blobs inside the leaf and dropped it into the sack.

‘Do you eat those?’ I asked, shocked. ‘What are they?’

‘Palm grubs,’ Beck laughed, ‘You ate loads last night.’

I made the connection between the white sausages on my plate and the blobs wriggling around inside the sack. I was a bit grossed out, but they’d tasted really good. As we walked, Beck scoffed green caterpillars and a cracked open giant beetles before sucking out the insides.

A few yards further on, Beck grabbed a beetle the size of a kids fist off a tree trunk. He held it upside down with the legs flipping about.

‘Try,’ Beck said, shoving it in my face. ‘These are the best ones.’

I don’t know why I agreed. Curiosity I guess. Beck handed it across to me.

‘Pull the legs off first.’

I plucked out the first hairy leg and the others started flickering like mad. It freaked me out and I dropped it. Beck managed to scoop it up before it ran away. He pulled off the five remaining legs, cracked away the hard black shell and snapped off the head.

‘There,’ Beck said, handing it across to me.

It looked like a waxy marshmallow. I stuffed the whole thing in my mouth. The insides were still warm, and the blood trickled out when I bit into it. I chewed quickly and swallowed, resisting the urge to gag.

‘Good eh?’ Beck said.

The white goo was stuck all round my teeth.

‘I suppose you’d get used to it,’ I said.

We walked for over an hour, moving slow and quiet; keeping our throats moist with fruit. Beck searched the trees for monkeys. He had a small bow and arrow specially for killing them.

‘We just hit monkey central,’ Beck said, pointing up in the trees.

There were about twenty monkeys messing in the branches around us. Beck strung out his bow. The first arrow silently hit it’s mark. The monkey crashed through the leaves and thumped the ground. The second monkey managed a dying screech, which made all the others scatter. Beck was annoyed that he’d only got two before the other monkeys noticed. He told me a good hunter can pick 3 or 4 monkeys from the edge of a pack before the others realise what’s going on. Beck recovered the bodies and cut their throats to drain off the blood.

We headed back to camp. The sack was full of grubs and fruit. Beck had the dripping monkeys tied on a pole over his shoulder.

‘Sami told me you’re useless,’ I said. ‘But we’ve got all this stuff.’

Beck looked a bit offended, ‘Sami doesn’t like me much. I’m not a soldier like she is.’

‘But you’re providing all this food. Isn’t that as important?’

‘We don’t need to hunt,’ Beck said. ‘We steal all the food we need on raids and ambushes. I just pick up luxury stuff like grubs and monkeys. Everyone would be happier if I was a fighter.’

I laughed, ‘But you’re only 12.’

‘That’s old enough. They took me on my first raid a year ago. I was supposed to be covering Sami and her brother while they unloaded an army truck. A soldier came up behind them. I hesitated and Sami’s brother got shot in the back.’

‘How old was Sami’s brother?’

‘Edo was thirteen. He was my best friend. Captain went crazy. He whipped me until I passed out and said I wasn’t to fight again.’

‘That’s so bad... Does Captain whip people all the time?’

'Only if they really deserve it,' Beck said. 'It was my fault Edo died. I think I got less than what I deserved. Captain's OK about it now, but Sami still hates me.'

'That's Captain's fault really though,' I said 'Twelve is too young to fight in a war.'

'This is a rebel army,' Beck said. 'If you're old enough to carry a gun, you fight.'

7. DEATH

The second night a massive thunderstorm broke just after dark. Don tied me up again. He'd found some nylon cord and pulled it hard so it tore into me. Amo had made me a pillow by sewing an old scrap of cloth and stuffing it with rice. Don grabbed it off me, just for the sake of being mean; so I ended up on the bare earth, listening to the rain and watching blue lightening flashes through the cracks in the walls.

...

Everyone washed in the pool. Waded in with mud on their boots. The little kids peed in it and so did half the local wildlife. Then they drank the water. Over a lifetime you build up resistance to the parasites and bacteria in untreated water, but I'd only ever drank out of a tap; so when the polluted water hit my stomach, my body wasn't trained to fight the nasties.

Halfway through the night I started feeling cramps, like my guts were squashed down to a tiny ball. I was afraid to wake Don up, but I'd never needed to crap so badly my whole life. There was no way I could hold myself until morning.

'Don.'

He never budged. The second time I shouted.

'Don.'

I ended up having to wriggle over the floor and nudge into him. Don's eyes rolled open; angry white balls.

'I need to go to the toilet.'

Don shoved me away, 'If you wake me again, I'll gag your mouth.'

'You've got to untie me. I can't hold it.'

'Maybe this will persuade you,' Don said, bunching his fist in my face.

I let out a massive fart. It had the worst smell ever. Don jumped off his sleeping mat.

'Dirty, dirty animal,' He screamed.

'I told you,' I said. 'It's gonna be all over the floor in a minute.'

He rummaged in the dark for his knife and cut the bindings. I ran out into the trees, pulled down my shorts and let out a blast of diarrhoea that practically launched me off the ground. It was the most unbelievable relief. I stumbled back to the hut, but Don shoved me out.

'Stay out there,' he shouted. 'You're not coming in here with that foul arse.'

It was an awful night. The rain gushed over the baked earth. I sheltered under the trees as best as I could. Every few minutes the cramps returned and I had to crap again. Morning took forever to come. When it finally started getting light, I stumbled to Amo's hut. As soon as Amo saw me, she wrapped me up in her arms. I rested my face on her sweaty neck and broke into tears.

...

I spent two days curled up on the ground, moving only when I crawled into the trees to shit or puke. I had fits of the shivers, even though it was 40C. Amo purified water for me by boiling it over a wood fire, then she added sugar and salt to make rehydration solution. The cramps left my stomach muscles in agony. My legs quivered when I tried to walk. I could only manage a few steps at a time.

Whenever I woke up, it seemed to be from some nightmare about Adam. Watching him choke on a walnut. Trapped in a burning barn. Getting hit by a red London bus. The worst dreams were the ones where I couldn't find him but his voice called out for me. Dad kept telling me to go back and look properly.

Little Becky was sweet. She'd sit beside me, patting my arm and saying she wanted me to take her swimming when I got better. Amo gave me bits of whatever she cooked. I usually managed a few bites and puked them up soon afterwards. I got really depressed. How can your life get any worse than laying on bare earth, covered in flies and your own dry puke?

The third morning I felt slightly better. I drank two cups of water and kept down a couple of fried banana slices. I wasn't so tired and the sun felt hot again. Amo helped me down to the pool. I sat in the shallow run off and lathered up with soap flakes. Amo perched on a rock bathing her feet. She asked me loads of questions about London, and told me a bit of her life story.

She'd worked in a clinic run by a French charity and was studying for nursing qualifications. Seven years earlier, when the civil war started, the clinic treated injured soldiers from both sides. The government didn't like them helping the rebels, so their soldiers smashed up the hospital, killed the rebel patients and sent the nurses and doctors back to France. Beck's Dad and older brother went to fight for the rebels. Amo reckoned they were dead, but there was no way to be sure.

A couple of small rocks tumbled down the embankment. Sami yelled out:

'Amo, we need you.'

Sami had bloody hands and face. Her camouflage glistened with red stains.

'Who is it?' Amo asked.

'Ben.'

'I'll come back for you,' Amo said, looking at me.

The women dashed over the rocks towards camp. I laid back and let the water dribble through my hair and rush over my shoulders. After fifteen minutes, my curiosity got the better of me. I still felt shaky, but I reckoned I'd get back to camp if I took it slow.

Amo had washed my only set of clothes and laid them on the rocks. The sun had already baked them dry. The cloth was warm to touch. I had to stop a couple of times, leaning against a tree while I caught my breath.

Camp was dead quiet. Everyone crouched in a semi-circle around the flap at the front of Amo's hut. Beck realised I was a bit unsteady and ran over to help me walk the last few meters.

'How is he?' I asked.

'He'll die soon,' Beck said. 'The bullets almost cut him in two.'

I didn't want to see it, but sometimes you can't not look at something. Ben's eyes were like pools of milk, staring at nothing. Amo had stuffed him with morphine to kill the pain. The empty syringes laid around him on the earth. You could hardly see his wounds for the mass of flies feasting on the blood.

The only time I'd heard Ben speak was the first day, when he offered to take Sami's pistol and kill me, but he stopped the pickup, so there must have been part of him that cared. The thing that hit me hard, was that Ben was only a bit older than me. If he was born in England, he'd have been learning to drive and doing his A-levels.

I crawled into Amo's hut and drank some of the purified water. Captain told Don, Amin and a couple of others to get shovels and start digging Ben's grave. He wasn't even dead yet, but in the tropics it doesn't take long for a body to start rotting.

...

'This bloody watch!' Sami said. 'It wakes me up before the sun comes up. Diddle de dee, diddle de dee.'

Her camouflage was drying on a stick standing in the ground outside her hut. All she had on was a t-shirt and a set of men's boxers.

'That's what it does,' I said. 'I'll have it back if you don't want it.'

'You think I'm stupid, traitor?' Sami asked. 'Do you see me walking around with a clay pot on my head? I'm not a bloody peasant. Just tell me what button I press to switch off the alarm.'

She unbuckled the watch and put it in my hand. While I fiddled with the buttons, she scratched her leg with her foot.

'Top left button,' I said, handing back my watch. 'Hold it for five seconds to turn the alarm on or off.'

'It's a good watch,' Sami said. 'I can press the light and see the time in the night.'

'I know it's a good watch,' I said bitterly. 'That's why I bought it.'

Sami smiled, 'So how are you feeling anyway?'

'I started eating this morning. So far I've kept everything down.'

'What about your head?'

'It's mostly better,' I said. 'It's still a bit sore and it breaks open sometimes.'

She was still scratching her legs and her tits were jiggling up and down in time with the scratching. I was getting quite turned on watching them. It never occurred that Sami might have something going on underneath the baggy camouflage.

‘It’s good you’re better,’ Sami said. ‘You’ll be ready to fight soon.’

‘I don’t want to fight,’ I said. ‘I want to go home.’

Sami laughed, ‘You’re living in our camp and you’re eating our food. You’re going to fight if you like it or not.’

‘Beck doesn’t fight.’

Sami raised her hand between us.

‘Don’t mention his name around me. My brother died because he’s got no guts.’

‘What if I refuse to fight? Will you kill me?’

‘In two seconds flat,’ Sami shrugged, ‘I’ll kill you myself. We all fight.’

‘What about you and Ben, were you close?’

‘We weren’t humping, if that’s what you mean.’

I laughed, ‘No, I mean... Were you friends?’

‘He joined us about a year ago. He was a good guy to be alongside. I liked him a lot.’

‘So, what happened out there?’

‘Mercenaries,’ Sami said.

‘What?’

‘The government soldiers are crap. They’re conscripts who don’t want to be in a war. They’re usually drunk. They never get paid their wages and half the time they have to steal food because they don’t get enough to eat. So, the government started sending in some real soldiers to catch us rebels: mercenaries.’

‘So who are the mercenaries exactly?’

‘Foreigners,’ Sami said. ‘Serbians, Israelis, Yanks. Trained to fight in their own countries armies and tough as hell. They don’t care what they fight for or who they kill, as long as they get a nice fat wad of dollars for their trouble.’

‘So what are you fighting for?’ I asked.

‘The rebels control the east of the country, the government controls the west and in-between there’s this.’

Sami spread her arms out wide.

‘Jungle,’ I said.

Sami nodded, ‘Exactly. Half a million square kilometres of trees to fight over. Whoever controls the river and the roads through the jungle can send an army into the other part of the country.’

‘So who’s winning?’

‘Nobody really. The war reached a stalemate after a few months. Ever since, we’ve been fighting each other in the jungle and not really got anywhere.’

‘Sounds pointless.’

'It is,' Sami said. 'Except the government has ten times as many men as us, and they've got artillery, helicopters and tanks. If they can get an army through the jungle, they won't have any problem retaking the east of the country.'

'So, what actually happened to Ben?'

'We ambushed a truck,' Sami said. 'Me Ben and Desi. You know Desi?'

I nodded. I'd never spoken to Desi, but I'd seen him around. He was 16 year old beanpole, way taller than anyone else at camp.

'Well normally, you put a log or something in the road to stop a truck getting through. There's two or three soldiers up front. They get out to move the log, we kill the soldiers and either steal the truck or blow it up so it blocks the road. But this time it was a trap. We shot up the driver, but there were about six mercenaries hiding in the back. They all jumped out and started blasting at us. I've never seen so many bullets. We ran into the trees, shot a couple of the mercenaries, then walked about ten kilometres and made camp for the night.

'It seemed safe, but two of the bastards tracked us the whole way. They tried to take us alive. They wanted information before they killed us. It was pure good luck that Ben's gun jammed. He'd just fixed it and had it in his hand when we spotted them. If it wasn't for that, I'd be dead or getting tortured right now. Ben killed one of the mercenaries, but the other one shot him. It gave me and Desi enough time to grab our guns. I doubled back behind the mercenary, came out of the bushes and shot him from behind.'

'I don't know how you do it,' I said. 'I'd be so scared.'

'I thought the same once. But if the other guy is pointing a gun at you, your survival instinct kicks in. Oh, I've got something you can have if you want.'

Sami went in her hut and came out with a watch.

'It came off that mercenary I killed,' Sami said.

The watch was an Omega chronometer. It must have cost a couple of grand, but Sami had no idea.

'Don't you want this one?' I asked.

'I'm keeping yours,' Sami said. 'The blue light is cool.'

8. MOTIVATION

The grave was shallow. Amin rolled Ben's body into the hole with his boot and stepped back quickly to avoid the cloud of dust and insects. Captain told everyone how Ben a good fighter and would be missed, but nobody seemed that upset. I'd never seen a body before, but it wasn't a huge deal to the others. Death is like anything else, you get numb if you see enough of it.

Amo had found a couple of photos and a bible in Ben's hut. She chucked them in the hole, then everyone took a turn throwing a shovel load of earth onto the body. Captain was the last one. When he finished, he handed the shovel to me. I don't know if he meant it as a gesture, but it felt like a signal of acceptance: I was one of them now.

Captain walked back to camp with me. He offered one of his little brown cigars. I shook my head and he lit one for himself.

'How do you feel, Jake?'

'I'm getting stronger, but I'm still a bit shaky.'

'You've been sleeping in Amo's hut the last few nights?'

I nodded, 'I suppose I'll have to go back with Don and Amin now.'

'We have an empty hut now,' Captain said. 'You might as well have it.'

'Ben's?'

Captain nodded, 'You should have your strength back in a few days. When you do, I want you to come and see me.'

...

All Ben had to show for his life was a sleeping mat, a few candles, a wood burning stove, some ragged clothes and a hunting knife. I felt like a grave robber and stood uncertainly in the entrance of the hut, breathing the stink of a man who no longer existed. I picked some of the clothes off the floor. My instinct was to chuck them away, but I only had the clothes I stood up in. So I'd be wearing Ben's clothes, cutting with his knife and cooking on his stove. It spooked me out: it was like I was his replacement.

'Hey,' Beck said.

I turned around and saw his grinning face in the entrance.

'Nice hut,' Beck said. 'Can I come in?'

'Feels sad,' I said. 'I'll have to wash all his stuff tomorrow.'

'There's room for two,' Beck said. 'And it's getting cramped with Becky growing up. So I was wondering if you fancied a roommate?'

I didn't want to spend a night in Ben's hut on my own.

...

The next few days I got a routine. Get up with the sun, go down to the stream and wash off the night's sweat. Fill the water barrel, then start a fire and boil my drinking water for the day. I was determined not to get sick again. Amo usually made our food; it was one of the perks of having Beck as a roommate.

After eating, me and Beck would set off into the trees to go hunting. I had a few goes at shooting birds with the bow and arrow, but they only managed to crack Beck up with laughter; so I stuck at picking fruit and carrying the sack. Once I got over my squeamishness, I started to quite like the taste of grubs and beetles.

Beck was a walking encyclopaedia. He knew all what was safe to eat, what snakes were poisonous, where to avoid scorpions, what times of day you were most likely to find animals drinking at the bank of the stream. I asked him how he always knew where we were. To me, every tree looked the same, but to Beck the shapes of the trunks and the size of the branches were like road signs.

Nobody could cope with the heat in the middle of the day. We'd go back to camp and sit in the shade. Beck and the others usually managed to sleep, but I was too hot to relax. I'd rest against a trunk and see how long I could go without having to wipe the beads of sweat tickling down my face.

When it cooled, I went down to the stream with Beck. Becky tagged along and by the third day she was splashing clumsily from one side of the pool to the other. I offered to teach Beck to swim as well, but he stood on the edge and stubbornly refused to even try.

...

I rested up against a trunk with my eyes shut. Captain grabbed my cheek and pinched it.

'Oww. What was that for?'

'Full belly?' Captain asked angrily.

'What?'

'I asked if you have a full belly.'

'Yes I do.'

'Feeling healthy?'

I nodded, 'Yes.'

'Would you like to live with Don again? This time I won't tell him to go easy.'

'No... What did I do? Why are you pissed off?'

'What did I tell you to do when you got your strength back?' Captain asked.

'Come and see you,' I said.

'So why didn't you?'

I'd been putting it off. I knew I had to fight and I knew that's what Captain wanted to talk about.

'I forgot,' I lied.

The metal roof over Captain's office had baked all day in the sun. The windows were closed to keep out the flies. It was the hottest place I'd ever been. The first time I went in the office it was dark. This time I could see the dots of blood soaked into the concrete floor.

'Sit down.'

The chair creaked as I sank onto the plastic cushion. Captain paced around to his side of the desk, with the conceit of a man who wouldn't have to answer to anyone if he killed me.

'Twenty-two,' Captain said.

'What?'

'That's the number of people who've died in that chair. Eighteen men, four women. Three of them were younger than you.'

I took my hands off the arms and shuddered. Captain was pleased that he'd had the desired effect.

'You must think I'm some kind of animal, Jake.'

I shook my head, 'No.'

'Remember what I told you before, about being honest when you speak to me?'

I nodded.

'So, do you think killing all those people makes me an animal?'

'I guess.'

'And you'd be correct,' Captain said. 'If you asked me ten years ago if I could I kill a man, I would have said no. I was a university professor in the capital. I studied in Paris and got my doctorate in politics. Then the war started.'

'I was born in the east. I wrote a letter to a newspaper saying the east should be allowed to break away and become a separate country if the people there wanted it. I was dismissed from my job. Then government soldiers came to my house. They killed my wife and four of my children. Sami and her brother only survived because they were at a piano lesson.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'My Mum always says the worst thing that can happen to a person is if they outlive their child.'

'I grabbed Sami and Edo and bribed an army truck driver. He sold me a gun and drove us deep into the jungle. I managed to find a rebel group and I became a soldier. Six years later, here I am. I'm not proud of who I am, or the things I've done to people. But I'm still angry about my family and I want my people to win this war.'

'So, you're a complicated animal,' I said.

Captain laughed, 'Exactly. In the heart of every ordinary man lies a killer, and in every killer lies the heart of an ordinary man.'

'Who said that?' I asked. 'Someone famous?'

Captain rubbed his cheek, 'I'm pretty sure I just made it up... The point I'm trying to get across, Jake, is that any person can become a soldier if they are motivated. Do you know there are more than ten government soldiers for every rebel?'

‘Sami mentioned it.’

‘But we hold the government at bay. All the government soldiers think about is drinking and sex. They keep their heads down and count the days until they get sent home. The rebels are different. We want to stop the government sending tanks through the jungle, destroying our homes and killing our families. This motivation makes our men worth ten of theirs. Do you understand?’

I nodded.

‘I want you to fight with us, but sticking a gun in your hand doesn’t make you a soldier. I need to motivate you. So I’ll give you a choice. If you don’t fight, you can’t leave here, you’ll work around camp and you’ll only eat what you find for yourself in the jungle. In a few months, when security is compromised and we abandon this camp, I’ll set you free and you’ll have to look after yourself. If you agree to fight, I’ll pass messages on to all the other rebel groups to look out for your brother and I give you my word that when the opportunity comes, I’ll do all I can to get you back home.’

‘Do you think there’s a chance I’ll find my brother?’

Captain shrugged, ‘I’d be a liar if I said the odds were good, but there is a chance and if you fight with us, I promise to make that chance as big as I can.’

...

I said I’d fight to save Adam. It makes me sound like a hero, but the reasons were more complex. There was part of me that was into being a soldier. I was nothing: I ate and slept, people bossed me around and I had no control over my life. By joining the fight, I raised myself off the bottom of the pile. Most important though, it’s human nature to want to fit in and it’s what everyone wanted me to do.

...

Sami gave me a big hug.

‘So you’re a man after all, traitor.’

I felt a weird mix of elation and dread.

‘You scared?’ Desi asked.

I shrugged, ‘A bit.’

I was terrified, of course.

‘Not to worry,’ Sami said. ‘It’s only men who are fitter and stronger than you, firing chunks of metal at you at a thousand kilometres an hour.’

‘Great,’ I said.

‘Unless they get up close and slice you up with their knives,’ Desi said.

Sami laughed, ‘Or they catch you and zap your balls with a car battery.’

‘You look really pale all of a sudden, Jake.’

It was all a big joke to them.

'I'll get you some kit,' Sami said. 'We're going out on a mission tonight. Dad said to take you with us.'

'Tonight,' I said, shocked. 'What about training? I don't even know how to shoot a gun.'

'You'll pick it up fast enough.'

Desi smiled, 'Or you'll get you head blown off.'

Me and Sami went inside a lock up underneath the main building. Sami pried the lid off a wooden crate. The guns inside were Czech made AK47's, brand new, sealed in air tight plastic so that they didn't rust.

'Merry Christmas,' Sami said, handing me one. 'What else should you have?'

She started rummaging through the boxes and handed me a tatty revolver.

'Needs a good clean, but it's handy if the AK jams,' Sami explained. 'Short range only, but revolvers never go wrong. You want one?'

I shrugged, 'Why would I not want one if they're so useful?'

'Weight,' Sami said. 'Everything you take, you've got to carry twenty or thirty kilometres a day, along with all the food and water you need. And we don't hang around... Backpack, essential.'

Sami threw me a lightweight pack.

'Did you want the revolver?'

'Might as well.'

'Grenades, take two or three.'

The way the grenades were packed in boxes of a dozen reminded me of my Dad's golf balls

'You've got Ben's knife and his spare camouflage haven't you?'

'Yeah.'

Take some boots, you'll see those white trainers a mile off. Water bottle. Last and most important: ammunition.'

Sami handed me a few clips for the AK and a box of bullets for the revolver. The ammunition weighed a ton.

'You think it's heavy now,' Sami grinned. 'Add water and food, and imagine how it feels after a thirty kilometre hike. I wont slow down if you start whining. You're a security risk, so I'll have to kill you if you pass out.'

We stepped back into the sun. Sami put the padlock on the storage room.

'Where do all the weapons come from?' I asked.

'There's never been a shortage of weapons,' Sami said. 'It's people that don't last long.'

9. SHOPPING

Sami sat beside me on a rock and showed how to fit the magazine and switch the AK47 between safety, single-shot and automatic fire. She split it in pieces and showed how to use the cleaning kit to keep the weapon lubricated and rust free.

‘Always fire in short bursts, otherwise the gun gets hot and jams up.’

I nodded, ‘Can I try shooting it?’

‘We never shoot around camp,’ Sami said. ‘The noise echoes and you never know who might be out there snooping around.’

I looked like a soldier in the boots and camouflage. Grenades in my jacket pocket, knife and revolver tucked into my trousers, but I was crapping myself. I felt like a total fraud.

‘What’s the mission?’ I asked.

‘Shopping,’ Sami said. ‘We’re going to a government base about ten kilometres away. Amo needs medical supplies, we’re short of grenades, rice and some other stuff.’

‘How will we get it all back?’

‘By stealing a truck and driving out the front gate.’

‘Won’t they notice?’ I asked.

‘There’s three hundred armed men in the camp, so we better hope not.’

...

The government enforced a curfew on the roads between sunset and sunrise. Me, Sami and Desi ran into the scrub every time we heard a jeep or truck. The army didn’t do prisons or trials. If they caught you, the only question was if you got beaten and tortured before they killed you.

It was a full moon, so there was quite a bit of light. The sky was clear and full of stars. Sami and Desi kept a steady pace and didn’t even seem to sweat. The breeze whipped up a layer of dirt that stung my eyes and lined my throat. The pack rubbed my back raw and the mosquitoes were eating me alive.

‘Keep up,’ Sami whispered, looking back at me. ‘You’re like an old man.’

‘I need some water.’

‘Well drink some then,’ Sami said.

‘I’ve drunk it already.’

Sami stopped for me to catch up.

‘We’re not even halfway,’ she said angrily. ‘You’ll have to tough it out.’

‘It’s the dust,’ I said. ‘Can I have a sip of yours?’

‘Give us your pack, traitor.’

Sami took some of the ammunition out of my pack and put it in hers. She handed me her water bottle. It was unboiled and might make me sick again, but I had grit crunching between my teeth and I could hardly breathe.

There was an army checkpoint about a kilometre outside the base. We cut deep into the jungle, to avoid it. The trees were low and the undergrowth dense. Every step was a battle with a creeper or a barbed branch. My face and hands got all slashed up and I was bleeding in a couple of places.

The jungle ended at the perimeter of the base. Between us and the wire fence was about ten metres of cleared land. There was an observation tower twenty metres away, but it was impossible to tell if anyone was up there. The camp was in darkness and you couldn’t see a soul, but there was plenty of shouting and singing going on.

My heart drummed, but at least the fear stopped me thinking about my thirst and my aching legs.

Sami looked over at me, ‘Scared?’

I nodded.

‘Take deep breaths and try not to screw up.’

The three of us crouched low and sprinted across the clearing to the fence. Sami rattled the wire, looking for a gap.

‘Are we in the right place?’ Sami asked.

‘They’ve repaired the hole,’ Desi said. ‘What the hell now?’

‘Have you got wire cutters?’ Sami asked

‘Nope,’ Desi said.

‘What kind of arse goes on a mission like this without wire cutters?’ Sami asked.

Desi sounded angry, ‘You never got any either.’

‘What about the knife you stole off me?’ I asked. ‘There’s a pair in there.’

‘Is there?’ Sami asked

She pulled the Swiss army knife out of her pocket and started going through the blades.

A light came on in the watch tower. We crashed onto our bellies. Some guys leaned over the side of the tower and started shouting.

‘This army is shit. I want to go home to my wife.’

The soldier threw his metal helmet into the jungle like a Frisbee.

‘Joseph’s wife is sexy,’ another soldier shouted. ‘I want to go home to her as well.’

The soldiers all started laughing. A couple of bottles got thrown off the tower and smashed into the ground. They weren’t paying any attention to us.

Desi whispered to me, ‘Doesn’t look so bad when you see we’re fighting against a bunch of horny drunks.’

I smiled anxiously. They might be horny drunks, but they still had assault rifles slung around their waists.

‘Where are these bloody wire cutters, traitor?’

I snatched the Swiss army knife out of Sami’s hand and found them straight away.

‘Smartass,’ Sami said.

The cutters were a bit on the small side, but Desi managed to snip a few links and tear up a corner of the mesh.

‘Act casual, traitor,’ Sami whispered, as we crawled through. ‘Only use your gun if you really have to.’

We walked across the camp. Most of the troops were asleep in tents; except a few who were stumbling around raising all kinds of hell.

‘I’ll find us a truck and fuel it up,’ Desi said. ‘You two deal with the store room.’

Soldiers noticed us, a few even said hello. You couldn’t tell rebels from government soldiers, which wasn’t surprising when you consider most of our stuff was stolen off them.

The store room was about twenty metres long, built out of corrugated metal sheets. Sami opened the door. The inside was lit with fluorescent tubes that had half a dozen moths frantically slamming their bodies against them. A fat soldier sat behind a counter picking his nose.

‘What the heck do you want at this time of night?’

‘I came for you,’ Sami said, blowing the soldier a kiss. ‘For \$200 you can do whatever you want to me.’

The guard laughed, ‘You’re no \$200’s worth.’

Sami undid the top buttons of her camouflage and gave the guard a flash of her breasts.

‘How about a nice kiss?’ Sami said. ‘And we’ll see how things go from there.’

The soldier squashed his gut against the counter and leaned over. As Sami pecked his cheek, she slid a twenty centimetre hunting knife out of a sheath behind her back. Time seemed to freeze as I watched it happen. The soldier noticed the light reflecting on the blade and jerked backwards, but he was too late. Sami punched the knife into the side of his neck and ripped out his throat. Blood spewed over the counter and dribbled down the sides onto the floor.

Sami turned to me, ‘Lock the door.’

She still had the knife in her hand. I was so stunned I didn’t move. She walked past me and bolted the door herself.

‘Anybody in there?’ Sami asked, waving her hand in my face.

‘Uh?’

Sami grabbed my nipple and twisted it really hard. The pain brought me back to planet Earth.

‘It’s only a bit of blood,’ Sami said. ‘Get your head together before you get us killed.’

Sami looked so cool about it. She stepped behind the counter and kicked the soldier’s legs away, sending his corpse crashing onto the floor.

‘Couldn’t you just tie him up?’ I asked.

‘Tying people up is for the movies,’ Sami said. ‘It takes ages.’

She got a shopping list out of her pocket, tore it in half and handed one bit to me.

'Put everything we need by the door,' Sami said. 'Desi shouldn't be long with the truck.'

The racks of wooden shelving were well stocked. I learned later that Captain had a spy inside the base who informed him whenever the supply convoy arrived.

I scanned the list: bandages, morphine, engine oil, rice, cigarettes, grenades. I couldn't find any medical supplies, but I got hold of the other stuff and added a few luxuries like a tray of cokes, bottles of vodka and some tins of meat. We trod the soldiers blood everywhere we walked. Ben hammered on the door.

'What took you so long?' Sami asked.

We each made about ten trips back and forward, piling everything inside the truck. A few soldiers went by, but we never even got a second glance off them.

'We need the medical supplies,' Desi said. 'Amo's got almost nothing left.'

Sami looked at me, 'Stick your face in the blood.'

'What?' I said.

Sami pointed at the red puddle on the counter.

'We need to find the medical hut. Stick your face in the blood so it looks like you're injured.'

I was too chicken to answer Sami back. I lightly dipped my cheek in the warm blood.

'More than that,' Sami said.

She dunked my head right in, so the warm blood poured through my hair and down my face.

'Get in the truck and keep the engine running,' she said, looking at Desi.

Sami put her arm around my shoulder. We ran outside and she started shouting for directions.

'This might get hairy. Keep one hand on your pistol.'

There was a bunch of guys sitting on wooden crates playing poker. One of them pointed out the medical tent. It was pitch dark inside, but you could hear a couple of patients snoring. It smelled of cigarettes and disinfectant.

'He's been shot,' Sami shouted. 'Is anyone in here? Can someone help us?'

An electric lamp came on over a wooden desk. A tiny old nun sat there. Sami pointed her AK47.

'I want drugs and bandages,' Sami shouted. 'Fast.'

The nun got a set of keys out of her pocket and crept towards a wooden cabinet. She looked calm. You got the impression she'd had guns pointed at her a hundred times before.

'Some time this month would be nice,' Sami shouted.

The nun unlocked the cabinet. Sami shoved her out of the way and started cramming all the medicine into her backpack. It was too dark to see what anything was.

The nun stumbled back to her chair. I met her eyes, and she smiled at me. All her teeth were gone, except two brown tombstones in her lower jaw. I got this weird feeling off her, like my soul was being x-rayed. It felt as if the nun could see my fear and actually felt sorry for me.

'I'll pray for both of you,' the nun whispered.

She made the sign of the cross on her chest.

Sami gave her a scornful look, 'Shut your bloody hole.'

There was a massive bang and a flash of orange light. My ear howled with pain. The bullet can't have missed me by much. I spun around. Shadows of giant fingers and a gun were projected onto the inside of the tent. It was one of the patients. I hit the floor as the second bullet ripped a hole in the canvas.

My AK47 was trapped under my body, so I grabbed the revolver out of my trousers. I was actually laying across the legs of the man shooting at me. God knows how he missed from such close range. I squeezed the trigger. The bullet entered the base of his jaw and exploded out the top of his head attached to a hairy clump of his skull. The other patient was behind me. I thought he might have a gun as well, so I rolled over and fired once into his chest and once into his head. He'd slept through the whole thing, but the bullets were out of my gun before I gave it a second thought.

Sami zipped up her pack and grabbed my arm.

'Lets get out of here, traitor; before you wake up the other half of the camp.'

I could barely hear over the whistling in my ear.

We ran back towards the store. The truck cab was open and the engine was turning. Sami climbed in first. Desi drove away while I was still on the step. Sami helped pull me inside and slammed the door. We pulled up at the main gate. A guard approached.

Any second, someone could sound the alarm and we'd be getting killed from ten different directions. I tucked my hands under my arse to stop them shaking. The guard shone his torch into the cab. Sami gave him her sweetest smile.

'Just taking this young lady back to her village,' Desi said, passing the guard a few dollars.

'What *have* you been up to?' The guard laughed, 'Naughty boy.'

The guard walked over to open the gate. He probably wasn't going that slow, but it felt like every step lasted a thousand years. Desi rolled us through the gate and started to accelerate away. He kept the speed down to avoid suspicion. Sami looked back in the mirror to see if anything was coming after us.

'Looks OK,' Sami said

Desi laughed, 'It should do. I slashed about twenty tyres.'

It took a couple of minutes to drive up to the checkpoint. There was a row of metal spikes blocking the road and a heavy machine gun behind a wall of sandbags. One of the guards wandered out of a wooden hut and stood on the step leading into the cab.

'Destination?' the driver asked.

'Taking this young lady home,' Desi said, handing over a few more dollars.

A telephone started ringing inside the guard hut.

'Hold on. I better see what that is before I let you through.'

'This is bad,' Sami said. 'Can we go over the spikes?'

'We won't get fifty yards. They'll shred the tyres,' Desi said.

'I could creep out and move them,' Sami said.

'The metal makes a hell of a noise when you drag it,' Desi said. 'They'll gun you down.'

'So what do we do?' I asked.

'I say we should abandon the truck and run for it,' Desi said.

'No way,' Sami said, 'Not after going through all this. It could be nothing.'

She pulled her AK47 off her shoulder and laid it across her lap with her finger on the trigger.

'Don't let them take you alive, Jake' Sami said. 'Unless you enjoy being tortured.'

I couldn't take the fear. I think I was about to pass out, but the chain of spikes started clattering out of our path. A smiling guard emerged from the side of the road.

'Sorry about the wait,' he shouted, 'Sounds like a couple of drunks went a bit crazy up at the base and shot someone in the hospital.'

Desi shook his head, 'Too much banana beer, I expect.'

The guard thumped the side of the cab, 'Probably... Drive safe now.'

'Thanks,' Desi said. 'Have a good night.'

The hydraulic brakes hissed and we pulled off down the road.

10. ADRENALIN

Desi drove fast and kept the headlights off. Christ knows how he saw where we were going. I kept thinking we were about to crash. Sami was looking back in the mirror all the time, but once we were away from the base we were just another army truck without markings or number plates. Even if we got stopped, we could pass ourselves off as government troops.

You can't believe the buzz. I shouted my head off with pure relief. Sami wrapped her arms around me. Desi was grinning. People chuck themselves off cliffs, go white water rafting and ride roller coasters to get a bit of excitement in their lives. But this was the real stuff, no safety line, no life jacket. I'd done something that would get me twenty years in maximum security prison if I did it in Britain.

'You should have seen him, Desi,' Sami beamed. 'Drops down, cool as ice. Wastes the guy shooting at him, then flips over and shoots the guy behind him. I mean, one guy was paralytic and the other one was asleep, but it was still classy.'

'Nice one,' Desi said.

'Why did you kill the second patient?' Sami asked.

I shrugged, 'He looked dangerous.'

'He was *asleep*.'

I shrugged, 'I don't know. It just seemed like the right thing to do.'

'Even Sami doesn't kill people when they're asleep,' Desi said.

'Mind you,' Sami said. 'That's only because I like to see the look on their faces when they wake up with a gun in their face.'

Desi floored the brake. The tyres squealed. I flew forward and hit my head on the dashboard. It killed my head, but I just burst out laughing.

'Sorry,' Desi said. 'Didn't see that corner.'

He dunked the accelerator again.

'You're not traitor anymore,' Sami said. 'I've got you a new name.'

I grinned, 'What am I?'

'Killer.'

'I want to go back,' I said. 'Get the biggest gun. Sneak up the watch tower with it and blast everyone in their tents.'

Desi laughed, 'One raid and you're a certified psycho. Wait until you get pinned down with a few Army shooting at you, then we'll see what you're made of.'

'Titanium,' I said. 'I can take it. I'm so hard, they'll take one look at me and shit their pants.'

'Killing machine,' Sami shouted.

'Kill,' I shouted back, right in her ear.

She slapped my face.

'You dare slap my face?' I giggled. 'I'll mash you up.'

'I'll kill you,' Sami snorted.

I wrapped my arm around her head and pinched her nose. She went straight for my nipple. It was still sore from earlier.

'Jesus... Let go of my nipple.'

'Not until you let go of my nose.'

'I'll kill you.'

'I'll kill *you*, dog breath.'

Sami bundled me off the seat onto the floor of the cab and pinned me down with her boots.

'Will you two stop acting like idiots,' Desi shouted. 'It's hard enough driving without all that going on.'

'Let us up Sami.'

I wriggled. Sami smiled down at me.

'Come on.'

'No,' Sami said. 'You're a naughty boy. You're staying down there until we arrive.'

It was a three hour walk on the way out. The drive back took about 25 minutes. Desi pulled into the clearing. Me and Sami moved the stuff camouflaging the road into camp. The truck was too wide to go up the hill and it wasn't four wheel drive, so it probably wouldn't have made it anyway. We were too knackered to unload, we just grabbed our packs and weapons and stuffed our pockets with bottles of banana beer.

We started drinking as we struggled up the hill to camp. It was thick and slightly bitter tasting. You wouldn't have known it was made out of bananas unless someone told you. I was thirsty; the first bottle went down in a few seconds. I lobbed it in the bushes and unscrewed the cap on another. Some places the path was steep; you had to grab onto a branch or something to pull yourself up.

A guy called Jesus was at the top of the path, under an open sided shelter about a hundred yards short of camp. He was supposed to be on guard duty, but he'd fallen asleep. Desi tipped beer over him to wake him up.

'This isn't good enough,' Sami said, struggling to keep a straight face. 'Fifty dollars each or we'll tell Captain.'

'Give us a beer,' Jesus said.

Sami handed him a bottle, 'Cough up.'

'Shove it up your arse,' Jesus said.

Sami smiled and cuffed him around the head. We wandered into the middle of camp. The beer was starting to work on me. After all the action, I needed something to take the edge off. Desi said goodnight and went off to his hut. I looked at Sami.

'See you in the morning,' I said.

'Come with me first,' Sami said. 'I'll wash the blood off your face.'

Sami took me into her hut. She lit a kerosene lamp with her pocket lighter.

'You want another beer?' Sami asked.

I didn't want a beer, but I realised it was an invitation to stick around for a while, so I said yes. It was the middle of the night, but there was no way I could calm down and go to sleep after what had happened.

I sat on the floor. Sami dampened a piece of rag and started dabbing off the blood. It reminded me of Mum wiping ice cream off my face when I was little.

'How many people do you reckon you've killed?' I asked.

Sami shrugged, 'I remember the first couple; after that it goes into a blur. Thirty, maybe.'

'So who was the first one?' I asked.

'I've got him in a jar on the shelf,' Sami said.

I looked on the shelf. She had a few books and cuddly toys from her childhood and there was a framed picture: Captain stood in front of a white painted house, with a big lawn and a satellite dish on the roof. He was a bit younger and fatter, but not so different you couldn't recognise him. His wife stood beside him, with a baby boy in her arms and five other kids standing on the grass.

'Which one are you?'

Sami pointed at a little girl with platted hair, wearing nothing but a disposable nappy.

'You were cute,' I said.

Sami smiled, 'Thanks killer. And this is the first man I killed.'

She picked a jar off the shelf and handed it to me. It was empty, except for what looked like a shrivelled blob of wax in the bottom.

'He was one of us,' Sami said. 'A rebel. I was only eleven. He came in the middle of the night and ripped my vest and knickers off. Dad warned me someone might try to rape me while he was away fighting, so he gave me a knife. The man had his thingy waving about over me. I grabbed the knife and chopped it off.'

'So what's in the jar?'

Sami looked at me like I was stupid; which I guess I was.

'That's his penis. They managed to stop the bleeding, but he got an infection and died of blood poisoning.'

I reached over and put the jar back on the shelf.

'You're nothing like the girls at home,' I said.

Sami laughed, 'You're not like the boys round here... There, you're face is all clean now.'

She threw the bloody rag out of the hut and drained the last drop of her beer. Then she started unlacing her boots.

'I better go,' I said.

'Sleep here if you want,' Sami said. 'Saves you from waking Beck up.'

Even though I was half drunk, I remembered that Sami hated Beck.

'OK,' I said. 'I've got to piss first. Too much beer'

I crawled outside. I tried to get my head straight while I sprayed the ground. It was obvious Sami liked me, but I was scared of girls and Sami was the scariest girl ever. I told all my mates I shagged a girl when I was

on holiday in Portugal, but it was a lie. All I'd ever managed was a couple of quick snogs and a hand up a girls shirt on sports day. A girl like Sami had probably shagged loads of guys. I almost hoped she didn't want to have sex. I was sure I'd make a complete tit of myself.

When I got back inside, Sami had turned out the lamp and pulled out her sleeping mat so there was enough room for me. I took off my boots and camouflage. I smelled pretty bad, but Sami wasn't exactly fresh either. I laid right on the edge of the mat so I wasn't touching her and wondered if I should make some sort of move; or if part of me would end up in a jar if I did.

Sami rolled over, so our legs were touching and her tits were pressing against my chest. Sami put her arm around my shoulder. As she breathed her whole body shuddered.

'All the things I've done,' Sami sobbed. 'I'll be dead soon...I'm going straight to hell.'

It was the last thing I expected. She'd cut a guy's throat out as casually as I'd scratch my arse. I thought she was rock hard. Her arm crept around my back and she started sobbing out of control.

'You'll be OK,' I said.

'I see all their faces in my dreams. All crying and stuff...'

I pulled her as tight as I could.

'You won't die Sami. The war can't last forever.'

'Mum and Edo and the others are dead. I'm never going to see them. Me and Dad are going to hell.'

'After what I did tonight, I'll be there with you,' I said, rubbing her neck.

Sami laughed a tiny bit, 'That frown you gave me when I was going to kill you. I knew I'd see it in my nightmares, over and over again. That's why I couldn't shoot the gun.'

I was starting to cry a bit as well; thinking about Dad and Adam and the two guys I killed. The one shooting at me seemed fair enough, but I didn't even see the other one's face. What would happen when his wife or his Mum found out? Maybe he had a kid. I'm not sure if I felt sorry for myself, or for the dead guys; it just felt right to cry with Sami.

Our sobs shook each other. I ran my nail over Sami's sweaty back, tickling gently.

'That feels nice,' she said.

'We can live together in hell,' I said. 'We'll have a big red house with a giant fire in every room.'

Sami smiled, 'It's not funny Jake.'

'Twenty red babies with long tails and forked tongues.'

'Don't you believe in hell?' Sami asked.

'Not really.'

'What do you believe in, Jake?'

'Nothing, I guess.'

Sami kissed my cheek and rolled away, 'You're crazy.'

I reached across and rested my hand on her bum. She nudged it away.

'Not now,' She said softly. 'I'm so tired.'

I watched her outline gently rise and fall with each breath. It was ages before I fell asleep.

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A half drunk beer bottle laid on the floor with ants crawling around the opening. I'd slept after sunup, something you could only do if you were exhausted: the heat inside is unbearable and the huts did a rotten job keeping out the sunlight. Sami hadn't been up long. Her part of the mat was still warm. I rolled into her sweat, breathed her smell and wondered where she was.

As soon as you start asking yourself where a girl is when she's not around, you're in trouble. I was always falling in love with girls. Red tracksuit girl was a classic example of how stupid I was. She didn't go to my school, but she went out with a guy in our football team. She'd come to matches on Saturday mornings and stand on the touchline, stamping her feet to keep warm. She usually wore a denim jacket and red Adidas tracksuit bottoms with a rip over the knee.

I never spoke to her, but I started thinking how great it must be to have someone who cared enough about you to come and watch you play football in the cold. I started looking forward to seeing her. Then I found myself awake in the middle of the night thinking about her. Friday nights, I'd be counting down the hours until I saw her. I tried to think up some way to start a conversation. I killed myself with envy, imagining my team mate snogging her and touching her up. It was pathetic, but I was nuts about her.

'Didn't see your girlfriend today,' I said, in the shower one Saturday after a match.

'Dumped her,' the boyfriend shrugged. 'She drove me crazy, followed me everywhere I went.'

I knew it was a stupid crush, but it ripped my heart out knowing I'd never see red tracksuit girl again. I stood in a corner of the shower, facing the tiles and trying not to cry.

It had been the same ever since I started getting into girls. Dumb infatuations, clumsy snogs, striking out in front of all my mates. I never seemed to get it right. The girls in my class rated all the boys out of ten and I finished third out of eleven guys. So I knew I wasn't a freak; but I was still paranoid that I'd end up some lonely old guy doddering back from Sainsburys carrying cans of dog food and frozen meals for one.

The thought of going through it all again over Sami filled me with dread. Then I'd think about her. Some little detail, like the shape or her eyes, or how great it was when she had her arm around me and I'd get a twinge of happiness. I'd got it so bad it wasn't funny.

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I crawled out of bed and wandered down to the pool. Amin was there fetching water, he gave me a thumbs up sign and a smile. He muttered something, but you could never understand a word he said. I nodded and returned the thumbs up. Don was now the only one left who hadn't accepted me.

As soon as Amo saw me, she slapped a fish in her pan and started cooking it for me with some tomato and banana slices.

'Sami and Desi said you did a good job. You should be proud of yourself'

'Thanks,' I nodded. 'Did you get the medicine?'

'I've got all I need. Replaced the morphine I used on Ben. Loads of bandages, antiseptic and dressings. There's even some antibiotics.'

'Where did Sami go?' I asked.

'Same as everyone else I expect: helping to unload the truck.'

'I should go and help.'

I stood up to leave.

'I'm making your breakfast, Jake.'

'Oh, right,' I said, sitting back down. 'I'm starving.'

'Beck was looking for you to go hunting. He said you didn't sleep in Ben's hut last night.'

'No, I stayed with Sami.'

'Did you now?' Amo said, grinning from ear to ear.

'We didn't do anything. Just had a few beers and went to sleep.'

Amo scraped my food onto a metal plate. I started eating with my fingers. Amo's cooking was pretty basic, but it always tasted good.

'Sami's got a soft spot for you,' Amo said. 'But you want to be careful. Captain is very protective towards her and if you upset him, it'll be you that comes off worst.'

I walked down the hill to help the others unload the truck. I passed a few people carrying stuff on the path. They all smiled and told me I did a good job.

Sami was down by the truck, helping some of the others chop off branches and cut a clearing to hide the truck in. She went up on tiptoes and kissed my cheek.

'Morning Killer.'

Jesus started singing, 'Love is in the air.'

Sami gave him a filthy look, 'Go stick your head down a toilet.'

Don loaded me up with three sacks of rice. By the time I got them up to camp, my camouflage was drowned in sweat. I threw my top off and headed back down the hill for a second load. I lost my footing and slipped. The dirt stuck to my wet skin, like breadcrumbs on a piece of fish.

There wasn't much left to carry. The truck had been driven as deep into the trees as possible. Palms and branches were laid all over it. Don and Jesus headed off with the last sacks slung over their backs, leaving me and Sami to carry four catering sized cans of beans.

'Race you,' Sami said.

She stuck a giant can under each arm and started off running up the hill. Before I'd even had time to pick my cans up, Sami stumbled and hit the dirt. I burst out laughing, then started running with my cans. Sami stuck her leg out and tripped me up. One of my cans rolled off down the hill. I was too tired to go after it. We sat there and watched it crash through the bushes while we brushed dust off ourselves.

'Cheat,' Sami said.

'You tripped *me* up.'

Sami went for my nipple again.

‘Stop doing that, it’s bloody agony.’

‘Make me Killer.’

I jumped on top of her and wrestled her fingers off me. She tried to tickle my ribs, but I managed to pin both of her wrists to the ground. She relaxed all her muscles and smiled at me. I stared into her eyes.

‘Am I gonna lay here like this all day, or are you going to kiss me?’ Sami asked.

11. RAIDS

The first few days, me and Sami just kissed and cuddled. The forth morning we started messing about, wrestling on the sleeping mat. We both got really horny and ended up having sex. I felt like climbing up the highest tree and shouting to the whole world that I'd lost my virginity to a hot African chic. I reconsidered when I remembered that the hot African chic's Dad had an office with dried blood on the floor and a tendency to pull out people's teeth.

To start with we were at it every half hour; but Sami was scared of getting pregnant. There wasn't any contraception around, so we had to give up except for special occasions. We were always looking for excuses: a successful mission, a nice sunset, Sami bending over in front of me. What was the point being sensible? We could be dead in a few hours.

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The rebels didn't have the muscle to fight the army head on. Our job was to cut off supplies of fuel, food and weapons being sent to government troops on the front line further east. Most missions were ambushes. We walked fifteen or twenty kilometres, chopped down a few trees to block a road and waited. As soon as the truck drivers saw the blockade, they knew it was an ambush and tried to escape. You had to shoot out the back tyres to stop them reversing away. Once the tyres were gone, they usually tried to escape into the bushes. A few put up a fight, but they never got more than a couple of shots off before they died.

What happened next depended on who was in charge. Don and Jesus killed the soldiers even when they put their hands up to surrender. Desi and some of the others took their weapons and boots and let them go. If Sami was in charge, it depended on what mood she was in.

Killing was easy. When it's pitch dark, steaming hot, your heart is banging in your ears and any second someone could waste you, whatever kind of morality you have goes out the window. I had a driver beg for his life on his knees in front of me. Maybe he was a nice guy. Maybe the money he sent home to the city was all that stopped his kids from starving. But all I could think about was that I'd be in a bit less danger if he was dead. So one tiny pull on the AK47 and a line of bullets blew him to pieces. I've watched him die a thousand times in my head. I can hear the little groan he made as his chest exploded. Sometimes I hate myself for doing it, but put me back there and I'd do it again.

Single truck ambushes were most common and easiest to handle. Convoys of two and three were OK. You threw a few grenades and made a big mess, then picked off as many soldiers as you could before burning out the trucks.

Big convoys were a nightmare: ten or more trucks, all with at least two men on board. You wanted to run away, but it was too good an opportunity to pass up. There were usually three or four of us on a raid. One would drop back and shoot at anyone who touched the roadblock. The rest ran through the bushes, throwing grenades into the back of the trucks. The trucks at the back didn't know what the hold up was at the front, so they wouldn't try and reverse out. The bad thing was, a big convoy was always guarded by mercenaries or a group of special guards. They were good shooters, fast runners and they were paid a special bounty if they caught one of us alive. If you got chased, you had to stay in the jungle for a couple of days in case you were being tracked.

Back at camp, you were too stressed to live a normal life. I took Becky swimming and went hunting a few times, but my heart wasn't in it. All the fighters were the same. We'd wake up, often with a hangover, then sit about camp all day, spoiling for a row and bored off our heads. We were usually tired, but it was too hot to sleep.

The ultimate nightmare was having your rifle jam. I spent an hour every day, cleaning, lubricating and polishing off specks of rust. Guns were sacred objects. We each had our own ritual of checking and double checking for faults. There were as many opinions about guns as there were soldiers. Some reckoned new guns were best and got a fresh one whenever they could. Sami, used a decrepit Chinese AK47. She swore it hadn't jammed in the five years she'd had it and wouldn't give it up for anything. Don reckoned Chinese made AK47s were rubbish. He went around with two short stocked M16s in holsters, like a gunslinger. Desi reckoned short guns were stupid, because you couldn't hold them to aim. I heard the same crap every day, but I always tuned in, hoping for the little gem of advice that might save my life.

Sometimes there was wood to chop or a building to repair, but it was never much. Mid-afternoon, Captain always called us into a circle for a briefing. He told us who was going where that night, what intelligence reports he'd had on where convoys were heading and which of the local bases had supplies worth stealing.

Unless it was more than twenty kilometres, we usually set off just after sundown. It was the peak time for mosquitoes and there was a sense of dread about the walk. My thighs and ankles never stopped hurting. Once my feet hardened off I stopped getting blisters, but they still ached the whole time. The back of my camouflage was permanently stained with blood where my pack scoured off my skin.

We walked four hours on average, followed by several hours waiting if it was an ambush. As you got closer, the adrenalin kicked in and time started to move slow. The raids themselves never lasted long. Ambushes were over in five minutes. If you raided an army base, you were rarely inside more than twenty. These flashes of excitement seemed like my whole life. The rest of the time was like being in suspended animation, wondering if you'd be alive this time the next day.

If you had to walk back to camp, it would be at least 3AM before you arrived. A lot of the time, it took a few beers to numb the pain in my shoulders and legs, and calm down enough to sleep. Half the time you'd keep waking up with nightmares. By 7AM the sun was blasting your hut. If you got five hours a night, you were lucky.

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Sami was laughing her head off.

'I'm never gonna be able to do this,' I moaned.

'Calm down killer. Push down the clutch and turn the engine back on.'

The engine of the pickup choked a few times before it started to turn. A blue plume rose out of the exhaust. I lifted the clutch as gently as I could and the Subaru started to roll.

'That was excellent,' Sami said. 'Now, change up to second... Keep looking where you're going, not down at the gears.'

We started to get up a bit of speed. There were so many bumps, it was like I was doing ten rounds with the steering wheel.

'Put it into third gear.'

I flicked it neatly into third and finally started to feel I was getting the hang of driving. I had to squint to avoid the sun. The inside of the cab was about 50C and the air conditioning had a piece of tape over it saying *Do Not Use*. Every piece of trim rattled and you got the impression that the whole shebang would disintegrate on the next bump.

'This is cool,' I said. 'So how come we can drive down here in daylight?'

'No road is totally safe, but the army always travels east to west, this is a dead end heading south. The only way they'd ever come down here is if they're lost, or hunting for the likes of us.'

'Turn left here,' Sami said. 'Start slowing down and drop into second gear.'

We pulled up at a village of abandoned wooden huts. They looked more solid than the makeshift affairs we lived in, although the land was overgrown with weeds. We parked the Subaru out of sight of the road.

'I remember when about a hundred people lived here,' Sami said.

'What happened to them?'

'Same as every other village. The men and boys either ran into the hills and joined the rebels, or got forced into the army. We stole all the food. When they got hungry, most of the women tried to go west towards the capital, but they had little kids and stuff. Not many of them made it. The only civilians left in these parts were a few old timers. Most of them are dead now.'

'Why did you steal their food?'

'We were too busy fighting to hunt. If we didn't steal the food, the army burned it to stop us getting it. In the west, we burned food so the army couldn't feed it's troops. People think weapons are the most important thing in a war, but you're nothing without a bit of food in your belly.'

'Some people must have starved.'

'Dad saw a newspaper,' Sami said. 'It claimed forty thousand people died fighting in the first year of the war, but over a million starved. Half of them were children.'

'Fucking hell.'

'Yeah, hell,' Sami shrugged. 'That's where everyone in this country is heading.'

'You were only a kid,' I said. 'You can hardly blame yourself.'

'My very first raid, we went into a village like this one. Threatened everyone with guns and took their food. I was only eleven, but they needed an extra set of hands to carry everything away. All the women were crying and begging. A couple of them got slapped around.'

'I thought I was fighting for the good guys,' I said.

'It's a war, Killer. There aren't any good guys, just people doing what they can to stay alive.'

We wandered around the village, looking inside the huts. The villagers had only taken what they could carry. In one musty hut I picked a cockroach nibbled book off the floor. I opened the page to a cartoon of Noah's ark, with penguins on the deck and two giraffes heads poking through the roof. I couldn't read the text, it was all in French, but I could imagine a bunch of kids sitting under a tree listening to an old woman reading the bible stories. A postcard of the Eiffel tower slid out from between the pages. I showed it to Sami.

'That's where I'm taking you when this is over.'

'Yeah right,' Sami laughed, 'It's in Paris isn't it?'

'They say it's the most romantic city on earth.'

'Have you been there?' Sami asked.

'Once. I thought it was really boring, but I was only a kid.'

'I'll miss you if you go home, Jake.'

I'd realised I might have to choose between Sami and going home. It was something I tried not to think about, but Sami mentioning it choked me up. She looked a upset as well. We went outside and sat in the sun with our arms around each other's backs.

...

Rebel groups met on neutral ground, so if the army caught you, you only knew the location of your own camp. Meetings between units were a complicated business. Everyone suspected everyone else, and was terrified of being ambushed by mercenaries or followed by spies.

We were in the village to meet two soldiers from Casino's unit. His was supposed to be the largest and most active rebel group in our area, with sixty fighters and three separate camps; but nobody knew anything for sure. We had an envelope of written messages from Captain. The back of the pickup was full with grenades and flour, which we were exchanging for some lightweight pistols and ammunition.

Our contacts were over an hour late. Sami was getting nervous. If they'd been captured by the army and given our location away, we were in deep shit.

'Ten minutes,' Sami said, looking at my watch. 'It's dodgy to wait any longer.'

Right after she said it, we heard something on the road. We clicked our rifles onto automatic fire and hid in the bushes near the pickup. An army jeep pulled up on the other side of the village. Sami fired a single

revolver shot into the air. One of the women in the jeep fired two shots back. If she'd returned a single shot, it would have been a signal to bail.

'Showtime, killer.'

We climbed out of the bushes. The jeep drove between the huts and pulled up beside our pickup. The two women were nearly as tall as me, with giant arses bulking up their camouflage. They jumped down and started hugging Sami.

'Hey Sami. How's business up your way?'

Sami nodded, 'Not bad. Plenty of supplies, but we've lost a few men lately.'

'Same for us,' one of the women said. 'According to Rebel Radio, we're mounting a big push. We might not be cut off from the east for much longer.'

'I miss the radio,' Sami said. 'Ours got broke the last time we moved camp.'

'And who is the handsome young stranger?'

Sami smiled, 'We call him Killer. He fell out of the sky.'

'He's lovely, can I give him a kiss?'

'Feel free,' Sami giggled.

One of the fat women smothered me and sucked my face. As she did it, she cupped her hand between my legs and rubbed it against my balls.

'What a lovely boy,' she howled.

Sami was killing herself laughing.

'What he really likes,' Sami said. 'Is if you twist his nipple really hard, like this.'

I dived backwards, but Sami was too fast. I screamed in pain and the three women laughed for about ten minutes. I was steaming, but I knew I'd only make it worse if I got angry.

...

'Stop sulking and grow up for god's sake,' Sami said. 'It was only a bit of fun.'

Sami was driving. She went about twice as fast as me and made it look easy.

'My nipple's really sore. If you carry on twisting it, it's gonna drop off.'

'If you say so, Killer.'

'It's not funny.'

She started laughing so bad you could hardly understand what she was saying.

'The look on your face when she grabbed your balls. Your eyebrows went up so high, I thought they were gonna shoot right off your head.'

I stared at my lap, sulking.

'Tell you what, misery guts, lets do a quick detour.'

'Where?'

‘We’re only a few kilometres from where me and Ben first found you. We could drive up there and see where your brother ended up.’

12. ADAM

We stopped the car briefly at the exact spot where I was found. It seemed weird to think that the kid who'd been laying in the road was alive and the fit rebel who stepped out of the pickup was dead.

We drove a couple of kilometres, seeing nothing except trees. Sami kept it fairly slow, looking out for any buildings or turnings that Adam might have ventured into. I could imagine Adam, taking his little steps with his arms swinging, getting more and more desperate and probably sobbing for Mum. Maybe he crawled into the trees, curled himself in a ball and died. It was a sad thought, but it was almost comforting compared to some of the stuff I could imagine.

The road went left and down a steep hill.

'We'll go another kilometre,' Sami said. 'We'll have to turn back then.'

I looked out the window and tried not to get upset.

'There,' Sami shouted.

She backed up and drove through an overgrown opening between the trees. There was a big house on two floors, built out of stone with a tin roof. It must have been the home of a wealthy European, back in colonial days. Half the roof was missing. The statues and windows were smashed and creepers covered the stone.

The front door wasn't locked. I stepped through with my gun drawn. My boot crunched some broken glass and a dank smell hit my nose. The floor was covered in fruit skins and chocolate bar wrappers.

'Adam?' I shouted.

I walked into the kitchen, half expecting to find his body. We checked all the rooms on the ground floor. As I turned to go up the stairs, I saw a skinny old woman with no teeth on the landing. Her hands were trembling.

'Please don't hurt me,' she said softly. 'I've been a good girl today.'

She started creeping down the stairs.

'Did you bring me food?'

I reached out to grab her arm and help her walk, but she flinched and burst into tears.

'Please don't hit me any more.'

I put my arm on her shoulder.

'Nobody is going to hurt you,' I said, as gently as I could. 'Don't be frightened of us.'

I walked her to a table in the kitchen. Her whole body was shaking. She was so weak, I felt like my hand would go right through her. I helped her sit on the only unbroken chair at the dining table. Sami brought some fruit and cooked rice out of the pickup. The old lady smiled when she saw it.

'This looks so nice,' She said.

She dug her grubby fingers in the rice and turned to Sami.

'You're a girl soldier. You don't usually come here.'

Sami smiled at her, 'I've never been here before. Do soldiers come here very often?'

'They hit me,' the lady said. 'And make me eat horrible food. It's a big joke for them.'

'I'm looking for my brother,' I said. 'Did a little boy come in here? He was wearing a green shirt.'

The lady looked up brightly, 'You mean Adam?'

I gasped with relief, 'That's right. I'm Adam's brother, Jake.'

'He got water for you,' the lady said brightly. 'But he couldn't find you when he went back. He was crying. I hid him from the soldiers. Then the fish soldier took him.'

'Who's the fish soldier?' I asked.

'He comes sometimes and brings me fish. He's not horrible like the others.'

I heard a car engine. Sami ran to the window. A big Nissan 4x4 was rolling into the driveway.

'Oh shit,' Sami shouted. 'Army. We're so screwed.'

'Don't let them hurt me,' the old lady sobbed. 'They push me around. It's a big joke to them.'

Four soldiers piled out of the Nissan and started shouting.

'Hey Grandma. I hear you've been a naughty girl today.'

'Time for some punishment,' another one said.

They were all laughing, right until they noticed the pickup. There was no way we could get back on the road, the Nissan was in our way. We ran out of the kitchen into the corridor, just as a soldier burst through the back door. He bundled the old lady off her seat and pointed his gun at her head.

'Where's your visitors Grandma?' he shouted.

We were on the other side of a thin wall. Sami spun around the doorway and fired her AK47 at the soldier, practically cutting him in half. Two more soldiers burst through the front door. I blasted them before they even saw me. Outside, there was a massive explosion.

The last soldier had thrown a grenade inside our pickup. The back was full up with the pistols and ammunition. The bullets cracked off one after another, like a firework display.

'Did you see where the last soldier went?' Sami asked.

I shook my head, 'No.'

'Don't let him get back to their car, Killer. We're sixty kilometres from camp. I don't know about you, but I don't fancy walking home.'

I ran out the front door, shielding my face from the heat off the burning pickup. There was no key in the ignition of the Nissan, and no sign of the soldier either. Me and Sami walked around the building in opposite directions, fingers on triggers, looking for him. The heat got so bad, the exposed roof timbers of the house started burning. Flames flashed across the whole roof in about thirty seconds. I sprinted into the hallway and searched the pockets of the two soldiers I killed for the ignition key.

The smoke was getting bad. The ceiling was starting to crack and looked like it could collapse on us any second.

'Got the key,' Sami screamed from the kitchen.

I ran into the kitchen. Our eyes met over the old lady. She'd managed to crawl across the floor and prop herself against one wall. I don't think she'd even realised there was a fire.

'Grab her legs,' Sami said.

We carried her out of the building. I opened the back door of the Nissan and we slung her across the seat. She can't have weighed more than thirty kilos. Sami climbed in the drivers side and started the engine. A burst of automatic fire ripped off as we reversed onto the road. I fired back at nothing in particular. The roof timbers of the house collapsed, crashing through the first floor and sending clouds of dust out of every window.

The tyres screeched as Sami accelerated off down the road. The Nissan had a lot of grunt and the giant wheels gave a much smoother ride than the pickup. I leaned over the centre console and switched on the air conditioning.

'This is a much better car,' I said.

Sami practically bit my head off. 'Do you think this is good, you idiot?'

'We're alive, that's all I know.'

'For now, Killer. But everyone within twenty kilometres will have heard that blast. We could have army coming towards us from all directions.'

'Oh,' I said.

Sami grimaced, 'That's all you've got to say? And we've lost the pick-up.'

'It was a piece of crap; and we lost the guns in the back, but there's hundreds of guns in the store room at camp.'

'Captain's messages from Casino's group,' Sami said. 'What about them?'

'Were they that important?' I asked

'You can ask Captain yourself, right before he gets Don to whip your arse.'

As soon as she mentioned Don, I started to get nervous.

'It was intelligence,' Sami said. 'Details of who's raiding what and where. Information about other parts of the war and what supplies are coming through. And on top of all that, there's Grandma in the back there.'

'What are we gonna do with her?' I asked.

'What we should do is chuck her out of the car and let the leopards eat her. But my conscience isn't up to it. Do you want to do it?'

'No,' I said. 'Besides, she might know more about what happened to my brother.'

'She might,' Sami said. 'But Captain isn't exactly going to welcome her with open arms.'

'Can't you sweet talk him? He is your Dad.'

'That counts for something,' Sami said. 'But it's not gonna get us off the hook.'

...

Kids usually exaggerate: *I'm in so much trouble, my Dad is gonna kill me*, so I thought Sami was probably laying it on a bit. Was she hell.

As soon as he found out what happened, Captain made us sit in his office in the darkness. The sun had only just gone down. It felt like there was no air and the heat was unbearable. He made us sit dead still, with our backs straight, ankles crossed and our palms flat on the table in front of us. Don sat behind, breathing right in my ear.

Captain placed a gas lamp on his desk. As he spoke, he heated a metal teaspoon over the flame.

'The explosion must have been very loud,' Captain said. 'Are you sure nobody tracked you back here?'

'I drove really fast,' Sami said.

Captain pressed the hot spoon against the back of Sami's hand. She gritted her teeth as her skin sizzled.

'Daddy, please, let me explain.'

'Don't you dare call me Daddy. When you take command of a mission, all our lives depend on you. When you make a mistake, I cannot allow my affection to get in the way. You must be treated the same as all the others or I will lose their respect. Do you understand?'

'Yes Captain.' Sami sobbed.

Captain looked at me, 'You said the pickup was burned and that there was no way my documents could survive.'

'Yes,' I said.

Captain moved the hot spoon over my hand, so I could feel the heat. I was shaking so bad I couldn't breathe.

'Is there a chance that the papers were removed before the car was detonated?'

'I don't think so.'

Captain pressed the spoon against my hand. I could have moved my hand away, but I'd have got something even worse if I had.

'Answer my question accurately. Could you see the pickup from the moment the soldiers arrived until the vehicle exploded?'

I shook my head, 'No.'

'So my documents could have fallen into enemy hands?'

'Yes, I suppose'

Captain looked at Sami, 'Why didn't you go back and try to kill the fourth soldier, when he might have the documents?'

'I made a judgement,' Sami said. 'I don't think he got the documents and we could have both been killed if we'd gone hunting for him. I think it was the right decision under the circumstances.'

Captain nodded, 'On balance, I agree. It seems unlikely the documents were stolen... Now Sami, I want you to think carefully and tell me everything you did wrong.'

'I should have obeyed your orders and driven straight back to camp,' Sami said. 'I should have taken your documents with me when I left the car. I shouldn't have brought the old lady back with us. I should have gone into hiding overnight in case anyone was tracking us.'

Captain nodded, 'Do you think you deserve to be punished for this?'

'Yes,' Sami said quietly. 'Of course I do.'

'What about you Jake?' Captain asked. 'What did you do wrong?'

I couldn't think what to say. The end of the spoon was getting so hot the metal was turning orange.

'Sami was in command,' Captain said. 'Did you disobey any of her orders?'

'No,' I said.

'Was it your idea to go and look for your brother?'

'Partly,' I said.

'It wasn't,' Sami said. 'Jake didn't even know we were near to where we found him.'

Captain quickly dabbed the back of my hand with the spoon. Don laughed in my ear as the smell of my burned skin wafted upwards.

'Never lie to me,' Captain shouted. 'Mistakes are understandable and will be punished lightly, but I cannot tolerate liars.'

'No,' I sniffled. 'It was Sami's idea.'

I felt really bad that all the blame was getting put on Sami.

'So,' Captain said, looking back at his daughter. 'Am I correct in saying that Jake did nothing wrong that wasn't because of an order from you?'

'Yes,' Sami said.

Captain flicked me away with his hand.

'In that case Jake, you'd better go.'

'It's not fair for Sami to get all the blame,' I said. 'It's at least partly my fault.'

Captain looked at me coldly, 'It's very noble of you to defend my daughter. But the matter is closed and I want you to leave.'

I walked to Amo's hut, to get the burns on my hands treated. Amo had washed and fed Grandma and dressed her in a set of clean camouflage that was way too big for her. She was sleeping in the back of the hut with Becky curled up beside her.

'Did you get any beats?' Beck asked.

'No. Captain says it's all Sami's fault.'

Beck laughed, 'I hope she gets whipped.'

I dived inside the hut and grabbed Beck by his t-shirt.

'Do you want a punch in the mouth?'

Amo pulled me off him, 'Cool it boys. Beck, that's not a nice thing to say.'

Beck shrugged, 'I got beaten when Edo died. Sami laughed.'

'Show me your hands,' Amo said.

She looked at the oval marks under her gas lamp.

'It's nothing much,' Amo said. 'It'll sting for a couple of days. Stick your hands in cold water if it starts to hurt.'

...

Sami was in with Captain for another hour. I walked to the water barrel and listened at the office door. I couldn't understand what was being said, but Sami was definitely crying. I went back to our hut and waited in the darkness.

When Sami came in she was all stiff shouldered. She sat on our sleeping mat and pulled off her boots, without saying a word.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'For what?'

I shrugged, 'Everything.'

She unbuttoned her jacket, threw it on the floor and laid face down on the mat. Her back glistened with blood. There were six deep welts where she'd been whipped. I reached for my gun.

'I'll kill him,' I shouted.

Sami grabbed my arm, 'Don't be a moron.'

'What kind of Father does that to his daughter?'

'Don't you get it?' Sami shouted. 'He's right. We broke orders and took a stupid risk. We could have been tracked back here. They could have killed everyone. Not just the fighters, but Amo and Beck and all the little kids as well.'

'But what good does whipping you do?'

'If you're stupid, you get punished,' Sami said. 'It's called discipline. The commander we had before Dad took over this unit would have smashed all our fingers for a stunt like that. If Dad wasn't here, Don would run the unit. Do you think you would have walked out with a couple of little burns if he was in charge?'

'You're right, I suppose. It just doesn't seem fair. You tried to do something nice for me and you got punished.'

Sami smiled, 'Don't worry about it. I stopped expecting anything in life to be fair the day I came home from a piano lesson and found my Mum's head cut off and stuffed in the kitchen sink.'

...

Sami kept sobbing from the pain. Neither of us could really sleep that night.

'I'm not going without you,' I said.

Sami had been dozing off, 'What?'

'You know earlier, in the village? You said you'd be sad if I left.'

'Yes.'

'I'm going to find Adam. Then I'm going to find a way out of here and you're coming with me.'

'OK,' Sami said, but I could tell she didn't believe me.

'I swear on my life. I won't go without you.'

Her hand glided gently over my thigh.

'Maybe none of us will ever get out of here,' Sami yawned. 'Try and go to sleep. I'm sick of thinking about stuff.'

13. FISH

All the rebel leaders had code names. Captain, Blink, Dickens, Sunflower and Casino were the ones I'd heard of. Messages went back and forth all the time. When someone went off to meet with another group, gossip always travelled with the messages: who'd been killed, where the mercenaries were, who was shagging who. I'd never met any of the people they spoke about, but I'd heard so much about them, it felt like I did.

At afternoon briefing, Captain announced he was having a face to face meeting with Casino and Sunflower in a few days time. It almost certainly meant a big raid was going down. Everyone reckoned it was linked to the rebel push we kept hearing about.

Everyone sat in their normal spots under the trees, tossing around theories about what the mission might be. Nobody would admit to being scared, but you could sense it in people's voices.

...

Grandma spent all day sitting under a tree watching the world pass by. The baggy camouflage with rolled up cuffs and ankles hung off her like a clown suit. She'd been motionless for hours, with an insect covered orange resting in her lap. She seemed happy and I was proud we'd rescued her. It was the one decent thing I'd done since I got here.

I crouched in front of her.

'Do you mind if we talk now?' I asked.

She smiled, but didn't open her eyes.

'It's a big joke to them,' she mumbled. 'They spat in my food.'

Sometimes Grandma made sense. Other times she mumbled out of control, trapped in her own nightmares.

'The man who took my brother,' I said. 'What was it you called him?'

'The fish soldier,' Grandma said. 'The most beautiful silver fish.'

'Why didn't you hide Adam from him?'

'I couldn't keep Adam safe. Fish soldier could.'

'Do you know what base he would have taken my brother to?'

'He came to see me with fish. He didn't hurt me like the others. It's a big joke to them.'

Grandma started to cry. She slumped forward and I put my arm around her.

'I asked them not to hurt me,' she sobbed. 'It made them laugh when I cried.'

'We won't hurt you here. You're safe now.'

'You and Adam are nice boys. You wont hit me, will you?'

I took the half eaten orange out of Grandma's lap and replaced it with a fresh one, then I wandered into the trees to Sami. She was depressed and didn't want to sit with the others. Her cuts had scabbed over, but she was still in pain and ashamed that she'd lost the messages.

'Got you an orange,' I said, kissing her on the cheek.

'Fantastic,' Sami said sarcastically. 'All my problems are solved.'

'Does your Dad have a map?' I asked.

'What of?'

'Around here; like where all the military bases are. I want to work out what base the soldier who took Adam came from.'

'Sure he's got a map. But there's loads of roadblocks and bases.'

'It's a start though,' I said. 'Will you help us look for Adam?'

'Why not?' Sami said. 'It's only everyone's life you'll be putting at risk. Plus Grandma's half off her rocker. This whole fish thing is probably just in her imagination.'

'She remembered Adam's name.'

'I suppose.'

'I've got to try and find him. I bet you'd keep looking if it was Edo.'

'See Captain,' Sami said. 'He might have some ideas.'

...

I waited until Captain went off to smoke a cigar. I stood in front of him, not sure if I was going to get yelled at.

'How's Sami?' Captain asked.

'Pretty upset.'

'I don't like being a tough guy, Jake. But I'm in charge of a bunch of kids with guns and grenades. You need strong discipline or we end up fighting ourselves and getting killed.'

'Sami knows that,' I said. 'I feel guilty she got punished when she was helping me.'

'She's got it for you, big time,' Captain said. 'I suspected as much the first day she dragged you back here.'

I smiled uneasily, 'She's beautiful.'

'My wife was sixteen when I married her. Sami looks a lot like her.'

'That's young,' I said.

'It's not like in Europe. A lot of girls out here get married at fourteen or fifteen and have a litter of kids by the time they're twenty.'

Captain took a long drag on his cigar and stared up at the sky.

'Sami was such a sweet kid before the war. Very feminine: dolls, prams, all the girly stuff. I remember her going to her first party. I got her one of those dresses with angel wings on the back. You couldn't get her to

wear anything else. Her Mum had to wash and dry it after she went to bed, so she could put it back on when she got up the next morning.'

'I can't imagine her like that.'

'Anyway,' Captain said. 'They say nostalgia is a refuge for the weak minded. What is it you want?'

'What makes you think I want something?'

'Because you can't look me in the eye, you've got your hands in your pockets and your trainers scuffing in the dirt. It's common knowledge that if you want to ask me for something, I'm always in the most relaxed mood when I'm sitting on this rock smoking.'

Captain might have had a psycho thing going on, but you couldn't help admiring his intelligence. I told him what Grandma said about the fish soldier.

'Soldiers don't go fishing,' Captain said. 'And they never travel alone.'

'You think Grandma's lost the plot?'

'Not necessarily. I'd bet a few dollars that the man who took your brother away is a deserter.'

'What's that?'

'There's a lot of bullying and cruelty in the army. Some soldiers can't hack it and run away. Most deserters try and find their way home and end up getting caught, but a few go native. They hide in the jungle and live by hunting.'

'So you think Adam's probably safe?'

'The soldier was regularly bringing fish to Grandma, so it sounds like he's a caring person who's not short of food. He's probably built himself a decent shelter. It's not an easy life out there, but tribes have survived in the jungle for hundreds of thousands of years.'

'Do you think we'd be able to find them?' I asked.

'We know he brought her fish, which doesn't stay fresh long in the heat. He probably lives near to the water, or spends most of his time there. If you looked on the map, found the nearest decent sized river or lake to where Grandma lived and spent some time poking around, there's a chance you'd either find where he lives or see him by the water fishing.'

'Can I go and look for him?'

'After the explosion and the house burning down, that area will be crawling with army for the next few days. But I did promise that if you fought for us, I'd help you find Adam. Every report I've had says you've shown courage and done good work. We'll give it a week for things to calm down, then I'll let you and Sami go up there and take a look.'

14. MONEY

The rumour was, Casino lived in grand style in a secret camp that had electricity and running water. Some claimed he received deliveries of weapons and luxury goods by helicopter, paid for out of a personal fortune stashed in an overseas bank. It's hard to say what was true and what was tenth hand myth passed around on hot afternoons. One thing was for sure, Casino got good information from his network of spies and all the other rebel groups relied on it.

Every so often, the government sent a convoy of money up to the front lines to pay the troops. It was the hardest convoy of the lot: loads of trucks, supposedly guarded by heavy weapons, mercenaries and the President's elite guard. Casino had found out when the money was coming and even what route it was taking, but his fifty men wouldn't be enough to take it down. He needed Captain and Sunflower's fighters to stand a chance.

It wasn't just that we could use the money. The government hadn't bothered paying its troops for a couple of months and there had been rioting in army bases near the front line. If we stole their wages, the government troops would probably riot again, giving the rebels a perfect opportunity to launch an attack from the east.

If the government troops rioted, then the rebels broke through and advanced about a hundred kilometres, we wouldn't be isolated behind government lines anymore. The women and kids would be able to move east, away from the fighting and I'd probably be able to get across the border into Uganda and fly home. There was a big chain of ifs and lot of danger between me and Heathrow airport, but I could finally see a way out of the jungle.

...

'We've all got to fight this one,' Captain said. 'No excuses.'

Amo and Beck got guns. So did a couple of other women who usually stayed in camp. Grandma and a woman called Ghina who had a dodgy leg stayed behind with the kids.

We left camp in a big group. Amo hugged a tearful Becky, who couldn't understand why she couldn't come along. Everyone was a bit emotional. It was unlikely all of us would make it back, but there was also a feeling that it was worth the risk. All our lives might get better if we succeeded.

The truck we stole from headquarters was loaded up with sandbags, heavy weapons, food and ammunition. Don and Amin sat in the cab. Jesus and a few others made themselves as comfortable as they could in the back.

The other six of us were in the big Nissan. Desi drove, Captain rode beside him. Me and Sami were in the back with Beck sandwiched between us. Amo was squashed in the boot, legs astride a heavy machine gun mounted on a tripod. We kept all the windows open, so nothing would delay our fire if we encountered an army truck or unexpected roadblock. The dust billowed inside and the mosquitoes were drinking our blood like it was on special offer. Everyone was tense and quiet. There was nothing that hadn't been discussed a hundred times already.

...

It was an hours drive. We met an army truck half way out. The soldiers looked at our guns, we looked at theirs. Captain smiled at them and after a couple of tense moments, everyone decided it would be best if they didn't start shooting at each other.

The ambush site was a few hundred metres past the brow of a hill, so that the enemy had the least possible time to sight us. Apart from that, it was like any other overgrown section of dirt road. With the convoy not expected for another day, there was a party atmosphere. I met all the people from Sunshine and Casino's units; learning names and putting faces to the stories I'd heard.

I was the star of the show. Everyone wanted to shake hands with the English kid who dropped out of an aeroplane. Quite a bit of beer was flowing and the leaders kept warning us to stay sober and keep the noise down. A couple of people in Casino's unit even had radios. I wondered what was happening in the world, but the radios were set on stations playing African pop music.

...

After two days stuck at the side of the road, the novelty started to wear off. The tension got so bad I wanted to thump my head against a tree and knock myself out. All anyone ever spoke about was the convoy. *Why was it delayed? Did it alter its route? Did we have the correct dates? Did the convoy even exist? Had it already been ambushed by units further behind enemy lines? Was the whole thing a trap?*

When a storm broke, the ground got tramped into brown slush. We made the best shelter we could, using plastic sheets and branches. People were going to the toilet everywhere and there was nowhere to wash. We had to sit and sleep in the filth. It soaked through our camouflage, mixed with our sweat and itched like crazy.

Captain wanted to clear out before the unsanitary conditions made us ill. The three unit leaders spent an hour screaming at each other. Eventually they agreed to stick it out for another six hours. I showed Sami how to set my G-Shock to do a countdown. We sat together watching the minutes disappear; dreaming of soap flakes and getting some decent sleep.

There was less than an hour left on the countdown when it finally turned up. As soon as the first vehicle rolled over the hill, I realised we were in trouble. We'd been expecting trucks, which are made of thin

steel, with cloth canopies over the back. What we got was a fleet of six APCs: armoured personnel carriers. They were enclosed in armour, with four solid rubber tyres down each side. There was a small bullet proof windscreen for the driver to see through and a twin barrelled, 25mm machine gun on the roof.

Captain ran along the road, telling everyone to stay calm and go for the tyres. We had a few logs and a turned up truck blocking the road. The roof cannon on the first APC started ripping the logs to shreds. You could tell just from looking that the APCs were tough enough to ride the logs and barge away the truck.

Some idiot ran into the road and shot at the bullet proof windscreen. The double cannon didn't so much kill the gunman, as annihilate any suggestion that he ever existed. We all started blasting the tyres. Don fired our heavy machine from behind a wall of sandbags, ripping out great chunks of rubber. It's a good job Captain knew what to do: any stray bullets hitting the armoured metal pinged off without making a dent. When the first APC drew level, the troops inside began firing out the sides at us through narrow slits.

I kept flat to the ground. The trees around us were disintegrating. Splinters of smoking wood hurtled in a thousand different directions. Beck screamed as a beefy chunk speared the back of his leg. The APC's cannon blew away the sand bags and destroyed our machine gun.

One of Sunshine's soldiers showed a bit of initiative and started up a truck. It ploughed out of the bushes, smashing into the side of the first APC. The momentum pushed the APC off the road, and rolled it onto its side against a tree. It was pretty helpless with most of its weapons pointing at the earth or sky. The bullet proof screen at the front gave way after being pounded by dozens of rounds. Grenades were tossed through the hole. The heavy back door of the APC clanked open and the troops inside got shot to pieces as they tried get out.

Seeing the first APC destroyed was a massive boost. We felt like we had a chance.

I don't know how the woman in the truck didn't get shot when she t-boned the first APC, but she managed to reverse and smash head on into the second one. While it was immobile, and I guess all the soldiers inside were finding their feet and rubbing bumps on their heads, Beck limped into the road and wedged a grenade under the wheel arch. I'd have bet anything he'd get shot, but he found a bit of speed and crashed into the bushes beside me, just before the troops inside started firing again.

The grenade knocked out two of the tyres, disabling APC number two. With all the noise, we hadn't noticed that an APC from further back had pulled off road and was almost on top of us. Beck was fighting the pain in his leg, so I grabbed him and yanked him out of the way. There wasn't time to get clear. I dived flat to the ground, pinning Beck underneath me. My pack got crushed, but the tyres rolled by on either side of us, with the metal bottom clearing me by a few centimetres

Once the APC was past us, we crawled a few metres into the undergrowth. We grabbed our breath and clipped fresh magazines on our AK47s. It was my last one. All the rest got crushed inside my backpack.

'Are you OK?' I asked, looking at Beck's blood drenched leg.

Beck managed a bit of a smile, 'No.'

'Me neither,' I giggled.

I'm not sure what made me laugh. I guess it was relief at still being alive.

The APC's at the back of the convoy had been immobilised, but they'd each managed to unload some mercenaries. The ones that didn't get shot straight away cut deep into the jungle and attacked our rear. A couple of them were running towards me and Beck. We rolled behind a tree. I heard this loud Australian shouting in English:

'Come out and get blasted, little blackies.'

I thought he was shouting at us, but the cocky idiot didn't have the sense to shut his trap and use his ears. I poked my head out from the side of the tree and shot him between the eyes with the revolver. His mate pumped a few nervous shots into the tree and ran off. Beck fired a burst at him, but missed. I took the rifle and backpack off the dead Aussie. It was pretty heavy and I had no idea what was in it, but I'd lost mine and would need equipment if the battle lasted much longer.

The two of us moved from tree to tree, keeping low to the ground and ducking down behind each one. I don't know if it's good soldiering or not, but it's what they always did in Vietnam war movies. Back at the roadside, things seemed to be working out. Four APCs were burned out. One was disabled, with the troops still holding up inside and one - probably the one that rolled over my head - had escaped. It was most likely heading to the nearest base to bring reinforcements, so our next task was to grab the money and clear out fast.

A grenade went off inside the last APC, followed by a few short bursts of rebel gunfire. Then it went shockingly quiet. The air smelled of gunpowder and burned rubber. I could hear birds and crickets again, with my ringing eardrums providing a backing track.

I put my arm round Beck.

'You're one of us now.'

'Tell that girlfriend of yours what I did,' Beck said.

He was smiling, but looked slightly horrified at the bit of wood sticking out of his leg.

'Mum,' Beck shouted, looking around for Amo.

It made me sad hearing the high pitched shout. Beck still had a little boy's voice and there was a good chance he wouldn't live long enough for it to break.

Amo was down the front end of the convoy. The dead and injured were being lined up in the road. Out of our unit, Don died when the machine gun got blown up and a guy called Claude was squished under the APC that went over me and Beck. Desi had some fingertips in a grenade blast. Most people had shards of wood stuck in them. I had a few little ones in my face and chest. I don't think there was a single person who didn't have some kind of minor injury.

Amo was directing medical treatment for a few people who were badly injured. She pulled the wood out of Beck and tied on a bandage.

'Not too much pain?' Amo asked.

Beck winced, 'Quite a bit.'

'You'll live,' she said. 'Desi might not if we don't stop the bleeding. Go and help him.'

Amo had taught Beck some of her medical skills, but I was in the way. I spotted Captain and sprinted off towards him.

'Did we get the money?' I asked.

Captain nodded, 'Five sixths of it anyway. As far as we can tell, they split the cash evenly between the six APCs.'

'Have you seen Sami?'

'No,' Captain said. 'She's not among the dead or injured, but she could be stuck out in the trees.'

'Shall I look for her?'

'No. Casino is organising search parties. I want you to get the bullet proof jackets and helmets off the dead mercenaries. Most of those guys have loads of kit that's worth grabbing. Then I want you to put the injured and our share of the money and equipment in the Nissan and head back to camp. There's a risk you'll be followed. If I don't make it back before dark, I want you to organise two men to stay awake and guard the camp. I don't care how tired people are. We must have a proper guard tonight.'

'OK. What about Don and Claude?'

'No point carrying dead people back to camp.'

'And Sami?'

'Try not to worry about her, Jake. Hopefully she'll turn up before too long, but I don't want you hanging about waiting for her. You've got your orders.'

'I think our truck's blown up. How will you get back?' I asked.

'Looks like twenty or thirty got killed. We should have an empty vehicle I can grab. Otherwise it's a ten hour walk.'

Captain was right about the mercenaries. I worked with Jesus, collecting up their rifles, all of which had scopes, some of them with night vision. They also had lightweight Kevlar body armour and waterproof jackets and boots.

We loaded the Nissan. Amin took the drivers seat, which was a relief because I didn't feel experienced enough to drive such a long way. Beck squeezed on my lap in the front, with four in the back and Amo nursing Desi in the trunk.

The whole drive back, all I could do was worry about Sami.

15. NIGHT

We got back a couple of hours before dark. Grandma built a fire and started boiling water, so it was pure to clean Desi's wounds. Me and Amin did a few journeys to the Nissan, carrying the loot. I stashed the metal cash boxes in the store room under the main building, then I went down to the stream for a wash. I hadn't been down without Sami for weeks. The thought that she was dead or captured was freaking me out.

Beck turned up while I was feeling sorry for myself. He washed out his bloody trousers and started rubbing soap in his hair.

'How's your leg?'

'Torture,' Beck said. 'I was tempted to jab myself with the morphine, but Mum says it's addictive.'

'Desi?'

'He's getting all the morphine he wants. He's lost the tips off three fingers.'

'Did you see Sami?' I asked. 'She was with me until two minutes before the battle started.'

'I think she went in the bushes to go to the toilet. That's the last time I saw her.'

'I don't suppose you'd miss her if she was dead,' I said.

Beck shrugged, 'I always got on OK with Sami until Edo died.'

'I still can't believe that APC going over our heads. I thought we were dead.'

'Maybe we are dead,' Beck said. 'And heaven turned out to be a really crappy stretch of jungle.'

I laughed, 'If we're dead, this isn't heaven.'

'Mum wants me to get everyone's splinters out before they get infected. I'll do yours now if you want. The tweezers are in my pocket.'

I slid on a pair of shorts and sat on a rock. Beck ran his hand over my chest and face, feeling for spikes of wood. He counted fifteen and began the painful process of plucking them out. It took half an hour. By the end I had streaks of blood trickling everywhere.

...

I took guard duty once it got dark. There was a shelter at the top of the path, built specially for whoever was on guard. I was tired, but I was thinking about Sami and I knew wouldn't sleep. Amin sat with me. I was embarrassed to look at the tears running down his face. If one person had to die, I would have picked Don, but Amin was crushed.

I never found out the whole Don and Amin story, but I heard they were cousins and best friends from boyhood. Amin could read our lips, but Don was the only one who understood the strange sounds he made. He couldn't write, so with Don dead, he was cut off apart from nodding yes or no.

I offered Amin a bit of the melted chocolate I found in the Aussie's backpack. He shook his head. There were feet crunching on the path. I tapped Amin and we both switched our rifles to automatic.

I went running down. Captain had a couple of the women with him and two boys I didn't recognise.

'Did you find Sami?'

'No,' Captain said.

'How far did you look?'

'We looked,' Captain snapped. 'You've been her boyfriend for a month; I've been her father for sixteen years. It may surprise you to know it, but I do care about her.'

'I just asked.'

'Jake, I'm tired and I'm in a shitty mood. There's a chance Sami's been captured. We'll stand guard tonight and if she's not back by morning, we'll have to move the whole bloody camp.'

Captain looked back at the two new recruits.

'This is David and Joseph. Casino gave them to us.'

The brothers shook my hands. David was seventeen, my height, but more powerfully built. Joseph was only eleven, but he already had the *I don't give a shit* look of someone who'd seen a lot of action. One side of his face was badly scarred where he'd been burned. His eyelid hadn't healed properly, making his whole face twitch when he blinked.

'These guy's slept in the truck,' Captain said, looking at his new recruits. 'They'll take over here for a bit. You and Amin might as well get some rest.'

I didn't want to be alone, but I couldn't be asked to argue. As I laid in our hut, it sounded like no one else could sleep either. Amo was looking after Desi. Grandma was helping her and Beck had started taking out Captain's splinters. It's weird after a battle, you're tired as hell, but your heart won't stop racing and you can never sleep. I tried for nearly an hour, but all I could do was sweat, worry about Sami and pick at the scabs where the splinters came out. I lit a candle and started wondering what was in the dead Aussie's pack.

I tipped the whole lot out. There was a radio and a packet of spare AA batteries, binoculars, a set of cutlery, a metal compass, some ammunition and a cloth bag with a Gillette razor and some decent toiletries inside. I was most excited to find socks, boxers and t-shirts. They were a bit big for me, but I'd been rinsing out my only set every day since I got here.

There was also a plastic pouch filled with documents. I took out his passport and flipped it to the picture. *Kieran Paul Montgomery, born 20-11-1974, Townsville QLD, next of kin Eleanor Kate Montgomery, mother.* The other people I killed, I only had a few seconds to remember their faces. Knowing his name and seeing his stuff gave the whole thing gravity.

There was a photo of Kieran when he was about thirteen, standing barefoot with a little brother on either side and his parents behind. He looked stocky and gormless; definitely the kind of kid you'd expect to go out, join an army and get a thrill out of killing stuff.

There was a notebook as well, with a newspaper advert pinned inside.

*Ex Military Personnel Required
For security work in Africa and the Middle East
Exceptional Rewards for Suitable Candidates
Earn over US\$3,000 per month. Tax Free.
Call Gold Cross Security*

There was a phone number after it and his letter of employment form the Dubai office of Gold Cross. The notebook was full of phone numbers and addresses. Some of the entries were ex-girlfriends: *Donna (London, good shag), Donna (Cairns, now married), Donna (School g.friend)*. I was impressed by the number of women in his book. Right at the back, was a newspaper clipping, stuck down with crinkled up tape:

22 year old Army corporal Kieran Montgomery was sentenced to three years in prison and a further seven years probation, following the stabbing of a doorman outside a Gold Coast nightclub. He also faces a military tribunal following the reported mistreatment of suspects during a UN peacekeeping mission in Indonesia...

I guess he kept the cutting so he could show all his pals what a tough guy he was. There was a Visa card stuck underneath. I pulled it out. The PIN number was written where it had been taped.

...

‘OWWWW, God. Will you leave my sodding nipple alone for five minutes?’

She was filthy and she smelled bad, but she was alive.

‘Morning,’ Sami said.

‘Man... Are you OK? I couldn’t sleep, I was worrying about you so much.’

‘You seemed to be sleeping fine when I walked in.’

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It was just starting to get light.

‘I suppose you have to doze off eventually or you’d drop dead.’

She stood with one boot on either side of me and knelt over my stomach.

‘Kiss me.’

‘No way,’ I laughed. ‘Your breath stinks.’

She pinned my shoulders, blew her disgusting breath under my nose and ran her tongue up my cheek. Somehow, it managed to be sexy and gross at the same time.

‘Some boyfriend you are. I go missing and you don’t even want to kiss me.’

I put my hand around her neck and gave her a good snog.

‘I want to do a lot more than kiss you... Just, not the way you smell at the moment.’

‘This must count as a special occasion,’ Sami said.

I nodded eagerly, ‘There won’t be anyone down at the stream this early.’

...

We walked back from the pool, checking in to see Desi on the way. His hand was a mess, but it looked like he’d be OK.

‘So,’ I said, back in the hut. ‘What happened?’

‘It’s embarrassing,’ Sami said. ‘I’m gonna make some bullshit heroic story up for public consumption, but I’ll tell you the truth if you swear to keep it secret.’

This sounded good.

‘OK,’ I nodded. ‘I swear on my life.’

Sami smiled, ‘No, on me ripping off your nipple if you ever tell anyone else.’

‘OK, on the nipple. I swear. Just tell us.’

‘You know the last time I saw you, I said I was going to the toilet?’

I nodded, ‘Yeah.’

‘Well, it was getting pretty stinky near to the road, so I walked a couple of hundred metres into the trees and pulled down my trousers. While I’m sitting there peeing, this bullet hammered into a tree right beside me. I hadn’t heard any noise before that; it must have been the first shot fired. I jumped out of my skin and hit my head on a branch. When I came around, it was dark and I still had my trousers round my ankles.’

I started to laugh, ‘That’s superb. I’m telling everyone.’

‘You swore on the nipple,’ Sami said.

I was laughing so much I could hardly breathe.

‘Can it Killer, it’s not *that* funny.’

‘It is,’ I gasped. ‘So what are you going to tell everyone else?’

Sami shrugged, ‘Saw a couple of bad guys in the trees, chased them, killed them and couldn’t find my way back.’

‘Sound’s plausible. How did you get back?’

‘When I came around, I wandered to the road and realised you were all gone. There was army everywhere. I nicked one of their big Nissans and drove home.’

16. TRANQUILITY

There was a chance the government would flood the area with bad guys to try and get it's money back, so camp went into stealth mode. We didn't go on raids. We camouflaged our vehicles even more than usual, moved a couple of huts under the trees so that they wouldn't be seen if a helicopter went over, kept fires to a minimum and had two men on guard 24/7.

With the pressure of missions off us, we caught up on sleep and I relaxed for the first time in a month. I hunted with Beck most mornings. David and Sami came a few times and we all pissed Beck off by mucking about and not taking it seriously.

...

Me and Sami discovered our spot by accident. We were holding hands when we came to the giant crater a kilometre from camp where copper was mined before the war. All the trees had been taken out and the topsoil dredged down to the grey ore underneath. The rock would have been drilled, blasted and crushed; then trucked away for refining.

Some of the machinery had been abandoned. There was a massive dump truck, sunk down on deflated tyres. Anything portable, like the seats in the cab or the lamps on the front had been stripped away. What remained was rusty steel, with the odd burst of yellow paint.

Between the rocks, the jungle was growing back. Snakes, birds and lizards lived amidst tufts of grass and saplings. The dominant species was a stinky yellow flower. When a breeze hit, thousands of them swayed gently and sprung back, as if they were waving at us.

Me and Sami always sat in the same place; a shadeless patch of earth along the rim of the crater. We never kissed there, we hardly even spoke. We just laid still staring at the flowers and the clouds. The sun, that sapped our energy when we had to work or travel, made us warm and relaxed; almost like we were melting into each other. When we stood up to walk back to camp, our moist skin ripped apart like strips of sticky tape.

...

I gave Captain the Aussie's radio. We didn't leave it on all the time, because you couldn't just pop down the newsagent and buy another set of batteries. It was switched on for two fifteen minute bursts a night. Rebel Radio was our side's cheesy propaganda station. We'd all gather in the main building and listen to the news. We learned of the latest heroic triumphs and our continuing advance against demoralised government troops. On the turn of the next hour, we turned to the government station and got told how rebel troops were failing

in their desperate attempt to advance into government territory. The truth laid somewhere between the two sets of lies, but we had no way to know where.

...

There was always something scary about getting invited to Captain's office after dark, even though he didn't have Don to crank up the fear factor anymore. He'd asked me not to bring Sami, which was weird. A twenty centimetre stack of banknotes sat between us on the table.

'We're starting raid's again,' Captain said. 'I think enough time has passed for you to go and look for your brother. You can leave with Sami tomorrow.'

'Excellent,' I said.

After two weeks dossing about in the sun, I wasn't exactly thrilled about the prospect of doing anything; but it had to happen sometime.

'There's a more personal matter to deal with first,' Captain said.

'What's that?'

'Your relationship with my daughter.'

'Oh,' I said.

'I've decided it can't continue in it's present form.'

That was bad. Captain wasn't the sort of girlfriend's Dad where you could just say I don't care what you think and carry on seeing her.

'I take it you've been having sex?'

I'd learned the painful way that it was best not feed Captain lies, or even half truths.

'Yes,' I said.

'I take it you don't have a hidden cache of contraceptives?'

'No.'

'So, sooner or later, you plan on impregnating my daughter?'

'I certainly don't plan to.'

'But it can only be a matter of time,' Captain said.

'I suppose.'

Captain laughed, 'You *suppose*. Why do you only suppose?'

'OK,' I nodded. 'She's going to get pregnant before much longer.'

'Where does that leave Sami?' Captain asked.

'We'll... I love her.'

'That's nice Jake. But what happens if you rescue baby brother, head for home and I'm left with a sixteen year old daughter who's been knocked up?'

'I wouldn't do that to her.'

'I almost believe you, Jake. You seem like a decent young chap, but I can't let this relationship go on without you making a commitment.'

'What kind of commitment?'

'Marriage.'

Captain stayed quiet for a few moments, watching the thermonuclear explosion going off in my head.

'That's insane,' I eventually spluttered. 'I'm fifteen years old.'

'In my book, if you're old enough to have a sexual relationship, you're old enough to get married.'

'Well... I...'

It also means that when you leave here, Sami will go with you.'

That was definitely a major up side. I didn't ever want to leave her.

'I don't know what to say.'

'If you don't want to marry her. I'll have to send you to go and live with Casino's men.'

'But then I'll never see her again,' I said desperately.

Captain smiled.

'I can't even start getting my head around this.'

'We'll you'd better, Jake. I've already given it quite a lot of thought; which brings me to this.'

Captain nudged the pile of money on the desk.

'There are two ways for you to get home. If the rebel push succeeds, you can leave via the east. Take a bus into Uganda, where communications are fairly reliable and contact your Mother from there. This should be straightforward, but you'll still need this money for food and transport. If we fail in our advance, you could try leaving via the west towards the capital. Even with money, that will still be risky.'

'What if Sami doesn't want to marry me?'

'Persuade her. For my sake, as well as yours.'

'For your sake?'

I've lost a wife and five kids in this war. I want something more for my last child than to die out here from a bullet. Marry my daughter. Take her somewhere safe. You're a good person and I know you love her.'

Captain looked quite emotional.

'Even if I married her here, I'm not sure it would count in England. I'm too young.'

'If you love Sami, you'll find a way to save her. When Edo died, I prayed to god. I begged him to give Sami a chance of life. I think God sent you here to fall in love with her. I think you're here to answer my prayers.'

'It sound's nuts,' I shrugged. 'But I do love her.'

Captain went in his desk drawer. My mind leapt to the torture stuff, but he pulled out a bottle of whisky and a couple of plastic tumblers.

'Drink?'

I nodded. He filled my tumbler half way up. I shoved it down in two huge gulps.

...

'So, what did Dad want?'

I started to crack up laughing. If I kept my head still, the room carried on moving.

'Have you been drinking?' Sami asked.

I'd had two huge whiskeys with Captain, plus two beers and some vodka with Jesus and Amin.

'Absolutely not,' I slurred. 'You love me, don't you?'

Sami smiled. I pulled a vodka bottle out of my jacket.

'Would you like a drink?'

Sami twisted the top off the bottle and took a couple of mouthfuls.

'You're completely pissed, Jake. If you throw up on my sleeping mat, I'm gonna mop it up with your head.'

'Your father is insane.'

Sami laughed and drank a bit more.

'Why is he insane?'

'He thinks God sent me here to save you.'

'I know.'

'You don't understand... He wants me to marry you and take you home with me. Otherwise, he's gonna make me go and live with Casino's unit.'

'I know,' Sami said, calmly.

'What do you mean, you know? Are you listening to a word I'm saying?'

'Dad spoke to me this morning when you were out hunting.'

'We spent the whole afternoon together and you didn't say a word.'

Sami smiled, 'He asked me not to.'

'You're all bloody mad,' I said.

I grabbed the bottle of vodka off Sami and started to guzzle. She snatched it back off me before I drank the whole lot.

'Don't drink any more. We're supposed to go off looking for Adam in the morning and you'll be in a right state.'

She put the bottle to her lips and drained it.

'What did Captain say?' I asked.

'I think his exact words were: *If you get knocked up, I'll kill the pair of you. Marry him or I'll kick his worthless butt out of here.*'

'You couldn't talk him out of it?'

'He's got a point,' Sami said. 'If I get pregnant and you abandon me, I'm in a big mess. It's tough for a single Mum any place, but what's it gonna be like for me out here?'

'I could still abandon you. Men leave their wives all the time.'

'Dad's religious,' Sami said. 'As far as he's concerned, marriage is a vow made before god. If you break the vow, he doesn't have to worry because God will punish you for it.'

'The old trident up the arse theory,' I said.

Sami laughed, 'Pretty much.'

'It's cool anyway,' I said. 'I want to marry you. How could anyone not want to? You're totally hot. You want to marry me?'

'No,' Sami said. 'Not after a rubbish proposal like that.'

I pulled my revolver off the shelf and pointed it at my head. Sami started to laugh.

'I can't go on without you babe.'

Sami nodded, 'Better.'

'Life wouldn't be worth living. Will you marry me?'

Sami shrugged, 'All right then.'

'Cool,' I giggled. 'Is there any more booze about?'

17. PUNCH

It was barely light. I felt a bit delicate, but not bad considering the amount I'd drunk the night before. Captain unrolled a map on his desk. It showed about a hundred miles around camp, with major geographical features and roads. He'd added hundreds of his own markings, showing minor roads, footpaths, military installations and good spots for ambushes.

'So, any decisions yet?' Captain asked.

I nodded, 'Looks like we're getting married.'

'Thought you might,' Captain grinned. 'Welcome to the family... Anyway, I reckon Grandma lived about here.'

Captain tapped an area on the map.

Sami nodded, 'That's right, just after the bend in the road.'

'Like I expected, there's a big lake three kilometres into the bush. That's where you'll find your fisherman, if he's still around. Desi's going to drop you off. You'll have to walk the last ten kilometres, though. I still reckon it's dodgy sending a vehicle down that road. You'll probably have to search quite a big area to have any chance of finding Adam, so we'll pick you up tomorrow at sundown.'

...

'Oh shit,' Desi shouted. 'Never seen a roadblock down here before.'

When we planned an ambush, we always did it just around a corner, or past the top of a hill, so you were right on top before you spotted it. The army used the same strategy placing roadblocks. It was only fifty metres ahead.

'Shoot or run?' Desi asked, slowing the Nissan to a crawl.

Sami was in the front of the Nissan next to him.

'There's a line of spikes in the road,' Sami said. 'But there's only a couple of guys standing there. I say we take them out.'

'Could be more in the trees,' Desi said.

'It's just conscripts,' Sami said.

Desi nodded, 'You're the boss.'

He stopped about fifteen metres short of the spikes and wound down the window. A soldier stepped into the road.

'Come forward,' the soldier shouted, gesturing with his hand.

Desi leaned out and acted like he couldn't hear.

‘Pardon?’

Sami turned to me, ‘You get in the bushes. We’ll lure them out.’

I crept out the back door and sprinted into the trees. The soldier caught sight of me and started shouting at Desi.

‘Hey hey,’ The soldier shouted edgily. ‘What are you playing at?’

‘Pardon?’ Desi shouted again.

Three more soldiers heard the shouting and came out of a tent beside the spikes. When the soldier was about five metres short of the Nissan, Desi fired his AK47. A couple of rounds hit the soldier in the stomach. Desi reversed the Nissan around the corner, out of sight. Meanwhile, I’d scrambled through the bushes, positioning myself so the soldier who’d been shot was directly in front of me. He was squirming on the ground, hands over his guts and coughing blood out of his mouth.

The other three soldiers ran to help their stricken colleague. None of them had seen me get out and the one on the ground was in too much pain to warn them. I was worried there might be more soldiers in hiding, but there wasn’t much I could do if there was.

The three leaned over their colleague. They looked hopelessly at one another, with no clue how to give treatment. It felt unfair, killing them from such close range. I pulled the trigger. A couple of rounds hit one soldier in the back. Then my AK went quiet. I frantically pulled the trigger a couple more times, but all I got was a hollow clunk.

Time really does go slow when you’re scared. I watched the bloke I shot fall on top of the one Desi shot. The other two were turning towards me, clicking their M16s onto automatic fire.

I ducked down and crawled into the thick undergrowth, knowing I was in some deep shit. I took my revolver from its holster. It wasn’t going to be much help though: a revolver versus two M16s is like a bicycle going head to head with a tank. Bullets started whooshing through the branches around me.

Desi and Sami had jumped out of the Nissan and were moving towards the scene, expecting me to have made a neater job of things. They started shooting as soon as they realised it had all gone pear shaped.

I got my ankle tangled up in a creeper. One soldier was crashing through the leaves coming towards me. Desi took out the other one, who was still in the road.

I fired a couple of panicked shots at the moving branches. My enemy toppled forwards, collapsing a few metres away. I took a proper aim and shot him a couple more times to finish him off. Sami and Desi shot up the corpses, making sure we didn’t get any nasty surprises.

I stumbled into the road, holding up my revolver in case anyone jumped out of hiding, but it seemed like we’d got the lot.

‘Looks clear,’ Sami said. ‘What happened Killer? Are you OK?’

‘Bit rattled,’ I said. ‘My rifle jammed.’

Desi was shaking his head and whistling through his teeth, ‘That always happens at the worst moments.’

‘I don’t know why it jammed,’ I said.

'Give us a look,' Sami said.

I handed the rifle over. She took off the magazine and looked inside the gun.

'Come here,' Sami said, sounding a bit annoyed.

She held the gun up to my face.

'What's that Killer?' She snapped.

'Oh,' I said. 'It looks like a touch of rust got inside.'

Her fist smashed into my nose. I wasn't expecting it, so it hit me square on.

'Idiot,' she shouted.

Sami might have been a girl, but she didn't punch like one. I cupped my hands over my face and watched my blood pouring into them.

'What was that for?' I asked.

'Because you're a total moron.'

Sami grabbed my arm, twisted me around and kneed me in the guts. Then she shoved me backwards onto the ground and threw the gun in the dirt, a few centimetres from my face.

'Look at the state of it,' she shouted. 'It's a disgrace.'

She stood right over me. I was half expecting her boot in my face, but I didn't get it.

'When did you last clean that heap of shit?'

I sat up, holding my stomach and groaning.

'I cleaned it after we grabbed the money,' I said.

She put her hands on her hips.

'That's over two weeks ago. With that amount of corrosion, you're lucky it didn't blow off your hand.'

I started standing up. I hurt in about five different places.

'I didn't know we were going out today,' I said. 'I never got a chance to clean it.'

'You had time to get drunk though.'

'I'm sorry. OK?'

'What use is sorry when you're dead? We could have all been killed because of you.'

My nose dripped a trail of red dots onto the road. I bent over to pick up the rifle, but Sami kicked it away.

'Don't bother with it,' Sami shouted. 'Chuck it in the trees. You'll never clean that mess up. Take yourself one of the M16s and any other stuff the soldiers have got, then drag the bodies into the bushes. I'll move the spikes.'

'All right, I know I messed up, Sami. You don't have to be a total bitch about it.'

'Don't push your luck Killer,' Sami shouted, backing away from me. 'One more word out of that mouth and I'm gonna kick every tooth out of your stupid head.'

...

Sami was fitter and tougher than me. Usually she compensated, by taking some of my weight and going slower than she could; but I'd pissed her off and she was in no mood to coddle me. My nose was stuffed with congealed blood, my pack was heavier than usual because we were staying out overnight; plus there was the hangover and the fact it was unbelievably hot. Most days you thought it couldn't get any hotter, but the man upstairs always seemed to find another notch on the thermostat.

After an hour walking at Sami's pace, I got a massive stitch down my side and I had to stop. She walked back to me.

'Get up,' she shouted.

'I thought you loved me,' I gasped.

'Love isn't an excuse to let you get away with being an idiot. If Captain finds out what state your gun was in, he'll have you whipped.'

'Are you going to tell him?'

'I should, but I'm too much of a softie,' Sami said. 'Count yourself lucky that all I'm doing is making you work up a little sweat.'

'I've got a stitch,' I said. 'Please give us five minutes break.'

Sami threw down her pack and took a slug out of her water bottle.

'Two minutes,' She said.

Sami wasn't even out of breath.

...

The lake was about a kilometre across and three long. We knew the size from the map, but we hadn't counted on the wall of tangled vegetation that made getting near the water almost impossible.

We walked slowly, keeping our eyes peeled for a hut or pathway. It soon got monotonous. Sami gave up being annoyed with me and we walked close together. I was sweat drenched, insect bitten and my ankles howled for a rest.

The whole scheme seemed hopeless. Half an hour before dark, we found a small clearing and gave up. We pitched a lightweight tent that had been taken off a dead mercenary, kicked off our boots and opened up some canned meat. It smelled slightly better than dog food, but the chunks were set in the same kind of clear jelly and the heat had turned it into warm, greasy, sludge. We could have foraged for something tastier, but we'd been on our feet for eight hours and didn't have the strength. I could only swallow by closing my eyes and pretending it was something else. A couple of times I actually retched.

'We're never going to find him like this,' Sami said.

'It sucks,' I said miserably. 'We've got all day tomorrow, but it doesn't look good.'

'We need a different strategy,' Sami said. 'We can't just look. We've got to attract their attention.'

'How?'

‘Build a big fire,’ Sami said. ‘They should see the smoke and flames, even in the dark. That’s gonna put them on alert. Then we’ll go around the lake, stopping every few hundred metres and shouting your brother’s name.’

It sounded like a good plan. I looked at Sami and a shiver went up my back when I realised how brilliant she was and how I couldn’t imagine a day without her.

‘Course,’ Sami said. ‘That’s not the only attention we’ll get. We’re only a few kilometres from where we killed three soldiers and burned down Grandma’s house.’

‘You reckon the army will come out here in the dark?’

‘Depends,’ Sami said. ‘Not if it’s just conscripts. But after we ripped off the money, there’s probably all kinds of psychos around here looking for us.’

‘You want to risk it?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think were gonna find Adam any other way.’

The sense of hope reenergized me. We gathered dry timber, racing to get as much as possible before it turned dark. We got a huge pile together and some fresh wood to throw on once the fire was established.

We took a breather while the sun set, kissing for the first time since my gun jammed.

‘Sorry I punched you,’ Sami said, nibbling on my earlobe.

‘I did nearly get the three of us killed. Thanks for not telling Captain.’

‘I couldn’t really,’ Sami laughed. ‘You’re too soft. I bet you’d cry after two licks.’

‘I’m tougher than you think.’

‘I kicked your arse easy enough this morning,’ Sami giggled.

‘That’s because I was being a gentleman and I didn’t want to hurt you back,’ I said, struggling to keep a straight face.

‘Whatever you say, macho man... Anyway, we better start looking for baby brother before you get over tired and start whining for your Mommy.’

Sami flicked her lighter under some kindling. We soon had a massive blaze going. I stood as near to the lake as I could and started screaming:

‘ADAM PASCAL. ADAM PASCAL. IT’S ME, JAKE.’

It echoed over the still water.

‘COME TO THE FIRE.’

Once we put the damp branches and leaves over the flames, a thick plume of smoke rose into the sky. We began circling the lake. The smoke was visible in the moonlight when we looked back.

‘ADAM PASCAL.’

After about ten minutes, my throat started getting raw and Sami took over shouting duties.

‘ADAM PASCAL.’

At first, I thought the noise was just Sami’s echo. Then something came back stronger.

‘WHOOOOOUUUU.’

‘You hear that?’ I asked.

Sami nodded at me, then shouted, 'IS THAT ADAM?'

The second time we heard it, we worked it out:

'WHO ARE YOU?'

'I'M SAMI,' she shouted back. 'I'M JAKE'S FRIEND.'

I shot my revolver into the air. A burst of automatic fire ripped back at us across the lake.

'SEE YOU NEAR THE FIRE,' the man's voice shouted back.

It was a total buzz. I gave Sami a quick kiss and we ran back towards the fire.

'Better be careful,' Sami said. 'Just in case it's a trap.'

We hid in bushes near to the fire and waited about ten minutes before the next shout came.

'CAN YOU HEAR ME?'

I recognised Adam's voice.

'HEY MIDGET,' I shouted back. 'ARE YOU OK?'

'GOOD... YOU?'

He can't have been more than thirty meters away. I couldn't stop myself from crying.

'FINE. BILLY SAYS I SHOULD ASK YOU A QUESTION, IN CASE IT'S NOT REALLY YOU,'

Adam shouted.

'GO ON.'

'WHAT TEAM DO YOU SUPPORT?'

'ARSENAL. I'LL ASK YOU ONE BACK... WHAT'S YOUR GIRLFRIEND'S NAME?'

'MARIAH ISN'T MY GIRLFRIEND,' Adam shouted back furiously. 'I ONLY WENT TO HER STUPID PARTY BECAUSE MUM MADE ME.'

I stepped out of the bushes with my hands in the air and walked towards the fire. Adam ran out of the dark. He was wearing trainers and a pair of shorts made out of leopard skin. I picked him up and hugged him. We both had massive grins and tears running everywhere.

'Billy said the army must have killed you.'

'I thought the same about you,' I sobbed. 'Are you OK?'

It felt so amazing. His little fingers holding onto my back. The smell of his breath. The funny little double shake and snuffle he always did when he cried. You don't realise how much you love your family until you get pulled apart.

A handsome fellow emerged from the bush. He looked about thirty, with capped white teeth and a square jaw.

'You must be Billy,' I said, taking one arm off Adam and grasping his hand. 'We've got Grandma back at our camp.'

'I thought she'd died in the fire.' Billy smiled. 'That's good news. She's such a sweet little thing.'

'Thanks for looking after my brother. He looks in great shape.'

I wasn't flattering him. Adam usually existed on a diet of Skittles, Happy Meals and Gameboy Advance. Mum drove him everywhere. Fish, fruit and daily exercise had slimmed him down quite a bit.

‘He tells so many stories about your exploits,’ Billy said. ‘I feel like I know you already, Jake.’

I turned around and looked for Sami. She was tiptoeing with her hands behind her back, like a little girl who’d done something bad.

‘Hello Billy,’ Sami said. ‘I remember your show.’

Billy wagged his finger and showed us his lines of perfect teeth.

‘But the question is,’ Billy said dramatically. ‘How much do *you* think it’s worth?’

Sami stared at the ground, grinning. She looked like she was about to wet her knickers.

‘Oh my god,’ She squealed, jumping daintily into the air. ‘I can’t believe I’m standing in front of Billy Mango.’

18. BILLY

Sami claimed the Billy Mango story was a legend across central Africa. He was a poor eighteen year old, whose family lived in a shanty town on the edge of the capital. He'd wander the streets looking for odd jobs. When he couldn't find work - which was most of the time - he'd put on his best clothes and hang out with hundreds of others at the back of the national television station, vying to be a contestant on the nation's number one quiz show, *Name The Price?*

After months of baking in the sun outside the studio, young Billy was finally picked as a contestant. Before the live show went on air, the host collapsed with a bout of malaria and had to be taken to hospital. A replacement was urgently required, preferably someone good looking and neatly dressed, who'd already been through make up. Billy raised his arm. He invented himself a new surname and was a hit with the studio audience; particularly when he pointed to every contestant and said the words that would become his catchphrase: *But the question is, how much do you think it's worth?*

Billy hosted the next evening and every evening the following week. The story made the newspapers and the show's ratings nearly doubled. When the original host returned from hospital, he was jeered by the studio audience. He only lasted two shows before Billy Mango was reinstated as his permanent replacement. Over the next few years, Billy Mango made and squandered a fortune from TV shows, endorsements, personal appearances and pop singles.

When Sami shared a room with three of her sisters, they had a row of Billy Mango CDs and posters of him pinned on their wall. Sami told me that one time she threw a tantrum at a petrol station, bawling her head off until Captain bought her a Billy Mango key ring.

When the war came, the television station was bombed by rebels and nobody was paying for advertisements or CDs. Billy had managed to spend more than he earned, so he had nothing to bribe his way out when the army conscripted him.

The life of a conscript wasn't great for anyone. Hard training, rubbish food and brutal discipline, but it was even worse for Billy. He might as well have had a target painted on his back. Every bully and thug enjoyed dishing it out to the former celebrity. When he couldn't take it any more, Billy stuffed his few remaining possessions in his pack and disappeared into the jungle...

...

We put out the fire and headed towards Billy's hut.

‘Me and my sisters all used to guess the prices,’ Sami said. ‘I was the littlest so I always got them wrong. Like, guessing a fridge cost twenty dollars or something... And remember the time you came on stage and dropped your microphone? Then you bent over and ripped those tight trousers.’

Adam laughed when he heard that.

Billy smiled, ‘I can’t believe you remember all this. You must have only been five or six.’

‘We were all massive fans. My sister, Katya, sent off and got your signed photograph.’

‘My cousin made more money out of the signed photos than I did on the show. They were churning out two thousand a week.’

‘Must have killed your wrist, writing all those signatures.’

Billy laughed, ‘I never signed them. The TV station gave me some lessons, but I can hardly write my name even now.’

‘Oh,’ Sami said. ‘Katya would be so gutted if she found out.’

‘Has she still got it?’ Billy asked.

‘She’s dead,’ Sami said. ‘All my brothers and sisters are. I haven’t seen a TV show for seven years.’

‘I often wonder where I’d be now, if the war hadn’t come,’ Billy said. ‘I had a wife. She probably thinks I’m dead.’

Billy led us inside his hut. He’d been alone for five years until Adam came, venturing onto the roads only to scavenge through the wreckage after an ambush. His hut showed signs of being built by a man with a huge amount of free time. There was an air of perfection about the place; as if hours had been spent creating every snug fitting beam and neatly tied joint. The floor was covered in animal skins and there were bone carvings lined up on shelves: tiny models of animals, a steam locomotive attached to a line of carriages, and even a near perfect Mercedes, identical to one Billy had once owned.

Billy was short of candles. He set a small fire beneath the chimney in the middle of the hut. It’s surprising how well your eyes work in dim lighting once they adjust. I sat on a soft pile of leopard skins, with one arm around Sami and the other around Adam. Adam was playing with my M16. Billy sat on the opposite side of the spacious hut, looking sad. Adam was his only company and he wasn’t looking forward to losing it.

‘You could come back with us,’ I said. ‘Be a rebel fighter.’

Billy shook his head, ‘I was alone before, I’ll be alone again. I made a decision never to harm another person.’

I paused for thought when he said that. We’d killed four soldiers on our way here. I’d got so used to killing, it meant no more to me than if I’d stepped on a few bugs

‘I’ll miss playing tag with you, Billy,’ Adam said. Then turning to me, ‘We do it every morning, but he always cheats by tickling me.’

‘How will you get home?’ Billy asked.

‘The rebels are pushing forward. If we can get out east, the three of us should be able to get a bus into Uganda.’

Adam looked at me, ‘Who’s three of us?’

'Me, you and Sami.'

'Why's she coming?' Adam grinned. 'Is she your girlfriend?'

'We're getting married.'

Adam gave me a weird look, 'Eh?'

'I love Sami. She's coming home with us.'

Adam started to crack up laughing, 'Oh right. I can just see Mum's face when you turn up with a wife.'

'It might be a bit tricky,' I said. 'But she'll just have to live with it.'

'Jake, Mum won't even let me have a dog.'

'Well, I'm a lot older than you.'

Adam was laughing so much he could hardly breathe.

'A wife!' he screamed, kicking his bare feet in the air.

He was rolling around with spit dribbling all down his face. I'd forgotten how annoying he could be.

'You'll be dead,' he snorted. 'You'll be so dead.'

The thing was, the little brat had a point.

...

The four of us slept comfortably. We weren't meeting Desi until the evening, so Adam and Billy had the whole day to say goodbye. When we got up, Adam wanted all of us to play tag. It had rained in the night. As the sun heated everything up, the moisture rose off the plants in a fine mist. Billy had made Adam a feather headdress, which combined with the leopard skin shorts and trainers made him look like something out of a school play.

Adam and Billy ran and chased each other. It wasn't a proper game of tag, more of an excuse for the two of them to rumble and trade insults. Me and Sami were surplus to requirements. We propped ourselves against Billy's hut and watched them play, with our arms round each other's backs.

'Grandma certainly made the right decision, giving Adam to Billy,' Sami said, nuzzling my neck.

'I almost feel bad taking him away,' I said. 'I never spend that amount of time playing with him.'

'What he said last night about your Mum not accepting me. Is that true?'

I tried to make light of it, 'She certainly isn't going to like it.'

Sami started at the ground between her legs.

'It's normal to get married at our age here,' I said. 'But not in England. My Mum will come around.'

'What if she doesn't?' Sami asked.

'Sami, we've got about fifty massive hurdles to jump over and my Mother is the fiftieth one. You know I love you right?'

'Yes,' Sami said.

'And you love me?'

'Yes.'

'Well that's all that matters. The rest of the world is just problems we've got to solve.'

Sami leaned over and we started snogging. A piece of fruit whacked the back of my head. We broke off. Adam was standing a few metres away, his chest was covered in thousands of balls of sweat. He was out of breath from mucking around with Billy.

‘What was that for midget?’ I asked.

‘Wasn’t me,’ Adam giggled. ‘I think it fell out of the tree.’

Sami looked at Adam, ‘Don’t you like me kissing Jake?’

Adam went all shy and looked at his feet.

‘Would you prefer it if I kissed you?’ Sami asked.

‘Gross,’ Adam said.

Sami laughed, ‘Bet you’d like it. In fact, I’m gonna give you big wet kisses all over.’

Adam smiled, ‘No you’re not.’

Sami got up and lunged towards him.

‘It’s smoochy time,’ Sami giggled.

Adam span round and started running away. Sami crashed through the undergrowth, chasing after him. He ran behind Billy and started screaming.

‘Protect me. Protect me.’

Billy turned traitor and locked his arms around Adam’s waist, so he was trapped. Sami planted the soggiest kiss she could manage on Adam’s cheek.

‘AAAGGGHHH,’ Adam screamed. ‘You’ve probably given me some disgusting disease you caught off Jake.’

...

Adam got really sad as the day went on. He kept asking how long it was before we had to leave. When it got down to an hour, he cuddled up to Billy and started to cry. He wanted Billy to come with us, but Billy wouldn’t have it. Billy didn’t want to fight for anyone. Maybe it was cowardice, but I admired the strength of character it took to live peacefully where a life was worth less than a few bags of food.

‘I’ll never see you again,’ Adam sobbed.

‘We’ll always be friends in here,’ Billy said, tapping his head. ‘Besides, you’ll see me on TV after I make my big comeback.’

I found a piece of paper for Adam to write our address and telephone number on, vaguely amused at the prospect of Billy Mango ringing up our house in the middle of Eastenders. Billy tore a strip off the paper and gave Sami his real autograph. He printed jaggedy letters, with big gaps between, like a kid in year one.

When we finally left, Adam was reduced to a gasping, red faced, mess. He grovelled for us to stay, or for Billy to come with us. He broke away and ran back for a final desperate hug with a man who’d been his only friend for two months.

Then we set off to meet Desi, with me and Sami each holding one of Adam's hands. I was sad for Adam and wondered how Billy would cope being alone again, but at the same time I felt a sense of hope. I'd found Adam and Sami was coming with us, so I had no reason to hang around. The walk back from the lake felt like the first part of the journey home.

19. CONFESSIONS

Desi gave Adam a piggyback on the tricky path back to camp. He filled us in on the latest developments in the war. Rebel Radio was claiming that our side was advancing rapidly towards us. We usually took the announcements with a pinch of salt, but Captain had sent men to spy and rob in all the local camps. Everyone came back with similar reports: the government bases were operating with a minimal number of soldiers. Truck loads of local troops had been sent to the front line to counter the rebel advance. It could mean only one thing: the government was desperate and the war really was going our way.

It was an hour past dark when we got into the main building. Everyone who hadn't gone out on a mission sat around in a circle, listening to a man reading from a bible. Captain got off the floor and introduced us to the stranger.

'This is Father Desmond,' Captain said.

The white haired priest reached over his audience and shook me and Sami's hands.

'This is the couple you're marrying tomorrow morning,' Captain explained.

I did a bit of a double take. Captain certainly didn't hang about getting organised.

'Where did you come from?' I asked.

Father Desmond pointed at Joseph and Jesus.

'These gentleman extracted me from army HQ. They blindfolded me, stuck me in the back of a truck and here I am.'

Captain laughed, 'And he hasn't stopped scoffing our food or drinking our booze since he got here. When you two are married, we'll drop him back. It wouldn't do to harm a priest.'

Father Desmond smiled, 'I'm sure it's God's will that I was taken here to bring these two young people together.' He looked at me suspiciously, 'Are you a catholic?'

I nodded.

Mum had taken us to the local church a few times when I was little. She was sucking up to the priest so I could get into catholic school. Now didn't seem like the time to admit that I didn't believe in God.

'When did you last take confession?'

'A few months ago,' I lied.

'Perhaps I should take each of you inside the office and allow you to confess your sins.'

Sami went into Captain's office with Father Desmond. Amo rustled up some food. Everyone started asking Adam loads of questions.

'Your turn Killer,' Sami said, when she got out.

Father Desmond had arranged Captain's two chairs back to back. I sat down.

'Go on,' Father Desmond said.

‘Erm...’

It had been so long, I had to think what to say.

‘Bless me Father for I have sinned. It has been three months... Actually, it’s been about six years, since my last confession.’

‘What sins have you committed?’

‘All of them,’ I said.

Father Desmond coughed, ‘Try and be a touch more specific.’

‘I’ve killed fifteen people. I’ve had sex outside of marriage. I’ve stolen stuff. I’ve had unclean thoughts at least ten times a day. I’ve taken the Lord’s name in vain. I’ve disrespected my Mother and Father and I’m ninety-nine percent sure I don’t believe in God.’

‘Quite a busy six years,’ the priest said.

‘Most of that was in the last two months.’

The priest thought for a few seconds before giving me my penance.

‘Say two Hail Marys and ask the Lord to set you a path out of the darkness.’

It seemed like I’d got off light. I once had to say six Hail Marys for robbing a calculator off some kid in my class.

‘Is that it?’ I said, feeling like I’d been short changed. ‘I’ve definitely killed fifteen people. But that doesn’t include when I’ve thrown grenades in trucks and stuff.’

‘Pray,’ Father Desmond said. ‘You have confessed and the Lord forgives all worldly sins, but you are a young man and there is great remorse inside you. Your conscience will not be unburdened until you rediscover your faith in the Lord.’

...

Adam laid between me and Sami in the dark. I wanted to take my final chance to commit pre-marital sins with Sami, but we could hardly throw Adam out of the hut before he’d had a chance to get to know any of the others.

‘So, Adam,’ Sami said. ‘Has Jake had any girlfriends before me?’

‘Not that I’ve seen,’ Adam said. ‘So far you’re the only one mad enough.’

‘Tell me something Killer did,’ Sami said. ‘Preferably something embarrassing.’

‘I do know one story,’ Adam said.

I cringed. I knew exactly what story he was talking about.

‘You tell Sami that, Adam, you’re dead.’

‘Now I’ve got to hear it,’ Sami laughed ‘And don’t worry about Jake. I’ll protect you from that wimp.’

‘All the girls at school were inside the gym doing PE,’ Adam explained. ‘It was before I went to school, I only heard about it later. The boys were playing football outside and there are these metal grilles in the gym wall.’

I wrapped my hand over Adam's mouth. He tried to carry on and his spit got all over my palm.

'Shut up midget, or I'll tell everyone about you wetting your pants in the Christmas play.'

Sami pulled my hand away. Adam enjoyed being the centre of attention.

'All the boys started messing about,' Adam said. 'Shouting at the girls and sticking their penises through the grille.'

Sami laughed, 'How old was he?'

'Nine or ten,' Adam said.

'So what happened?' Sami asked.

'When Jake put his thingy through, one of the girls on the other side kicked it. He was bleeding everywhere.'

'That's a lie,' I said. 'I didn't even need stitches. It bled a tiny bit and I had to go to hospital to get a tetanus shot.'

'Dirty little pervert,' Sami laughed. 'Got any more embarrassing stuff on him?'

Adam giggled, 'I'll try and remember some.'

'So what do you think of Sami?' I asked, trying to embarrass him.

'She's cool,' Adam said. 'I can't wait 'til Mum finds out.'

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,' I said. 'You could wear that leopard skin skirt Billy made tomorrow and be our bridesmaid.'

Adam slapped my chest.

'Get stuffed, Jake. And it's not a dress, it's a pair of shorts.'

'Looks like a dress to me,' I said.

'Don't talk about Billy,' Adam said. 'It makes me sad... Anyway, I want to go to sleep.'

Adam closed his eyes and wriggled around, trying to get comfortable in the small gap between me and Sami.

'And don't start snogging just because I'm asleep.'

...

I woke up early and walked down to the pool. I sat on a rock, listening to the water dropping and thinking how strange it was that in a few hours I'd be a married man; or at least a married boy.

I wanted to wash, but a whole nest of baby snakes had crashed into the pool. I wasn't sure if the little ones were poisonous, but I didn't want to chance it. Once in a while, a bird would swoop out of the trees and pluck one of the little snakes out of the water. One bird landed on a rock a couple of metres away from me. It perched patiently, until the tiny snake dangling out of its beak stopped wriggling and snapping its jaws. Once the snake was dead, the bird crunched it into two pieces, that dropped onto the rock. While the bird tipped back its head to swallow the first piece, an opportunist swooped down and gobbled the other half.

Amo and a couple of the others came to wash and cursed the snakes. Apparently the babies weren't just as venomous as the grown ups, but they'd give a nasty nip. I watched until there were only a couple of snakes left. Of the rest, about a third had been eaten by birds. The remainder had thrashed their way into the current and been carried out of the pool and downstream.

Adam came and sat beside me.

'How you doing?' I asked.

'Not bad,' Adam said. 'Amo's made some breakfast if you want some.'

'I don't think I'll hold it down,' I said. 'My stomach's turning somersaults.'

'Are you scared?' Adam asked.

'Terrified.'

'What of?'

I shrugged, 'Marriage is like the biggest thing you ever do. Promising the rest of your life to another person. If you think about it, doing it at my age is absolutely bonkers.'

'She's nice though,' Adam said. 'She was mucking about with me while I was getting dressed.'

'I'm scared shitless,' I said. 'But I love her. If you offered me a million pounds to call it all off, I wouldn't take it.'

Adam laughed, 'What about two million?'

'I'd probably reconsider for two million.'

'There's all stuff going on up there,' Adam said. 'Sami's got a nice dress and they're plating her hair. They're cooking loads of food and Father Desmond is telling all the kids stories. Everyone wants to know where you are. Do you want to come back with me and see?'

I got off my rock.

'Suppose I'd better go and spruce myself up. I can't hide down here forever.'

...

There's nothing quite as boring as wedding photos, or a wedding video, but I wish I had one picture of the way Sami looked. Her hair wasn't that long, but they put all beads and stuff in it. They'd made her a dress out of plain white cotton. It was a traditional African job, hanging off one shoulder and all wrapped around and gathered up somehow, so that it finished just below her knees. She only had boots, so she kept her feet bare, which I thought was really sexy. Captain gave me a brand new set of camouflage out of the lock up. Amo and Beck carried Captain's desk outside into the sun. They made a cross out of two branches bound up with vine leaves, and stood it on the desk surrounded by thousands of yellow and white flower petals. It wasn't exactly a Hello! magazine wedding, but it was pretty cool.

I can't remember much about the ceremony. I glazed over, listening to my heart drumming and staring at the beads of sweat dribbling down Father Desmond's bald patch. A couple of times, I felt myself swaying

and I thought I was gonna pass out. I must have said my vows on autopilot, because I can't remember doing any of them.

Once the ceremony was done, we stuck around and ate some food. Adam seemed happy enough. He started running around with Beck and a couple of little kids.

Me and Sami waited until it seemed polite before walking the kilometre to our spot on the edge of the old mine. We'd always just laid there watching the sun, but this time we started snogging and ended up screwing gently before our audience of waving flowers. It was the best feeling ever, the dress looked well sexy and she licked my ear and whispered that she never wanted anyone else. You could have offered me the whole planet and I wouldn't have swapped it for rolling around with Sami on that little patch of hot earth.

A couple of days later, Adam couldn't resist confessing that him, Beck and David followed us and watched the whole thing from behind some trees a few metres away.

20. CONTROL

‘It’s ambitious,’ Captain said. ‘But I agree with Casino and all the other leaders. This is the best chance our forces have had in six years of war.’

All the fighters were gathered outside the main hut. I’d been married about eight hours, but it was like nobody else even remembered.

‘Tonight, we’re beginning our most ambitious operation ever,’ Captain continued. ‘Most army command posts are down from ten or twelve men, to three or four. Headquarters is down from three hundred to less than sixty. With those sort of numbers, we can launch an all out attack. We’re going to set off before sundown and destroy two command posts. Three other rebel units will do the same in their areas. Afterwards, all rebel units will converge on headquarters. We reckon we’ll be evenly matched in terms of numbers, but we will have surprise on our sides. If this mission is a success, we’ll gain complete control over this region.’

‘What’s to stop the government sending in reinforcements?’ Jesus asked.

‘The government has already sent everything it’s got spare to the front,’ Captain said. ‘I expect a few units have stayed back to police the capital, but that’s all. All we should have to do is hold this territory until the rebels advance this far. We’ll block every road and stop any government supplies getting through.’

‘How long will we have to hold the area until the advance gets this far?’ Sami asked.

‘Always my daughter with the difficult questions,’ Captain said.

Everyone laughed.

Captain continued, ‘We don’t know exactly where our forces are and we don’t know how fast they’re advancing. All we can do is assume it won’t be long, based on the desperately small number of troops the government has left around here.’

Captain divided us into three groups. Two were attacking command posts. Me, Desi and Jesus were in the third. We had to sneak inside headquarters and soften it up before everyone else arrived a few hours later. It was the first time I’d been on a mission without Sami, but girls didn’t blend in around headquarters.

Adam was torn up. He seemed proud that I was a fighter, but he kept asking if I was likely to get hurt. He was also concerned about Sami, which made me happy because it showed they were getting along. When Adam saw Beck dressed up with his camouflage and gun, Adam was wildly impressed. The idea of a kid only four years older than him with a pocket full of grenades flipped his lid.

Captain took me off to one side.

‘Young Adam seems like his head is pretty together.’

I nodded, ‘He’s a bright kid. You don’t want him to fight do you?’

No,’ Captain said. ‘He’s too little. But you reckon he could watch camp for a few hours? It would free up somebody else to go on the mission.’

I thought for a few seconds: no enemy had ever ventured up the path to camp and if they did, Adam would be safer standing behind a gun than sleeping.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I’ll show him the ropes.’

Adam was grinning his head off when I told him.

‘Does this mean I get my own gun?’

‘You won’t be much use without one. I’ll show you how to use it so it doesn’t knock you off your feet.’

I found an AK47 with a short stock, then took Adam out to the little shelter at the top of the path and showed him how to use the it.

‘Don’t ever fire unless it’s an emergency,’ I said. ‘The noise echoes and it could give our location away to the army.’

Adam nodded.

‘Everyone in camp knows the password. If you don’t recognise someone coming up the path, hide in the bushes and shout, *Password*. If they shout back *Captain*, you know it’s OK. If they don’t shout back, or they say any other word, start shooting.’

‘Should I wake up the others?’ Adam asked.

‘No. As soon as you fire the gun, the noise will warn everyone.’

‘I can’t believe I’ve got my own gun,’ Adam grinned. ‘Can I just fire one tiny shot to try it?’

‘If you fire an unnecessary shot, or you fall asleep, Captain will whip you. Remember the scars you asked about on Sami’s back?’

‘Shit,’ Adam said, looking at the gun like he wished he’d never seen it. ‘What if it’s an accident?’

‘You’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘It’s only for about three hours anyway.’

...

It was my first trip back to headquarters since my very first mission, when we robbed the store room and bluffed our way out of the front gate with a truck load of goodies. That time, I went out without even having fired my gun. Now I felt like an old hand. The grit in my mouth on the walk out didn’t bother me, I knew how to ration my water and I’d grown tough patches of skin in all the places where my pack used to rub. I still wasn’t as fit as a lot of the others, but when bullets start flying around, it’s your brain not your muscles that get you out of trouble.

The watch tower at army headquarters was unlit and unmanned, as usual. We crept in, using the hole Sami tore in the fence with my Dad’s knife. The fact it was still there after eight weeks showed how ineffective the government troops were, even when it came to arranging simple perimeter security that might stop us creeping in and killing them.

Once we were through the fence, I immediately got the sense that the camp had fallen on hard times. Last time there were over a hundred large tents. All that was left were dusty outlines and holes in the ground, as

if the circus left town the night before. The troops that were left lived in three metal sheds, packed close together on the far side of the camp.

The trouble was, when there were hundreds of troops you could walk around and everyone would assume you were someone new, or someone they hadn't seen before. Now there were only sixty, we had to be more cautious.

Jesus was in charge. He looked at me.

'Jake, you take the trucks out of action. I'll try and see if there's anything in the stores that will help us out. Desi, I want you to try and find any heavy weapons they have and make sure they're not in working order when the cavalry arrives. We'll meet in ninety minutes by the hole in the fence.'

There were a couple of trucks parked in odd locations. I went to these first. Normally we slashed tyres to disable a vehicle without making a noise, but our chances of controlling the area depended on us capturing and using the vehicles. By letting the air out of tyres, we'd be able to pump them back up later on. The disadvantage was that I had to stand by each tyre for several minutes, pushing the point of my knife into the valve to let out the air.

I crouched by the first tyre and unscrewed the valve cap. The air made more noise than I'd expected. I had to stare down at the valve and concentrate on what I was doing. If someone came up behind, I wouldn't see or hear them and there was no quick way to grab my gun from such an awkward position.

I did the a tyre on two odd trucks and a Nissan with a little flag on the front that belonged to the base commander, then I walked to the line of trucks parked near the store room.

While I was working on the second truck out of six, a drunken voice roared from behind me.

'What are you doing?'

I sprung up quickly. The huge soldier thumped his fist on the metal. He was close enough to grab my gun if I tried to use it.

'Who said you could touch my truck?' he shouted.

'The commander told me to check all the tyre pressures,' I said, backing away.

'Looks like you're letting the air out to me,' the soldier roared. 'Who put you up to messing with my truck? Was it that asshole Nero?'

'That's right,' I lied. 'He told me to do it.'

The soldier grabbed my jacket and slammed my back against the metal. Guns are great equalisers, but face to face I was no match for a grown man. As the soldier's boozy breath washed over me, I tried to think of a way to talk myself out of trouble.

'Do you want to get Nero back?' I gasped. 'He always forces me do crap like this.'

The drunk loosened his grip a bit.

'How?'

'Nero's going out with a convoy tomorrow,' I said. 'He'll be furious if all the tyres are flat, not just yours.'

The drunk's expression changed into a smile.

'Nero will go crazy,' I said.

The drunk set me free and gave me a friendly thump on the shoulder.

'I like your style, boy,' he giggled. 'I'll give you a hand. But first you have to take this.'

The soldier reached inside his truck and pulled out two banana beers.

'Be merry my friend,' he boomed.

'Beautiful,' I said, grabbing one of the beers.

The drunk laughed, 'They're both for you. Put one in your pocket for later.'

I grinned, 'Cheers.'

I was thirsty from the walk. I twisted the top off a beer and drank half straight down. I walked back to the tyre and carried on letting out the air. My new friend staggered off and started letting down a tyre on another truck. He was so pissed, he took twice as long as me to do each tyre. When I crept off to meet Jesus, he carried on doing my job.

The three of us met up by the fence. Jesus had killed the storekeeper and hidden his body so that everyone thought he was skiving. He'd stolen loads of grenades and walked around camp rolling them under the raised buildings. If we got a single grenade to explode in any of the buildings during the assault, it would set off all the ones underneath, creating a massive explosion. Desi had packed dirt and stones inside heavy machine guns and grenade launchers, so they'd jam up or explode if anyone tried to use them.

Our final task was to neutralise the roadblock a kilometre from camp. The three of us crawled through the jungle. It was the kind where there are no tall trees, with really dense undergrowth. There wasn't any moon, so it was pitch black and thousands of insects and stuff kept buzzed past right next to my ears.

As we walked, I felt a sharp pain in my wrist. I was scared it might be a snake, but I ran my finger over the painful spot and only felt a little round lump, which I realised must be an insect sting. The pain was quite bad, but I carried on. Then I felt the same stabbing pain, only this time it was up around my elbow. Something was crawling inside my uniform. Jesus realised I had a problem and stopped walking, but it was so dark he couldn't do anything to help.

I frantically unbuttoned my jacket and threw it off. The insect managed to get a couple more stings in before I flicked it off.

'You OK?' Jesus whispered, trying not to giggle at my frenzied state.

'No,' I said. 'I think it was a wasp.'

'That'll hurt,' Desi said.

The wasps in Africa were black, evil looking, things, about the size of a small car. My arm burned with the most staggering pain. I slipped my jacket back on. Jesus started walking again.

We got up close to the guard hut at the roadblock. The fingers in my right arm were locked up and my wrist was all tingly and swollen. I could hardly hold my rifle.

Desi crawled around the side of the hut and peered in the window. He raised four fingers, to indicate the number of soldiers inside. There were two others outside. One in the road by the line of spikes and one

standing behind a big machine gun. We had to do a neat job. Too much noise would put headquarters on alert and the mission to take it over would be hopeless.

I couldn't shoot straight, so Jesus pointed me towards the guy manning the machine gun. It was the closest target and the only one I stood a chance of hitting with arm in agony.

'I'll do the one in the road,' Jesus said. 'Desi, you point your gun in the window of the hut and start blasting. We roll on three.'

Me and Desi nodded.

'One... Two... Three.'

I fired two quick shots into machine gun man. Jesus ran in the road and shot the guard, before spinning and blasting the only soldier who managed to run out of the hut before Desi got him through the window. We killed all six men in about five seconds.

Jesus dragged the chain of metal spikes out of the road. Then he dumped some of the sandbags packed around the machine gun a few hundred metres down the road. These were an arranged signal, to tell our people that the roadblock had been dealt with.

...

We hid near the guard hut and waited for the others. My wrist was swollen to about twice its normal size. Jesus and Desi said it was nothing to worry about, just a mild allergic reaction that most people get the first time they're stung by a wasp. They both giggled about my performance throwing off the jacket and said I was soft when I moaned about the pain.

The first truckload of rebels was from a unit I'd never seen. Within fifteen minutes, there were twelve vehicles stuffed with rebels lined up in the road. The reports were good. Every command post in the area had been taken without much difficulty. Sami and Captain jumped out of a freshly stolen Nissan. Captain went off to organise the final assault on the base. Sami spotted me, lit up by the headlamps of a truck and came over.

'Oh my god,' Sami giggled, looking at my arm. 'I'm married to a freak.'

A couple of people standing nearby started laughing. She kissed my cheek and grinned at me.

'It's not funny,' I moped. 'It really hurts.'

'Hurts even more when you do this.'

Sami grabbed my swollen wrist and squeezed it. I screamed out loud.

'You're such a baby, Killer. It's only a wasp sting.'

'I love you too,' I said.

I was getting fed up with everyone taking the mickey.

'OK,' Captain was shouting. 'I want an advance party of ten to go in through the fence and start attacking the front gate from inside. The rest can ram it in trucks as soon as the fighting starts.'

Sami gave me a quick kiss and got back in the Nissan.

We had plenty of troops and I could barely pull a trigger with my swollen arm, so I waited by the guard hut, telling any late arrivals that the party had started without them. I heard some explosions and a few brief bursts of gunfire. A big fireball shot into the air when a fuel tank got hit. The whole sky flashed orange.

When everything quietened down, I began walking up the road. I passed through the main gates and looked around. Things had gone well for us. The grenades under the huts had gone off and most of the government troops didn't even get out of bed.

Loads of rebels were celebrating by climbing up the watch tower and screaming off the sides. As a rebel, quiet became second nature. Even in our own camps we never spoke loud in case there was an army patrol nearby. Now we had 250 square kilometres of our own and there were no soldiers left, except a few manning obscure roadblocks, who'd be in for a nasty surprise when they finally got fed up waiting to be relieved and wandered back to base.

...

Sami and me crashed together in the back of a truck for the last few hours before sunrise. I woke first and gently rolled her head off my chest, without waking her up. I stepped over a couple of sleeping rebels and jumped off the back of the truck, into the white glare of the day's first light. Nobody else was awake, except a few poor souls who'd been ordered to stay sober, guarding the main gate.

The ground was littered with bodies. The rebels crashed out on the ground sleeping off drunken victory celebrations were dressed identically to the dead government soldiers. The only way to tell them apart was to inspect for bullet holes and blood stains.

I wandered to the mangled wreckage of the accommodation huts, where most of our enemies had died. The smell of burning was still strong. The corrugated metal sides had collapsed and were all melted out of shape. One bit looked like something out of a horror film: a charred arm, attached to a set of finger bones pointing at the sky.

I'd had a few drinks and celebrated with everyone else the night before, but I didn't feel that great about what we'd done. Whatever the politics behind it, up until now I didn't feel like I was fighting for a cause. I was fighting to get supplies, protect our camp and help a bunch of people who'd saved my life. The raid on headquarters felt different. We weren't plucky underdogs anymore. We'd ruthlessly killed everything in our way, even when that meant burning fifty people burning to death.

Maybe it was marrying Sami and having responsibility for Adam that changed my perspective. Whatever it was, I had a bit of a moment as I stood there. I looked at my filthy, sweat soaked, uniform. I had a pistol in my belt. Grenades, knives and ammunition in my pockets. My whole body dripped with stuff whose only purpose was to kill and maim other humans.

I was ashamed of what I'd become, but I still didn't have much sympathy for the dead soldiers. They would have done the same to me.

21. BUNGS

The unit leaders went into conference. We wouldn't hold our ground for long unless we cut off the roads with some heavy duty blockades. There was also a supply problem. We usually ambushed the fuel, food and weapons we needed, but the government had already sent everything it could forward. Unless new convoys started dropping supplies into our lap, things were going to get tight.

Captain estimated we had weapons and ammunition for months. There was food for a few weeks, after which they'd have to pull men off military operations and send them hunting. Our big problem was fuel. All but a couple of vehicles had survived the raid, but the store of diesel had exploded. We had whatever was already in the trucks, plus a few odd cans at our camps and in the army command posts. Within a week, we'd be reduced to defending our land on foot.

Casino had an engineer in his unit who'd drawn up plans for eight roadblocks, sealing the four roads through our area in both directions. The idea was to stop all government supplies getting through to the front. Our unit was one of the smallest, so we were assigned to build and defend a single blockade about three kilometres from our camp.

A lot of thought had gone into the design. An approaching convoy first encountered a double line of spikes. The spikes were booby trapped, so that anyone who tried to move them would be blown up. We set up heavy machine guns behind a wall of sandbags at the side of the road. If anything got past the spikes and guns - a tank or an APC most likely - they came face to face with a giant stack of logs. We parked a couple of trucks at the side of the road, because we'd seen how effective they'd been ramming APCs when we took the money.

The final obstacle, past the logs, was designed to stop tanks, which we reckoned were the only things likely to make it this far. It was supposed to be a trench, nearly two metres deep. We got the logs, spikes and guns sorted out the day after we captured headquarters, but the trench was one of those things that looks good on paper but never really works out.

We only had three shovels and the ground was baked so hard that digging was a nightmare. The sides of the hole crumbled when it was dry. When it rained, it filled with water and the bottom turned into sludge. Mosquitoes love a bit of stagnant water to lay their eggs in. By the third day, you couldn't go within five metres of the hole without your hands and face disappearing under millions of black dots, all stabbing your skin for a morsel of blood.

...

Life soon got boring waiting at the roadblock, but it was less tiring than ambushes, when you'd often walk thirty kilometres a night and only get a few hours sleep. We were on duty 24/7 so we made ourselves comfortable. We put tents by the road to sleep in, which was fine as long as a couple of us stayed awake

keeping lookout. Captain let us take it in turns to go up to camp for a couple of hours break. Me and Sami usually went to the pool, washed off and had a bit of a romp. I took Becky swimming if I had the time, which she absolutely loved.

Adam spent most of his time with us, messing around with David and Beck, and driving everyone crazy asking them to tell stories about battles they'd been in. There wasn't any camouflage small enough to fit him, but he carried his rifle everywhere and even managed to get hold of his own supply of grenades, despite me telling everyone not to let him have them.

He seemed really happy. He hadn't seen anything horrible happen yet, there were plenty of bored people around to pay him attention and as far as Adam was concerned, the weapons were the coolest toys ever. One afternoon, I took Adam out to the abandoned mine. I let him get a feel for shooting his gun, by letting him fire a couple of ammunition clips into a metal shed.

In the first four days, we only stopped two single trucks. Another sign that the government had already sent everything it could to the front, was that both trucks only had a driver, instead of two or three men like usual. Both times, the driver stopped at the line of spikes and got out of his cab with raised hands. We had to kill them. We didn't have the resources to look after prisoners and we couldn't let anyone who knew where the blockade was get away.

...

The fifth day of the blockade, a six truck convoy arrived in the hottest part of the afternoon. Adam refused to leave when I told him to hide in the trees. One of the trucks was a tanker. Unfortunately, the tanker driver had brains. Usually, you shoot at the tanker first because the explosion knocks out half the rest of the convoy, but we were desperate for fuel.

The tanker driver sussed we weren't firing at him and stayed in his cab. He picked a moment when it looked like we were all occupied shooting up the other trucks and made a run for it. Captain reckoned he got shot in the arm, but before we could finish him, the tanker erupted. The driver must have left an armed grenade on his seat. The cab exploded first, followed a couple of seconds later by a massive fireball as the fuel exploded. The fire surged upwards, setting light to the branches above our heads. Adam and Amin both started screaming. The wave of heat knocked me backwards. I grabbed my pack and ran towards Adam.

The skin on Amin's bald head and back of his neck had peeled up into little rolls, with the raw flesh exposed underneath. He'd dived forward to cover Adam when he saw the first explosion. I pulled him off Adam. It sound's awful, but I didn't care about Amin's sacrifice, I just needed to know if Adam was OK. First impressions weren't good, Adam's forehead was all bloody with strips of skin dangling in front of his eyes. He had another nasty patch on his elbow, where Amin hadn't quite covered him up.

Amin yelled out in my ear. Adam was in shock, eyes open wide, hands jiggling. There was still a bit of gunfire going on between our people and the last truck driver. Amo was next on the scene, she gave Adam's burns a quick once over.

'Looks like it's only the top layers of skin,' Amo said. 'Take him to the pool and run lots of cold water on the burns.'

I poured some of the water out of my canteen onto Adam and slung him over my shoulder. When I turned around, Sami was right in front of me.

'I'm faster,' She said.

Sami grabbed Adam and ran off with him. The tanker still burned fiercely, only a few metres away. Captain had arrived on the scene. I made to run after Sami.

'Where you going?' Captain asked.

'After Adam,' I said.

'That's a waste,' Captain said. 'Help with Amin.'

Me an Amo slung Amin in the back of a truck and drove as far as it would go. That still left us to carry Amin up the final narrow stretch to camp. He could just about walk, with an arm around each of us. He groaned in pain the whole time. Blood dribbled down his arms and torso until we were all sticky with it. It took half an hour to drag him the whole way.

We lowered him onto the ground outside Amo's hut. All three of us were breathless and covered in insects with the taste of blood. I doubled up in a heap. Amo didn't even pause for breath. She shoed Becky away and shouted for Ghina to fetch a bucket of water.

'Will he survive?' I asked.

'He would in a hospital,' Amo said. 'Out here it's no certainty.'

Grandma came over to help. Amo gave her a cloth and she started dipping it in the bucket and squeezing out water over the burns to soothe them.

'Can I help?' I asked.

'I'll cope,' Amo said. 'Take these down to your brother. Sami will know what to do.'

Amo gave me a sterile cloth, a bottle of disinfectant and some clean bandages. I grabbed a fresh uniform for myself and ran down to the pool. Adam was lying flat in the shallow part of the pool with water rushing over him. Sami laid beside him, dribbling water onto his forehead from her cupped hands. Adam was a bit shocked when he saw all Amin's blood on my uniform.

'You OK?' I asked.

'My head really hurts,' Adam said. 'Is Amin dead?'

'He looks bad,' I said. 'You're not going down to the blockade anymore. It's too dangerous.'

Adam sat up, 'It's boring up here with Grandma and the little kids.'

'Tough shit,' I said. 'You do what I say from now on.'

Now Adam was sitting up, Sami started dabbing his elbow with a cloth soaked in disinfectant. He winced in pain every time she touched him. I stripped off and started washing the blood out of my camouflage.

'You're not Mum or Dad,' Adam said. 'You can't tell me what to do.'

I wasn't in the mood for his lip.

'You're eight years old and you're not going down there,' I shouted. 'I told you to hide in the trees when we heard the trucks coming.'

'I'll do what I like,' he said defiantly.

Adam's expression changed to horror when I charged through the water towards him. I grabbed his hand and crushed his knuckles inside my fist. He let out a high whine and started to sob.

'Dad's dead,' I shouted. 'Mum's not here. I'm all there is. From now on, you'll do everything I tell you, or I'll make you bloody sorry.'

Adam stared me out, he could be stubborn as hell sometimes. I squeezed his hand harder and bunched my fist in his face.

'Got that?' I said.

Adam nodded reluctantly, between sobs. I let his hand go.

'No more knives and grenades,' I shouted. 'You can have your gun if Captain wants you to do guard duty. The rest of the time it stays in our hut. You're going to stay at camp and help Grandma and Ghina to cook and look after the little kids.'

Adam didn't have the guts to answer me back. He looked at Sami.

'Can I get out of here?' He asked sourly.

Sami shrugged, 'If you want. I'll put a bandage on your elbow later. Don't let the burns get dirty.'

Adam got up, scowling at me. He slid his shorts and t-shirt back on and started clambering up the rocks to camp. When he was almost out of sight, he turned towards me and did a Nazi salute.

'Heil Hitler,' he shouted.

I was angry enough to run up there and kick the crap out of him, but Sami grabbed my hand. I dumped myself in the water beside her and stared miserably at my shimmering feet.

'You OK?' She asked.

'He thinks this is a bloody game,' I said. 'I want him up here where he's safe. You can see that, can't you?'

'All kids need strong discipline,' Sami said. 'Captain will let you borrow his whip if you can't control him.'

I tutted noisily, 'Violence: that's your solution to everything, isn't it?'

Sami looked confused, 'I was just trying to help you... Jesus.'

'Everything's violence,' I said miserably. 'I've seen people get shot, burned, blown up. It's turned me into someone who beats up an eight year old to get his own way. I used to be a good person. Now I'm turning into your Dad.'

'Don't you dare criticise my Dad,' Sami said furiously. 'He's hard because he has to be hard. He kept me alive when thousands of other kids starved or got shot. Anyone but him would have let Don cut your throat two months ago.'

'I'm sick of being here,' I shouted. 'I hate this camp. I hate fighting. I want to go home.'

'Huh,' Sami sneered. 'At least you've had some sort of life, rich boy. You want to get out after a few weeks? How do you think I feel? I've been living like this since I was nine years old.'

I took a couple of deep breaths.

'Screw this,' I said. 'I don't want to fight with you. I'm just messed up because that little idiot nearly got himself killed.'

'Whatever, Killer' Sami said. 'I better go back to the roadblock. They're four short down there.'

'I'll follow you. I better sort Adam out first.'

I gave Sami a quick kiss and we started up the path to camp. It wasn't hard finding Adam, you could hear him balling inside our hut from the other side of camp. I crawled inside. Adam was curled up on the sleeping mat with his knees tucked up to his chest and a few spots of blood running down his face. He wouldn't even look up at me.

'I'm sorry I hurt your fingers,' I said. 'I was upset after I saw you get burned. I told you to hide in the trees.'

I was getting the full silent treatment.

'Listen Adam, I know I'm not Mum or Dad. But they're not here. I'm the only one who can look out for you. If you want to go back to the blockade, I won't stop you. But I don't think you should and if Mum and Dad were here, they wouldn't let you down there either.'

Adam didn't say anything until I was half way out of the hut.

'Jake.'

'What?'

'I'll stay up here. I can still see everyone when they come up for their break.'

'Good,' I said. 'Thanks for being sensible.'

'How long do you think we'll be stuck here, before the other rebels break through?'

I shrugged, 'You hear the same news on the radio as us. Hopefully, they'll be here in a week or so.'

...

Back at the blockade, the others had pushed the shot up trucks from the road, but the tanker was still smouldering, it's mangled frame too hot to touch. The grey plume of smoke towered above the trees. I slumped next to Sami in the dirt and gave her a kiss.

'I love you,' I said.

Sami smiled and said the same back.

Just before dark, we heard a feint, pulsing, hum. We rushed into ambush positions, but quickly realised that the noise was coming from the sky. A green army helicopter hovered in the trees overhead, keeping out of our firing range. We held our breath for a few minutes, expecting a barrage of mortars or machine gun fire. But after hovering for a while, the pilot tipped the chopper forward and it flew off.

We didn't know what to make of it, but we were sure it wasn't a good sign.

22. CAMP

It was 2AM. Helicopters kept drowning out the usual night time sounds of crickets and birds. Everyone was tense, even before we started hearing distant explosions and gunfire.

Nobody could sleep. Captain sat with his back against a wall of sandbags, flicking the radio between Rebel and Government stations. The Rebel station claimed their forces were re-grouping for a big advance. The government station barely mentioned the war. The main news was the story that the President had won a fifth term in office, with 98.6% of the vote. Rebel radio claimed the President's victory was made easier by the mysterious disappearance of both opposition party leaders in the weeks before the election.

I cuddled Sami in the dark as the explosions got louder. Captain flicked orange embers off his glowing cigar.

'What do you think Dad?' Sami asked. 'Is it the rebels or the army?'

Captain took a long puff before he answered:

'For better or worse, we're not going to be sitting here this time tomorrow.'

...

I recognised the sound of a Nissan coming down the road. It was on the undefended side of the roadblock. Me, Captain and Sami ran over, guns ready to fire. The Nissan stopped a couple of hundred yards short of our blockade and flicked its headlights three times, which was our prearranged signal for friendly traffic. Captain raised his thumb in the air. The Nissan winked its lights again and rolled forward.

Two fat women jumped out, the same two who'd half snogged me to death the day we found Grandma. They spoke to Captain.

'It's not good,' one of the women huffed, all stressed out. 'Casino got a message that the government is winning. The rebels at the front are in retreat. The army has sent back a convoy of tanks and APC's to reopen these roads and get their supplies moving. We barely got the news before we came under attack.'

'We got buzzed by a helicopter this afternoon,' Captain said. 'Did you put up a fight?'

'You couldn't really call it that,' the woman said. 'The army had fifty vehicles, half of them tanks.'

'What's Casino saying?' Captain asked.

'Casino was killed, at least we think. Maybe a few people made it back to our base, but not many. Dozens of mercenaries jumped out the APCs and chased after us.'

'I think we all got too big for our boots,' Captain said. 'We should have stuck with raids and ambushes.'

‘How long before the tanks get here?’ Sami asked.

‘We know the shortcuts,’ the woman said. ‘And tanks are not that fast, but I’d be surprised if you’ve got more than half an hour.’

Captain ran off and started shouting orders, ‘It’s over everybody. We can’t fight fifty tanks and APCs. Grab what you can. I want everyone and back to camp, fast.’

Me and Sami got our packs and one of the heavy machine guns. We chucked them in the back of a truck. Desi got the engine running. The others passed up more equipment, then a whole bunch of us clambered on top of it. Captain got in the Nissan with the two women. The drive to the camp entrance only took about five minutes, but knowing we were in a race with a column of tanks made it feel longer.

When we got to the hidden road, everyone jumped out and helped move the logs and branches. You could hear the tank tracks roaring in the distance.

‘Showtime,’ Captain shouted. ‘Move it.’

It was hard to tell if the army was minutes or seconds away in the darkness. Our two trucks and Casino’s Nissan raced through the gap, leaving me, Sami, David and Beck to replace everything. The noise of the tanks got crazy and the ground started vibrating. The four of us dropped down low and watched the first tanks roll past.

There’s something horrifying about a tank going at full pelt. The tracks crash and squeal. The roof mounted exhausts belch out choking, black, fumes and the whole things just bristle with power. I imagined what it must have been like for Casino’s men as tanks crashed through their blockade, smashing down trees and pounding their positions with shells.

After about twenty tanks, came a big line of APCs. Then three helicopters buzzed past, flooding the road with beams of light. I hoped our trucks were far enough up the road to camp not to get spotted.

‘Come on,’ Sami said. ‘They need our help disguising the trucks and carrying the equipment.’

The four of us got off the ground and started up the hill.

Sami looked at me, ‘You can say goodbye to our easy ride home.’

...

It took a couple of hours to carry all our stuff up to camp. The army would want to know how all the rebels manning the blockade had managed to disappear so quickly. Captain reckoned there would be mercenaries out searching. We ringed camp with heavy machine guns and kept them all manned.

Adam was in our hut, sobbing. The burns, followed by news of our defeat was a bit more than he could cope with. He looked half dead.

‘Does it still hurt?’ I asked.

‘The one on my arm’s not bad, but my head really stings and I’ve got a headache.’

I scooped Adam onto my lap and gave him a cuddle, carefully avoiding the tender patches of bandaged skin.

'How are we going to get home now?' Adam asked.

'I don't really know. I suppose we'll have to go west and try to make it back to the capital. The cash Captain gave us should help.'

'It's sad Amin died,' Adam said.

I looked at him, shocked. There had been so much going on I hadn't heard anything.

'Did he?' I asked. 'How?'

'Amo thinks he had a heart attack. She says it happens sometimes after you get badly burned and bleed a lot.'

'Oh,' I said.

'It won't happen to me though,' Adam said. 'Amo says my burns aren't bad at all... If I'd listened when you asked me to run into the trees, he wouldn't have got burned trying to save me. It's my fault he's dead.'

'None of what's happened is our fault,' I said. 'I blame it all on that bird.'

Adam gave me a curious look, 'What bird?'

'The bird that hit our plane. If it hadn't been stupid enough to fly into the propeller, we never would have crashed.'

Adam smiled a bit, 'Yeah... Stupid bloody bird.'

'I still think we can make it home. It's just going to make everything more difficult.'

'I was thinking,' Adam said. 'If we get home, I bet Mum will feel really sorry for us and get us loads of presents. Plus, I'm already owed nine weeks pocket money. That's £54.'

'Cool,' I said. 'I'll get £90.'

'But I lost my Gameboy, so I'll have to replace that.'

'We can probably claim it on the travel insurance.'

...

I spent all night wide awake behind a machine gun, twitching every time something moved in the undergrowth. Maybe there were hundreds of men out there searching for us, or maybe they demolished our blockade and didn't even stop.

Captain needed accurate information. At first light he started sending us out on reconnaissance missions. Me and Sami got the easiest job, a trip down the path to see if there were any troops by the road.

'Can I come?' Adam asked.

I knew he'd drive everyone crazy stuck in camp all day and we were only going down the path.

'OK,' I said.

'What about my gun?'

I shrugged, 'I suppose.'

I didn't have the energy to argue. I was pretty depressed. There's nothing worse than being tired as hell and knowing you've got to stay awake for twelve more hours. There was no sign of any footprints on the path and our trucks hadn't been disturbed, but when we got down to the road all the branches and stuff were gone.

'The log's still there,' Sami said. 'And there's no tyre tracks.'

All three of us clicked our rifles onto automatic. Half the branches were up in the trees.

'What happened?' I asked.

'Helicopters,' Adam said.

Sami nodded, 'He's right. If one of them flew low enough, all the branches would get blown everywhere.'

'Shall we put them back?' I asked.

'The pilots wouldn't even see the branches move at night,' Sami said. 'But if it happens again in daylight, it's gonna look well suspicious.'

'But without them, anyone could just drive up this road.'

'We can deal with the odd lost truck,' Sami said. 'We can't if the road looks dodgy and the army sends up a few tanks to investigate.'

I was about to turn around and congratulate Adam for working out it that a helicopter did it, when his gun went off. He fired three rounds into the bushes.

'Jesus,' I shouted. 'What was that for?'

'I saw a man,' Adam said. 'He ran when he saw me.'

Me and Sami poked our guns into the bushes where Adam was pointing.

'Nothing,' Sami said. 'Are you sure it wasn't a leopard or something?'

I gave Adam a filthy look, 'Everyone within five kilometres heard that, you idiot.'

'It *was* a man,' Adam insisted.

I walked over to him, 'Give me that gun. You'll be lucky if Captain doesn't whip you for that.'

Adam backed away from me, 'I'm telling you, it wasn't an animal.'

'How much of a look did you get?' Sami asked.

'Just really quickly,' Adam said.

I shook my head, 'It was an animal. Give us the gun.'

Adam held it out to me and I grabbed it.

'I'm not stupid,' Adam said. 'Even though you think I am.'

I slung Adam's rifle strap over my shoulder. We started moving back towards camp to tell captain what was going on. Sami believed Adam slightly more than me, she kept her rifle on automatic with her finger on the trigger.

Adam was starting to look scared, 'Will he really whip me, Sami?'

'He has to keep discipline,' Sami said.

He sniffled a bit.

'It really was a man,' Adam said. 'Does whipping hurt bad?'

He never got an answer.

'Drop your guns,' a man shouted, in a South African accent.

There were two of them behind us, with rifles pointing at me and Sami's heads. We both dropped the guns in our hands. I started sliding Adam's gun off my shoulder. Adam jumped into the bushes, the mercenaries didn't seem bothered about him.

'Put your hands on your heads and turn slowly.'

We turned round to face them. That's when we heard Captain and Jesus running down the path. They'd heard Adam's gun go off and come down to investigate. It ended up with Captain, Jesus and the two mercenaries pointing their guns at each other, with me and Sami standing in-between with our hands on our heads.

'Put the guns down,' Captain shouted, more in hope than expectation.

The mercenaries backed up a little.

'Put *your* guns down,' one mercenary shouted.

My head was going at a thousand miles an hour, playing out different scenarios. I could see Captain and Jesus getting out OK. I could see the mercenaries getting away. Whichever way you spun it though, you didn't want to be standing in the middle with four guns pointing at you.

I saw Adam's head poke out of the bushes, behind the mercenaries. Part of me wanted him to save himself and clear out, but he was me and Sami's only chance not to end up filled with holes. I wished I'd not taken his gun off him. I recognised the six inch dagger in his little hand as the one I'd told him never to carry again the day before. He got to his feet, put his free hand to his mouth and coughed deliberately.

They both instinctively looked towards the noise. Adam sank his knife in one mercenary's back, then ran. Me and Sami hit the deck and grabbed our guns. Captain and Jesus opened fire. The mercenary who hadn't been stabbed fired a few shots off, but only managed to hit the trees. Sami jumped forward on top of the other one and stuck her knife through his heart. The other mercenary got hit a few times, but he had a bullet proof vest on, so they just knocked him backwards into the dirt. Jesus jumped over me and Sami and shot him in the head from point blank range.

Everything went quiet and I breathed a lungful of gunpowder. Adam stepped out of the bushes and picked his gun off the ground. He was all muddy and the bandage over his forehead was hanging off. He had one corner of his mouth pulled up in a sneer and he looked down at me with total contempt.

'Do you believe I saw a man now, shit head?'

23. KILLER

I felt crappy. Glad to be alive, of course. But I hated the fact that Adam saved me. I shouldn't have let him come down the path with us. I'd never stop him carrying guns and knives now. I didn't want him to kill like me and Sami. When he stuck the knife in, he had his thinking-hard face on. The same face he has when he's building Lego and can't figure out the instructions. Afterwards he was full of himself, but I wanted him to stay like when he was little and he used to climb in my bed in his pyjamas and giggle when he rubbed his freezing toes against my thighs.

I said sorry and gave him a piggyback ride to camp. He put his hands over my eyes and mucked about like he always did. His hands smelled of gun oil and there was dry blood and dirt under his nails. In England, he usually smelled like soap. Mum lobbed him in the shower if he went near a speck of mud.

The other recon parties weren't all back, but Captain knew enough to make his decision. He called me and Sami into his office.

'It's time for you three to leave,' Captain said.

'But Dad,' Sami said. 'This whole area is crawling with troops and hardware. It's more dangerous now than ever.'

'We're no longer secure,' Captain said. 'We can't hide the road into camp with helicopters around, which means it's only a matter of time before more soldiers wander up here. We can kill the first lot, but they'll come back with more men. It's not a battle we can win. We have to set up a new camp.'

'We could come with you,' Sami said.

'If you know where the new camp is, you're a security risk if you get captured. From the unit's point of view, this is the best time for you to leave. It's going to be dangerous for a while. If I was you, I'd try and hold up somewhere for a week until things calm down. Then you can make your journey west to the capital.'

'I'm just not sure this is the right time,' Sami said.

'When's it ever going to be the right time?' Captain asked. 'Do you want to wait for the next rebel advance? Or maybe until the war is over? That could be years away. What are the chances all three of you will survive that long? About nil I'd say.'

'Maybe we could stay with Billy Mango,' I said. 'It's in the right direction.'

Captain raised his hand in front of his face, 'From now on, it's not in our interests to know each other's business. Keep your plans to yourselves.'

Sami sat in one of the chairs and started to sob.

'You could come with us, Dad,' Sami said. 'What have you got to stay here for?'

'No,' Captain said. 'There's a price on my head. Plenty of people in the capital know who I am. Besides, this lot will be a shambles without me around.'

‘There’s millions of people in the capital,’ Sami said. ‘I bet nobody will even notice you.’

Captain became a little firmer, ‘Sami, I prayed for god to let one of my children live a full life. This is your chance and I want you to take it.’

Captain got up and went in one of the drawers of his filing cabinet. He put three big piles of banknotes on the desk and a stack of papers.

‘What are these?’ Sami asked.

‘I’ve been working on notes for your journey,’ Captain said. ‘I’ve not got a map of your whole route, but I’ve written up everything I can remember. I’ve made a map, with most of the big towns and roads drawn on. Most importantly, you need these:’

Captain pulled three sheets of A5 paper out of the bottom of the pile of notes.

‘Identity papers,’ Captain said. ‘Casino got them off one of his sources for me, before he was killed. They’re the latest design. The only thing is, Adam’s one is for a boy of twelve. It was either that or one for a baby. They’ll help if you get stopped by the army, but they won’t explain what you’re doing out here in bandit country. If you hand them over with a few dollars, you should get through most road blocks and checkpoints.’

Sami put her chin in her hands and let out a loud sob.

‘When should we go?’ Sami asked.

‘Tonight,’ Captain said. ‘Or stay here overnight and leave in the morning. The rest of us will get moving as soon as everyone gets back.’

‘I’ll never see you again,’ Sami sobbed.

Captain walked around the table and put his arm across his daughter’s back.

‘We’re on separate paths now,’ Captain said. ‘It’s better for all of us.’

‘Tell Jake about the blood,’ Sami said.

‘What blood?’ Captain asked.

‘On the floor.’

Captain smiled at me, he had a tear down his face.

‘It’s not human blood,’ Captain said. ‘We cut a chicken’s head off and let it run around so the place looked a bit sinister.’

‘It’s just to scare people,’ Sami said. ‘Nobody ever died in here.’

I smiled a tiny bit, ‘Certainly worked on me.’

Captain went in his drawer, unrolled the pouch of torture stuff and pulled out the tooth. He lifted his top lip and held the tooth up to a gap in his jaw.

‘Used to slot in there,’ Captain explained. ‘Have it Jake. Something to remind you of your beloved father in law.’

‘Great,’ I said, staring at the brown tooth and feeling sad. ‘In England, your in laws usually get you a waffle maker or something, but I’m sure this will come in handy.’

‘Well,’ Captain said. ‘No use standing here getting all slushy. There’s too much to do.’

'I'll give you my phone number in England,' I said. 'You never know, you might be able to give us a call some day.'

I read *Catcher In The Rye* at school the term before summer holidays. It was OK: miles shorter than the book we did the term before. There was a bit where the mopey kid is going on about how you don't know you're going to miss stuff until you're about to leave. I understood it when I walked around camp.

Beck, Amo, Becky, Desi, Jesus, David, Grandma, Joseph, Ghina and the others: I asked myself questions about them. Would Amo ever find her husband? When would Beck get his first girlfriend? What would Desi get up to if the war ended? But the worst part was, I knew most of them wouldn't see the end of the war. Mostly, I wondered when they would die.

The road's weren't safe with all the tanks and mercenaries around. Everyone could only take what they could carry on their backs: food and drinking water, pistols, guns, grenades and ammunition. The store room had quite a few sets of new boots and camouflage. It was too much to carry spares, so most of us threw our old sets away. The shining boots and clean camouflage looked like everyone was getting ready for a parade.

Captain sent me and Sami down to perform our final duty for the unit. The path was no longer safe, so we stood guard while Desi and Jesus packed the trucks and 4x4s with explosives and ammunition. They rigged it up so they would blow up if anyone touched them.

When we got back to the top everyone was waiting to leave. It doesn't take much time to fill a pack with and every minute we stuck around was another minute when some bad guys might turn up.

I think Captain had a plan for the unit, though it was best for everyone if me and Sami didn't know. Sami reckoned he'd take them to a temporary camp deep in the jungle and go to ground for a month. Then they'd move again, to a camp nearer to a road. They'd start doing small ambushes. Get hold of a truck or a four wheel drive, build up a stock of heavy weapons and hopefully make a few recruits out of army deserters. In a few months, Captain's unit would probably be back to full strength, with some new faces holding the guns.

We all got upset saying goodbye. Adam was crying and hugging Beck and David. I melted when I picked Becky up. She asked if I could take her swimming tomorrow. She was too little to understand I was going away. She smiled and smudged out my tear with her tiny thumb. Sami went along the line hugging everyone. I couldn't even look when she got to her Dad. Finally Captain came over to me. His face was a wet mess. He reached out to shake my hand.

'You'll always be good to Sami, won't you?' Captain asked.

I nodded, 'You know how much I love her.'

'Have a safe journey. I'll pray for all three of you, every day.'

'You can come and visit us when the war's over,' I said. 'You can baby sit all our kids.'

I realised I hadn't given him the phone number. He opened up his backpack and jotted it on a corner of his folded up map.

Captain smiled, 'Do you know, I haven't used a phone for nearly seven years?'

'I'm sure you'll manage.'

Grandma walked over and looked at Captain.

'I'm not coming,' Grandma said. 'I'll slow all of you down.'

Amo overheard and came rushing over. Now I think about it, Amo must be the kindest person I've ever met. She did everything for everyone and never asked for anything back.

'Of course you're coming,' Amo said gently. 'We'll help with your things. You're no slower than some of the children.'

'You've given me some nice days,' Grandma said. 'I've enjoyed watching the children. I'll wander down to the road and see where it takes me.'

'Don't be silly,' Amo said.

Grandma picked up her pack. All she had was a few pieces of fruit and a bottle of water, but she still had a struggle getting it over her shoulder.

'I was here when the war started,' Grandma said. 'I'll do my best to be here when it ends.'

She began taking tiny steps towards the little guard shelter at the top of the path. Amo wanted to plead with her, but Captain held her back. You could tell Grandma's mind was set.

24. BREAK

Once everyone was gone, we walked to our spot. It was far enough from camp to be safe and both of us wanted to go back for a final peek.

‘You better not start shagging again,’ Adam said. ‘I don’t want to be a Granddad at my age.’

‘You mean an Uncle, midget.’

I picked some of the yellow flowers and stuck them in Sami’s hair. She laughed, but you could tell she was still sad after saying goodbye to her Dad. Adam got hundreds of flowers and turned his scruffy hair into a bouquet. We sorted out the packs so Sami had the heaviest load. It was a bit shameful that she was stronger, but pride wasn’t going to get me home.

We looked at Captain’s hand drawn maps. He must have spent hours tracing pages off his own maps, filling in missing sections from memory and adding notes in tiny handwriting at the bottom of each sheet of exercise paper.

‘How far is the capital?’ Adam asked, looking over my shoulder.

I flicked through the pages and added together Captain’s estimated distances.

‘About 2300 Kilometres,’ I said. ‘It’s like driving from London to Italy.’

‘You’d need about a million years to walk that far,’ Adam said.

‘We’ll have to hitch a lift or steal a truck,’ Sami said. ‘I agree with Dad about us not going too far until things calm down.’

‘Billy Mango’s?’ I asked.

Adam hadn’t been in the office when I mentioned it before. He looked pleased.

‘It’s as good a place to stay as any,’ Sami said. ‘It’s away from all the roads. We’ll be safe once we get there.’

‘It’s sixty kilometres’ I said. ‘Can we make that in one go?’

Sami shook her head, ‘I don’t want to be on the road in daylight at the moment, but if we don’t stick to the roads, we’ll get lost. We’ll rest now and set off when the sun drops. We should manage five or six kilometres an hour through the night. When day breaks, we’ll decide whether to rest or carry on, based on how many soldiers we’ve seen.’

...

After four hours walking, Adam broke down in the road and started to cough from all the dust. We’d taken his pack and all his stuff off him, but he still couldn’t hack it.

‘It hurts,’ he whined.

'Where does it hurt this time?' Sami asked fiercely.

'Everywhere.'

Sami had run out of patience. She picked Adam off the floor and dumped him on his feet.

'Come on, Sami,' I said. 'He's only got little legs.'

'He's got to learn to take pain,' Sami said. 'Or we'll never get anywhere.'

In England, Adam moaned about his legs aching when we went shopping and Dad would carry him to the car. In Africa, kids walked everywhere and got clobbered if they dragged their feet.

Me and Sami grabbed one wrist each and marched Adam between us.

'Captain used to play games with me and Edo on long walks,' Sami said. 'It makes time go faster.'

Adam didn't look enthusiastic.

'What games?' I asked.

'Take it in turns to name stuff. Or do times tables,' Sami said. 'We all have to say a boys name starting with the next letter of the alphabet. I'll start with A, for Adam.'

'B for Boris,' I said. 'Your go Adam.'

'I dunno,' Adam moaned.

'There's one in your class at school,' I said.

'C is for Charlie,' Adam said, grudgingly.

'D is for Desi,' Sami said.

Adam walked better once he started getting into the games. We did girls names, makes of cars, TV shows, pop groups. Adam even tried to teach Sami to play I spy, but it was pitch black, so it didn't really work.

We'd got about two thirds of the way when the sun started coming up. We hadn't seen a roadblock, but there was loads of army traffic. At night, you can crouch at the side of the road and let it pass. Even if the conscripts driving the trucks did see us, they wouldn't stop and investigate in case it was an ambush. It was different in daylight. You'd be seen from further away and you had to hide deep in the bushes.

We found an overgrown trail leading to an abandoned village. We checked out the rotting buildings, making sure they were empty. There was a stream nearby. The banks were all muddy, but it was clean enough to wash our sweat off and scoop drinking water. I made a fire and purified me and Adam's water by boiling it. Sami's guts were like cast iron, she could drink anything. I still got the shits half the time if I drank unboiled. Adam wasn't as sensitive as me, but I made him drink purified. The last thing I wanted was a sick kid on my hands.

Sami found some fruit and a nest of birds eggs, which we cracked open and ate raw. We had a lightweight tent that was stolen off a mercenary. We put it up in the shade, but it was still roasting inside. Laying in the open would have been cooler, but then we'd be fighting off snakes, scorpions, leopards and a zillion bugs and insects. I could never normally sleep in the daytime, specially not inside a tent, but I'd been up more than fifty hours. I stripped down to my boxers, rolled my sweaty t-shirt under my head and dropped off in about three seconds.

...

We had to go eighteen kilometres the second night. Adam's feet were all scabby and his ankles were puffed up. Sami popped his blisters with a needle and squirted out the pus. She tightly wrapped a length of bandage around his ankles for support and reduced the poor kid to tears when she forced his trainers on. It wasn't nice to watch, but Sami was right to be tough: the longer we were out here, the higher our chance of getting captured.

We passed a couple of roadblocks on the last stretch. They were designed to stop vehicles, not pedestrians. As long as you spotted them in time you could creep through the trees behind, keeping your eyes open for a mine or a trip wire. We went by where Sami found me and decided to rest at Grandma's burned out house. Going off road in the dark was hopeless.

We set the tent in the trees behind what was left of the house and grabbed some rest before it got light. Adam cuddled up between me and Sami and had a bit of a cry about his feet before he fell asleep.

Next morning, I crunched over the blackened wood and rubble to our wasted Subaru pickup. It felt sad, like visiting a sick friend in hospital. I stuck my head in the cab and choked on burned plastic fumes. The fire in the back had melted the pistols into a single lump that looked like something out of a modern art gallery.

Adam led the way through the forest. The prospect of seeing Billy again made him quite cheerful. Sami checked up with a compass, but she needn't have worried, Adam remembered the route. We approached Billy's hut cautiously, just in case. I thought he was out, but he was balled up in a corner with about ten animal skins over his head. Sami peeled a couple of them back. Billy was pissing sweat and shaking all over. He sat up and opened his eyes to check us out, but he could barely keep them open.

I knew it was malaria. Dad had an attack once after a business trip. Almost everyone in central Africa got it sometime. I'd seen a couple of people at camp get struck down, even though Amo gave us an anti-malaria tablets every week

'Make yourselves at home,' Billy shuddered.

He managed a little smile for Adam, but he drooped back down and pulled the skins over his head. It must have been sixty degrees under there, but Billy still shivered.

'Can we catch malaria off him?' Adam asked.

'Not from Billy,' Sami said. 'You get it off mosquito bites.'

Adam had been looking forward to messing around with Billy. He was a bit miffed that Billy was ill.

'Want to go spear fishing?' Adam asked. 'We'll need food.'

Adam stripped to his shorts and led me to the lakeside. It was an ideal spot. The clear water was less than a metre deep and there were more fish than you could count.

'Watch for snakes,' Adam said. 'And move gently. The fish all leg it if they feel a strong current.'

We waded in. Billy left his spears wedged into the bottom of the lake. There were a couple of plastic tubs hooked in the reeds.

'Take a spear,' Adam said.

I plucked one out of the sand. Adam grabbed a tub. He liked being the boss for once.

'Aim a bit in front of the fish. They'll fly off when they feel the spear coming.'

I looked into the water. There were plenty of targets to choose from, but they all moved fast and kept changing direction.

'Come on,' Adam said sarcastically. 'It'll get dark in ten hours.'

I made a couple of hopeless thrusts into the mud.

'You would have got that one if it was five feet long,' Adam giggled.

I spotted this fat fish, forty centimetres long. It was drifting towards me, almost like it daring me. I stabbed at it once, missing completely. The second time the spear glanced off the side of the fish, making it charge away.

'Mind your toes,' Adam shouted.

I'd been concentrating on the fish and only missed my toes by a few centimetres. Adam handed over the tub and snatched the spear off me.

'Now, watch the master at work,' Adam said.

He spread his legs wide apart and stared down intently, keeping the tip of the spear in the water and holding the shaft with both hands. He moved fast, narrowly missing on his first attempt. Before I had time to crow, he stabbed an absolute beauty and held the thrashing fish in my face. The sun reflecting off its silver skin blinded me. A stream of blood dripped off the pole, staining the clear water. I dragged the fish off the pole with one hand. It thrashed about inside the plastic tub, drumming against the sides.

'Pin it until it stops wriggling or it'll escape,' Adam said.

The fish had plenty of fight, despite the spear almost tearing it in two. While it suffocated, Adam got another. He pushed the blunt end of the spear into the sand, with the fish flapping in agony over the water.

When I had four dead fish in the tub, Adam offered me a second chance with the spear. He was all puffed, but he'd enjoyed showing off his skills. I didn't try hard. I played it for laughs, pretending to lose my temper and crashing into the water. Adam had been through a rough time and needed cheering up.

'You know how to gut them?' Adam asked, knowing I didn't.

He crouched in the mud at the edge of the water, opened up the fish with a sharp knife and rammed his hands inside. They came out covered in strings of guts and blood. I didn't need to fake my disgust.

'Want to do the next one?' Adam laughed.

'No ta.'

'It's only some guts,' Adam said. 'You're such a pussy.'

He chopped off the head and tail, peeled out the backbone and dipped the fish in the lake to wash out the last traces of blood. Then he flicked his wrist, splattering me with the bloody water. I jumped backwards.

'I'll get you for that, midget.'

'You can't come near me,' Adam giggled. 'I'll rub guts all over you.'

...

Adam slept with Billy in the hut. There was room for all of us in there, but me and Sami preferred the tent where we had more privacy. It was our fourth morning at chez Mango. Billy was on the mend. He'd eaten some fish and walked around a bit the day before, though he hadn't shaved and still looked weak.

Sami rolled on top of me and gave me a kiss.

'Feel like some sex, Killer?'

'Always,' I grinned.

We got about three seconds of snogging in before the zip on our tent cracked open.

'Leave us alone midget,' I shouted.

Billy cleared his throat, 'Ahem.'

Sami clambered off me and pulled on her shirt

'Sorry Billy,' I said. 'I thought you were Adam. He always butts in if were snogging or anything.'

'I've been thinking,' Billy said. 'I need to speak with the pair of you.'

We got dressed and sat outside the hut. Billy spoke while he cooked us fish and banana over his wood burning stove.

'A man used to go outside the TV studio and pick three girls from the crowd,' Billy said, stirring the food. 'I'd take the prettiest one back to my flat for a night of passion and kick her out of bed the next morning.'

I laughed. Sami gave us a killer look.

'I had more cousins and relatives than I could count,' Billy continued. 'I never knew half of them existed until I got rich. Then there was my wife's family. Total parasites. When the money dried up, they all vanished. Even my wife.'

Sami tutted, 'I'm not surprised she left you if you were out humping one of your fans every night.'

'So I wasn't a perfect husband,' Billy said. 'Who is? No man's gonna turn it down when there's twenty girls jiggling their goodies up and down in front of you.'

I laughed, 'I could live with that.'

Sami punched my thigh.

'Pig,' she snarled. 'You ever even sniff another woman and I'll have two penises in my jar.'

'The people in the army were even worse,' Billy said. 'So I bunked out of camp and walked until I found the lake. I taught myself to fish and hunt, built the hut and I was happy with my own company.'

'All that changed when Adam left. I'd enjoyed rumbling with him. Teaching him things. Teasing each other. When you took him, this place seemed dead. I hated staring at the same trees and walking the same path down to the lake every day. It got very dark in my head and I started to think about ending it all.'

'Did you try?' Sami asked.

Billy shrugged, 'No. I started thinking about heading west, but it's hard on your own without maps. I was wondering if I could travel with you.'

I shrugged, 'I can't see why not.'

Sami didn't seem so sure, 'You'll get recognised.'

'That's why I haven't shaved,' Billy said. 'The beard disguises the famous Mango jaw line.'

'You looked after Adam for two months,' I said. 'As far as I'm concerned, I owe you one. You're welcome to come along with us.'

'But if there's trouble, we're not sticking our necks out to rescue you.' Sami said. 'Adam's safety comes first.'

'That's fair,' Billy said. 'When are we going?'

25. MARINGA

Our next target was Kisumba, the nearest big town. It was 400 kilometres away on the western bank of the Maringa river. The Maringa cut the country in two, running north out of the mountains, before merging with the Congo and spilling into the pacific 3000 kilometres away. The river was a natural barrier, which the government used to keep rebel forces from the western part of the country. Captain's notes summed up our options:

Crossing the Maringa

- 1) All bridges across have been destroyed.*
- 2) Banks of river lined with mines, spikes and booby traps.*
- 3) Gun boats destroy unauthorised river traffic.*
- 4) Vehicles can cross on ferries, mostly army traffic. Vehicles are usually searched.*
- 5) Do not try to get across dressed as civillians. The army assumes anyone crossing from east to west is a rebel and you will be interrogated and probably shot.*
- 6) Best bet: Go over in a truck dressed as soldiers. Make Sami look like a boy. Adam's too little, you'll have to find a way to hide him.*
- 7) Once you are over the Maringa and into the town of Kisumba you have travelled less than a quarter of the distance to the capital, but the most dangerous part of the journey is done.*

We wouldn't have had a chance without the notes. There was no point ambushing a truck. I'd never seen one where the truck didn't end up with bullet holes and broken glass, which would raise questions at every roadblock. Our only option was to stick our head in the lion's mouth one last time and raid an army base. We needed other stuff as well: diesel, a couple of days food, a uniform for Billy, some sort of cargo in which we could hide Adam and we had to switch our AK47s to army issue M16s if we wanted to pass for government soldiers.

We stayed three more days at the lake, making a full week. The best thing about Billy coming with us was it cheered Adam up. The two of them got on great, teasing each other and mucking about all the time.

Billy tidied and swept inside his hut, made a couple of repairs to the roof and stacked his fishing equipment inside. He'd probably never come back, but it had been home for five years and he took pride in it. We left an hour before sundown, giving us time to reach the road before dark. The air was even stickier than usual. A thunderstorm was pounding its way towards us.

According to Captain's map, there was a base about ten kilometres down the road past Grandma's house. There was no indication about it's size, or what security was like. It might be a couple of sheds and a few drunks manning a checkpoint or it could be a big deal with mercenaries, tanks and all the trimmings. Whatever

it was, the level of detail on our maps dropped dramatically once we got out of Captain's old stomping grounds. It was better to face the unknown sitting in the cab of a truck disguised as soldiers than on foot.

The rain hit us on the road. The water was warm, like being in a shower. Our shoes got sucked into the mud, but it was cooler in the wet and the falling water cleaned the dust out of the air. We cut through trees behind a tough looking roadblock that had machine guns dug in and a metal gate across the road.

'Last time I came out this far, there was nothing like this,' Sami said

She stopped moving and let out a little gasp.

'I felt something under my boot,' she said, sounding scared. 'I think I'm on a trip wire.'

'What?' Adam asked.

'She thinks she's standing on a trip wire,' I explained. 'If she moves suddenly, it might set off an explosion.'

My heart was going mental. I pulled Adam out of the way, ripped off my pack off and fumbled inside for the Aussie's torch. I flicked it on and traced the path of the wire with the beam of light.

'What can you see?' Sami asked.

'It's hooked to a metal pin sticking out the ground.'

'Shit,' Sami said. 'That's a mine.'

You had to step right on a mine. Attaching a trip wire to the trigger made it effective over a much bigger area.

'Any ideas?' I asked.

'Get me a strong branch,' Sami said. 'You better take my pack. It's got all Dad's notes inside and you'll need them.'

Billy reached above his head and cracked a branch out of a tree. Sami slid her pack off, taking care not to lose her balance. The tiniest movement might blow the mine.

'Give us the stick and move well back,' I said. 'If this blows up, they'll be after you when they hear the noise. Don't wait around to see if I'm OK, I won't be.'

I took the pack and handed her the branch. Me, Adam and Billy crouched behind a thick trunk. We should have covered our faces, but I couldn't stand not knowing what Sami was doing. She pressed a fork in the branch against the wire and lifted off her boot. It looked easy enough, the second part was trickier. She had to wedge the branch against the nearest tree, so that the mine didn't go off as soon as she let it go. The branch was slippery and she had no free hand to wipe the rain dribbling into her eyes.

A massive bolt of thunder cracked off, turning the sky blue and making menacing silhouettes out of the trees. Adam jumped with fright. The back of his head banged into my jaw, making me crack my teeth together and bite my tongue.

'Sorry,' Adam said.

My mouth started filling with blood. Sami got the stick wedged into a spot where the tree trunk joined one of its branches. Ideally, it would stop the wire setting off the mine for hours, but I'd be satisfied as long as it held long enough for Sami to back away.

‘Give me some light,’ Sami said.

My mouth was in agony, so Billy took my torch and walked up close. Sami inspected the spot where the branch met the tree. Adam had his hands pressed together and kept mumbling the same words over and over:

‘Please god. Please god. Please god. Please god. Please god...’

Billy stepped back behind the tree with us. Sami gently lifted one hand off the branch. She took the other off quickly and dashed towards us, stumbling and just saving herself before she ran head first into the trunk.

Adam gave me a high five and mouthed, ‘Yes.’

Billy shone the torch at the tree, ‘I think that’s gonna hold the wire down a while.’

‘I’m a genius,’ Sami grinned.

I had both hands over my blood filled mouth. When Sami realised she couldn’t kiss me, she ducked down and smooched Adam on the mouth.

‘Oi,’ Adam moaned, swiping his lips on his sodden t-shirt.

‘What happened to Killer?’ Sami asked.

I tried to answer, but a load of blood dribbled over my bottom lip and spilled onto my uniform.

‘Typical,’ Sami said. ‘I step on a mine and Killer still comes off worst. We better be ultra-careful the rest of the way. There could be hundreds more mines about.’

Sami kept close to the ground, flashing the torch before taking a couple of steps. We stepped over a couple wires and a lump of metal sticking out of the ground that was probably a mine. I felt sick with fear and there was no easy way out: we were as likely to get blown up going back as forwards. It took us an hour to walk less than a kilometre to the edge of the base.

There were freshly cut trees piled along the edges of a huge clearing. A roar broke out and all the leaves around us started shaking. It was the unmistakable pulsing of helicopter blades. We leaned against the stacked logs and watched a chopper lift off in a cloud of fine droplets. There were three more choppers on the ground. A crew of conscripts was hammering fence posts into the mud on the far side of the clearing.

‘What do you reckon?’ I asked, looking at Sami.

‘Bet this is the new headquarters,’ Sami said.

According to Captain, the commander of the old headquarters was a slacker, mainly interested in grabbing truckloads of booze and selling them to his own men at inflated prices. He kept his job by marrying the defence minister’s cousin and cutting his superiors in on the profits. He’d been killed when we took headquarters and his replacement was made of sterner stuff. It wasn’t just that the camp had sober conscripts in it. It had sober conscripts building a fence, in a thunderstorm, at midnight.

‘Jake, give your rifle to Adam,’ Sami said. ‘The AK47 is a giveaway. Billy, stay here with Adam. We’re going shopping.’

‘Are you sure?’ I asked. ‘This camp looks rock hard. We could go around the edge and look for a smaller base further away.’

‘Reverse the logic,’ Sami said.

‘Eh?’

‘Killer, I thought you’d been on enough missions to pick up a bit of sense. This is a well protected new base. They just kicked our asses and no rebel in their right mind is going to stroll in and raid the storeroom.’

I nodded, ‘That’s what I just said.’

‘Military strategy 1A,’ Sami said. ‘Always do the last thing you’re expected to. If anyone asks questions, act cool and say hello.’

‘You’re a smart girl,’ Billy said.

I looked back at him, ‘You’re not the poor sod going in there.’

‘True,’ Billy said. ‘Rather you than me, especially without a rifle.’

Sami buttoned her jacket. She always wore one that was too small, so her tits got squashed flat. You couldn’t tell she was a girl unless you put some thought into it. We ducked low and stepped over the trees into the clearing. The rain laid a couple of inches deep over the cleared ground. We only splashed three steps before there was a gun pointing at us.

‘What the hell you doing back here,’ the gunman said.

He was part of the Presidential Guard, wearing fancy waterproof boots with tucked in trousers and the yellow and black presidential shield embroidered on his jacket. I had to do the talking, Sami could make herself look like a small man, but she sounded daft when she attempted a man’s voice.

‘Sorry Sir,’ I said. ‘I cut my mouth. We’re looking for the medical tent.’

The guard let his gun drop onto its shoulder strap and pointed his torch at my blood streaked face.

He smiled, ‘Looks like I missed a good punch up.’

‘I just bit my tongue,’ I said.

The guard started laughing, ‘You’re one dumb arsed conscript, aren’t you?’

‘Yes I am, sir,’ I said.

‘Try the building with the big red cross painted on the front,’ the guard said slowly, as if he was talking to a little kid. ‘It’s a dead giveaway.’

‘Sorry sir,’ I said.

We walked past rows of tents. They were lightweight jobs, all different colours and sizes. The ones on lower ground were flooded.

‘Looks like over sixty,’ Sami said.

‘Mercenaries?’ I asked.

‘Must be with tents like that,’ Sami nodded, ‘Let’s check out the trucks and find a storeroom.’

There were about thirty trucks and tankers parked up, plus some APCs and tanks. Sami opened one of the truck doors to see if the keys were in the ignitions.

‘See him,’ a soldier walking by said, pointing at a skinny man holding a clipboard.

The clipboard man looked imposing, he had a fancy uniform and a bull necked conscript keeping his paperwork dry with an umbrella.

'Truck?' Clipboard man asked.

'That's right,' I said.

Clipboard started scribbling on a form. 'Where are you going?'

'We're taking supplies out,' I said. 'Re-supplying a group out hunting for rebels.'

'Do you have a weapon requisition?'

I shook my head, 'Should we?'

Clipboard tore off one of his sheets of paper, 'That's what you need. Can you write?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Take this to the store room and get whatever you need. I've already signed it. Make sure you write down everything you take.'

'Yes sir.'

Clipboard handed me a set of truck keys. A helicopter was coming down, spraying the rain in our faces

'There's extra fuel cans over there if you need them,' clipboard shouted.

We could barely hear each other over the noise.

'Thank you sir,' I said.

The supply hut was built from metal sheets, the same as the ones we melted at the old headquarters. Three guys stood at the counter inside. I showed one of them my soggy form. He grabbed it out of my hand.

'Who gave you that?' He asked.

I shrugged, 'Guy out there under the umbrella.'

He screwed the paper into a ball and threw it across the floor.

'You'd think an army runs on paperwork,' he said bitterly. 'Just tell us what you want.'

I went for the works: four M16s, three boxes of ammunition, grenades, food and uniforms. People might be starving in the city and soldiers might not get their wages, but nobody ever seemed to be short of weapons.

'And a 20mm machine gun,' I said.

Sami gave me a funny look.

I turned to her and whispered, 'We can hide Adam in the crate.'

Sami nodded, 'Good thinking Killer.'

The stockroom guys helped us carry everything through the mud and put it on the truck. We got in the cab. Rain plinked off the metal roof and torrented down the windscreen. I put the key in the engine.

'This is like a dream,' I said. 'It's too easy.'

'And you were crapping yourself,' Sami said. 'You sneak off and get Billy and Adam. I'll deal with the helicopters and meet you fifty metres past the front gate in about thirty minutes.'

'Helicopters?' I said, shocked. 'This has all gone so smooth, why do you want to risk messing it up?'

'Those choppers can drop on a camp and kill rebels. If I can take them out, we'll be doing Captain and the others a big favour.'

'No way,' I said. 'We shouldn't take any more risks. Captain wants you safe, not out trying to be the hero.'

'Just try and stop me,' Sami said.

'You're mental,' I said furiously. 'You'll mess everything up.'

She jumped down out of the cab. I got out my side, walked around the cab and grabbed her arm.

'What are you gonna try and do?' I asked.

'See if I can find the fuel tanks and pour in some diesel. They won't fly with the wrong fuel.'

'I just want to go home, Sami.'

She shoved me up against the truck and waggled her finger in my face.

'Those people were my life for six years, Jake. There's never going to be a time when I'll stop helping them.'

I shoved her away from me.

'Do what you like,' I said. 'You're an idiot.'

'Don't shove me Killer. I'll kick your arse.'

A friendly voice interrupted our row, 'Hello Jake, Sami. How is married life treating you?'

We both spun around, shocked. It was Father Desmond, the priest who'd married us. We only had pistols. We'd never get out alive if he grassed on us.

'Umm, hello Father,' I said. 'Married life is great.'

'Yeah,' Sami stammered. 'Great.'

'Should I be keeping my head down for any reason?' The father asked.

'No,' Sami said. 'We're only here for a truck and some supplies.'

'Captain told me you'd be trying to get home after the wedding,' Father Desmond said. 'He warned me to stay out of headquarters the night you attacked. I'd have been asleep in one of the huts otherwise. Where's the little fellow?'

'Adam's hiding in the trees,' I said.

The man with the clipboard was walking towards us, with the umbrella holder shuffling awkwardly behind him. He spoke to Father Desmond.

'Do you need a guard, Father?'

Father Desmond shook his head, 'I'm going out with these two. I'm sure they can look after me.'

'If you're sure,' Clipboard said.

Father Desmond turned to us, 'I can escort you the next fifty kilometres. I'm well known around here. I'll should be able to get you through two serious roadblocks and as far as the main track to the Maringa.'

'How will you get back?' I asked.

'There's always a bored truck driver willing to give a priest a ride.'

Sami drove the truck to Father Desmond's tent, on the edge of camp. I was glad to have an escort, but Sami was angry she'd lost her chance to sabotage the helicopters.

The Father went in his hut to get a few things, while I crawled through the undergrowth to get Adam and Billy. When Sami gave the all clear, we dived out of the bushes. Adam and Billy climbed in the back. I got in the front, sandwiched between Sami and Father Desmond.

26. PRAYER

The roads were pretty hairy in the rain. Sami put out the back end in some thick mud and one the rear wheels jammed into a ditch. Every truck had a kit on board, designed to help out if you got stuck. It consisted of rope, a few wooden boards and a shovel. I wedged the planks under the overhanging wheel to help it get a grip. Adam had his chin resting on the tailgate of the truck, watching me. He cracked up laughing when Sami hit the accelerator and I got blasted by mud as the truck jerked forwards. I climbed back in the cab, half drowned and covered in filth.

We drove another few kilometres until we hit our second road block. There was a line of six trucks. A soldier thumped on the door.

‘Open up,’

Sami cracked her door a few centimetres.

‘Where are you heading?’ The guard asked.

‘Kisumba,’ Sami said.

‘The roads are slippery,’ the guard said. ‘Trucks coming the other way say there have been several accidents.’

Father Desmond leaned over Sami.

‘What’s the hold up?’ He asked.

‘Everything must be searched,’ the guard explained. ‘We’re looking for rebels trying to flee the area.’

‘Is Upton on duty up there?’

‘Yes Father,’ the guard said.

‘Tell him Father Desmond needs to pass urgently. I have to read a sick man the last rites.’

‘We have orders to inspect *every* truck,’ the guard insisted.

Father Desmond shouted, ‘If I have to get out in the rain and speak to Upton myself, you’re gonna find yourself in a deep dark hole, soldier.’

The guard looked suitably flustered and ran to fetch his boss. We waited a couple of minutes before the guard sprinted back. Sami opened the door again.

‘Upton apologises for the delay Father,’ the guard said. ‘He told me to wave you through immediately.’

The road was barely wide enough for two trucks to pass. Father Desmond gave a friendly wave to the guard hut as we drove past. The rain was still pounding and the roads seemed to be getting worse. Dips and potholes had turned into miniature lakes. You had to judge the speed exactly right. Too fast and you lost it on the bends, too slow and the mud swallowed your tyres.

Half an hour past the second road block, Father Desmond made us pull onto a narrow track that led to a farm house.

'I'll be leaving you now,' Father Desmond said.

'Who lives here?' Sami asked.

'Nobody,' The priest said, 'I've stayed here before. It's got a good roof. I'll spend the night in the dry and hitch a lift back to HQ in the morning.'

Father Desmond called Billy and Adam into the cab. It was a squeeze with five of us in there. Adam sat on Billy's lap and we all pressed our hands together while the Father said a prayer:

'Our Father, bless these people and provide them safe passage on their long journey. Guide them in the ways of your son, Jesus Christ and set them on a path that will lead them to eternal glory. Amen.'

We all opened our eyes and said *Amen*. We thanked Father Desmond for his help. The priest shook all our hands, except Adam who got a little hug. He took his overnight bag out of the foot well and began trudging through the mud towards the dark outline of the abandoned house.

Sami got our packs out the back and grabbed our AK47s. We had to use M16s if we wanted to pass for soldiers. I lobbed mine into the bushes without a thought, but Sami held up her shabby rifle, staring at it solemnly,

'Five years,' she said. 'It never failed me once.'

She raised the gun up to her cheek and kissed the wooden stock before throwing it into the trees on top of mine. Billy lifted Adam into the back and pulled up the tailgate behind himself. Sami looked upset as she switched on the engine on and began a delicate three point turn in the mud.

'I bet you're glad I couldn't do anything to those helicopters,' she snapped.

I couldn't help laughing, 'The priest turning up just then; it must have been God's will.'

She sunk her thumbnail into my nipple and gave it an almighty twist.

'One more word, Killer. You're asking for such a pounding.'

...

Sami kept our speed low through the night. The rain never stopped. The closer we got to the Maringa river, the lower the ground and the thicker the mud. We crossed loads of small bridges where the water had risen above the wooden deck. The structures groaned ominously. They'd been built for pedestrians and handcarts, not five tonne trucks.

The more experienced army drivers charged through the mud at twice our speed, blasting their horns if they got trapped behind us on a narrow stretch of road. We passed a few trucks that had slipped off the road. One had missed the entrance to a bridge and been swallowed in the muddy banks of a lake. Most satisfyingly, as the sun rose, we re-passed a particularly fanatical driver, who'd spent half an hour trapped behind us, blasting his horn and waving his fist. He had both his passenger side wheels wedged in a ditch. He and his co-

driver were standing up to their waists in creamy coloured mud. Sami waved out the window and sarcastically shouted '*Good morning,*' as we passed by.

There were occasional road blocks. All were the basic kind that used to spring up near camp, with a single line of spikes across the road and a tent with three or four troops inside. Every time, we warned Billy and he made Adam crawl into the wooden machine gun crate.

The mud and rain demolished any desire the guards had to search our vehicle or ask questions. We'd blast our horn to get one of the troops to drag the muddy spikes out of the road. The closest we came to being searched was a drunken fellow who moaned about his stomach pains and asked if we had medicine. When we said no, he turned nasty and threatened to search our truck. He only got as far as shining his torch in the back and waving at Billy before he got fed up and let us pass.

We'd managed 140 kilometres in eight hours when the sun rose. We pulled over to go to the toilet and top up the fuel tank. I had to make sure there was no traffic around before letting Adam outside to pee. Billy had slept some and claimed he was a good driver. He took the drivers seat, with Sami going into the back for some rest. Billy hadn't driven in years, but once he remembered which way round the pedals were, he did OK.

There was no air conditioning in the cab, the sunlight magnified through the glass was unbearable. Most of the time we seemed to be driving through a sheet of muddy water and the glare off it made it tricky to see, even with sunglasses. I rested my head against the open window frame. The noise and vibration were atrocious, but the warm spray blowing inside cooled me off.

...

Adam was just a toddler. We were playing on the stairs in our old house, I fell over on top of him and crushed his ribs. He started crying. I was scared that Mum was going to tell me off even though it wasn't my fault.

I woke up with a jolt. Billy looked at me from the drivers seat.

'You OK, Jake?'

Everything felt wrong. The sky was moving too fast and our progress was smooth and quiet, almost like I was still dreaming. I rubbed a bit of gunk from my eye and sat up straight. There were two lanes of tarmac going in each direction and the truck was doing eighty kilometres an hour. There were big cracks and the road markings had worn off, but after weeks of either choking on dust or sliding in mud, the tarmac felt like heaven.

Traffic was light. There were never more than a couple of other vehicles in view. The land beside the highway was kept clear to prevent ambushes. We passed every kind of wreckage. Giant articulated trucks, rusted tanks, cars, rotted wooden handcarts and thousands of burst tyres. In a few places, the tarmac was all rippled where burning vehicles had melted it. In others, Billy had to drive around craters where the road had been pounded by artillery shells. At one point, it stopped raining for a bit and a rainbow arced across the blue sky ahead.

Billy drove over two hundred kilometres before midday, untroubled except by the eerie columns of tanks and APC's grinding past in the other direction. As we got closer to the Maringa, I started reading the

giant blue road signs. They showed a road heading all the way to the capital. In the top corner of each sign was a painting of a fat man with a moustache and in giant white lettering, *President Umberto Sekki Transnational Highway*.

‘How far does this road go?’ I asked.

‘Not far,’ Billy laughed, ‘This bit out here was paid for by the mining companies, to help get their trucks to the river. There’s another bit leading out of the capital. You can’t use it though. All the flyovers collapsed in an earthquake and never got repaired. In between there’s seventeen hundred kilometres of highway they never got around to building.’

‘What happened to President Sekki?’

‘Military booted him out,’ Billy said. ‘They tortured him for a couple of days to get the number of his Swiss bank accounts, then they finished him off with a firing squad.’

27. FERRY

The Transnational Highway came to an abrupt halt on the banks of the Maringa. Dilapidated shacks on the edge of Kisumba were visible from our side of the river. Our noses caught the tang of rotting food and sewage whenever the wind gusted in the right direction. The four lane road bridge that once spanned the river had its central arch knocked out. The road ended abruptly in mangled steel reinforcing wires, with chunks of concrete dangling over the water. The surviving part of the bridge was home to thousands of noisy gulls. Their accumulated lime had stained the tarmac white.

An arrow painted on the tarmac pointed the way to the ferry. We drove a couple of kilometres down a slippery, single lane, track. In places there was only a few centimetres between our tyres and a tumble onto the muddy banks of the river. The road opened into a waterlogged field. There were about thirty trucks parked up, waiting to cross. Soldiers were propped on the tailgates of their trucks, drinking beer and fighting off flies and heat.

Me and Billy jumped out of the cab, pleasantly surprised by the relaxed atmosphere and apparent lack of security. I walked up to a couple of smoking soldiers.

‘Hey,’ I said.

The guy pointed at Billy, ‘You look like that idiot who used to do the TV show.’

Billy laughed, ‘I get that a lot. He’s a distant cousin.’

‘My sister used to fancy him something rotten,’ the other soldier said. ‘I told her he’s gay.’

We all laughed.

‘He was gay,’ the first soldier said. ‘All those prissy white teeth.’

‘Billy Mango was not gay,’ Billy spluttered angrily. ‘I’ve met his wife.’

‘How long for the ferry?’ I asked, trying to change the subject before Billy started fighting for his family honour.

The soldiers both shrugged.

‘We’ve been here since yesterday morning,’ one said. ‘A guy came across in a little boat and told us the ferry had broken down. They’re waiting for a spare part. It’s supposedly being flown up from the capital, but I wouldn’t hold your breath.’

‘Is there another ferry nearby?’ I asked.

‘Sixty clicks up river,’ the soldier said. ‘But it’s a two-hundred kilometre drive on the crappiest roads. I’m in no rush. I’d rather be waiting here than driving the truck up to the front with the rebels trying to blow us up.’

‘Fair enough,’ I said.

I climbed in the back of the truck with Billy. You got a cooling breeze through the canvas when the truck was moving, but it baked inside as soon as you stopped. We explained that we had to wait or drive north.

Sami pulled the lid off the machine gun crate. Adam sat up, looking all puffed.

'I can hardly breathe in there,' Adam said. 'Can I get out to pee?'

'There's soldiers everywhere,' I said. 'You can't go outside. I'll find you a bottle or something.'

'I better stay in here as well,' Sami said. 'The less they see of me, the longer it takes them to realise I'm a girl.'

'We could drive up to get the other ferry,' I said.

Sami shook her head, 'It's off our maps. We don't know what kind of roadblocks we'll encounter, or where we'll land on the other side. It can't take much more than another day to repair the ferry.'

I wandered up to the edge of the river. Half a dozen soldiers were standing there, passing around a set of tiny binoculars.

'What's going on?' I asked.

The binoculars were passed over to me. I focused them up and looked at the rusty ferry a few hundred metres away on the other side of the river. It had a single open deck with ramps at either end for vehicles to drive on and off. A man wearing nothing but blue running shorts was working out of an opening in the middle of the deck.

'He's been working there about an hour,' the soldier standing next to me explained. 'I think they must have delivered the part.'

I watched the mechanic climb out of the hole. He stamped his bare foot and hurled a wrench across the deck.

'He just chucked a fit,' I said.

'What?' Someone shouted excitedly.

The binoculars got snatched off me. The soldiers all started pushing and shoving, trying to get a glimpse of the action.

'Looks like were here for a while longer,' one soldier said.

I wandered back to the truck.

...

The day passed miserably. Adam was going crazy trapped inside the hot truck with nothing to do. At least Sami could button up her jacket and wander outside for a little while. Billy borrowed a couple of hundred dollars of our money and found a card game. He staggered back an hour later, half drunk, complaining that he'd been cheated.

Mid-afternoon there was a blast of smoke out of the ferry's exhaust, which caused great excitement among the crowd with the binoculars. It only lasted a minute. More trucks kept arriving, until the field was packed and they started queuing up along the single lane road. We wouldn't be able to get out of the field now, even if we wanted to.

Shortly before the sun went down, the grubby mechanic picked up his tools, walked up the river bank and rode off on his bicycle. It looked like we were staying the night.

...

I slept in the back of the truck, with Adam snuggled up between me and Sami. We hadn't washed since we left Billy's and the inside of the truck smelled foul. It was a restless night. I snatched bursts of sleep here and there and never managed to get comfortable.

I woke up just after the sun, with a headache and a stiff back. I jumped off the truck and wandered drowsily through the mud to the riverbank. The men with the binoculars were in a bright mood.

'He was already working when the sun came up,' one of the soldiers said when he noticed me.

I got a glance through the binoculars. The mechanic had a colleague with him. They looked happy and there was steam puffing out of the vertical exhaust.

'Looking good, kid,' the soldier said, thumping me on the back.

I walked back to the truck. Sami and Adam were up. Adam was eating peaches out of a can with his fingers. He already sounded fed up.

'When can we get out of here?' He asked. 'I'm boiling already.'

'Doesn't look bad,' I said. 'The ferry looks like it's fixed.'

I took a can of mixed fruit and stood outside with Billy, pouring the sugar drenched cubes of fruit in my mouth, while trying not to cut my lips on the jagged opening of the tin. There were shouts firing back and forth among the trucks as the ferry began loading up with trucks. I couldn't see how the trucks were going to land when there was a queue of trucks blocking the narrow path from the highway.

A little cheer went up when the ferry started moving. It got about halfway across the river when there was a bang. Black smoke spluttered out of the funnel, before stopping entirely. The ferry stopped moving forwards and began drifting downstream with the current. It took the captain ten minutes to get the engine going again and the ferry began creeping towards us. Judging by the noise, the engine was at full power, but the ferry barely moved against the current. When it eventually landed, the ferry had taken nearly twenty minutes to cross the three hundred metre gap. I could have swum it faster.

A couple of crewmembers dropped the front gantry and jumped ashore, only to realise there was nowhere to unload the trucks. Every truck on the single lane road had to reverse back to the highway. One truck got stranded with its rear wheel overhanging the river. There was no way to get it back on the road, so the driver got out and the ferry operators pushed the truck into the river, where it embedded itself nose first in the mud.

By the time the road was clear, it was midday. Sixteen trucks crawled off the boat and up the hill and sixteen more from our side on board. I worked out we'd make it on the ferry's next trip. When it got to the other side and the trucks unloaded, there was another hour delay. The owner of the binoculars had crossed over, so we had no clue why.

The ferry made its second crossing and the trucks unloaded. We sealed Adam inside the machine gun box with a bottle of water. I hoped he wouldn't be trapped for too long. He could easily pass out, or even suffocate. Me, Sami and Billy got in the cab.

The metal gantry clanged as we drove onto the rusty deck. It was quickly raised up and the ferry roared for a few seconds before the engine died. Choking black diesel smoke billowed into our cab. After a few grinding noises, the captain got the engine restarted and we began crawling across the river. The boat shook violently and the steel deck plates squealed over every bump in the water. As we got closer to the Kisumba side of the river, the smell of sewage got stronger until I had to force myself to take each breath.

We drove off. All the trucks had to queue in front of a security barrier. There were four guards with sniffer dogs. A heavy steel gate protected with machine guns our exit. Some trucks got waved straight through, others were held up and searched. I got more and more nervous as Sami edged us forwards.

A guard thumped on the passenger door. I opened up.

'All out,' he shouted.

I climbed down. Billy and Sami were taken care of by another guard on the opposite side of the truck.

'Hands flat against the truck, feet apart.'

I did what I was told. The dog rested its front paws on the back of my leg and gave me a good sniff. The guard patted me down.

'What's that?' The guard asked.

'Pistol,' I said.

'Whose boots did you lick to get one of those?' He asked.

I didn't answer.

'Any drugs?' The guard asked.

'No.'

'Have you or any part of your crew had any association with rebel units?'

'No,' I said.

I've often wondered why security guards ask questions like that. It's not like anyone's ever going to admit to being a rebel fighter and having half a kilo of heroin stuffed down their pants.

'Show us inside the truck.'

I walked around and pulled down the tailgate. The guard climbed inside. I tried to not to listen to my pounding heart and act calm. The dog started climbing over everything. It got pretty excited, yapping and wagging its tail when it got to the machine gun crate. The mutt could probably see Adam between the wooden slats.

The guard looked down at me, 'Bloody reeks in here.'

I was surprised he could smell anything over the stench of the town. It must be like when you go round someone's house and it stinks of cats, but they never even notice because they're used to it.

'Sorry,' I said. 'We've been sleeping in there the last few nights.'

The dog was getting frantic around the box, but the guard pulled it away, stroked the crown of its head and jumped out.

'Wants a good bloody airing in there,' the guard said, pushing the tailgate back up.

'Sorry,' I said again.

I think he realised I was nervous. The guard faced me right off.

'How long have you been in the army?' He asked.

'Four months,' I lied

'Hmm,' he said. 'You look really young. How old are you?'

'Seventeen,' I said. 'Everyone reckons I look younger.'

The other guard emerged from the driver's side and looked at his colleague.

'Everything OK?' He asked.

The guard wavered for a second, 'Yeah... I suppose.'

'OK son,' my guard said. 'Off you go.'

I walked back to the cab. The three of us exchanged grins and drove off.

28. KISUMBA

Kisumba was a stop off point for troops heading between home and the front lines. Most of the people on the streets near the river were soldiers out for a good time. They wanted drink and girls. Every shop front offered iced beer. There were bars every few metres. Some were in proper buildings, but most were improvised: typically a tarpaulin lashed over wooden posts, with a few bashed up chairs and kegs of beer standing on a filthy table.

Empty bottles littered the streets. Beggar kids dragged the empties in trolleys made from scrap. They could collect two cents deposit on each one.

Our progress was slow. There wasn't much traffic, but the streets heaved with bodies. Soldiers laid wherever they passed out drunk and pedestrians refused to budge, even when Sami blasted the horn. Whenever we slowed down, merchants started hammering on the truck trying to sell us stuff.

'Cool beer, follow me' A man shouted. 'Cool beer. Sexy girls.'

A man climbed on the side of the truck. He stuck his arm in the window and waved a bag of dried leaves in Sami's face.

'Hashish,' he yelled.

Sami used unladylike language and punched him into the dirt.

'We need somewhere quiet to ditch the truck and get Adam out,' Sami said.

Billy knew a bit about Kisumba from his days in the army.

'Just keep driving,' Billy said. 'There's an old cargo port a couple of kilometres away where nobody ever goes.'

Sami pulled up a side road and we took a sharp left into a litter filled alleyway where there were less bodies in the way. Huge rats fought over the rubbish with birds and stray dogs. We pushed up the windows, but the stench was still unbelievable. People had built shacks amongst the filth. A couple naked toddlers were splashing in a puddle of yellow water.

Billy was right about the port. There were a few small cargo ships and a wharf with decrepit cranes and warehouses with all the windows smashed. The government banned commercial traffic along the river when the war started. The largest boat was called the Pride Of Paris. Its hull had rusted through and it laid on the riverbed with brown water lapping over the deck.

Sami stopped the truck under the front canopy of a warehouse. I pulled down the tailgate and raced inside to release Adam. He'd drunk all his water and looked shattered. I sat him up, pinched his cheek to liven him up and handed him my bottle of water.

'You OK?' I asked.

'Feel a bit sick,' Adam said.

I ran my hand through his sweaty hair and kissed his cheek.

‘What was that for?’

‘I’m really proud of you,’ I said. ‘You’ve been through a lot and you’ve held up really well.’

‘How long will it take to get to the capital from here?’ Adam asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘If there’s a bus, it’ll probably take three or four days. Longer if we have to hitchhike or walk part of the way.’

We all got in the back of the truck and started stripping off. I put on the trainers, shorts and t-shirt that I’d been wearing the day I arrived in the country. I gave Billy one of the Aussie’s t-shirts and a pair of his shorts. The only civilian clothes Sami had was the white dress she’d got married in. She reckoned it looked too clean, so she rubbed it against the ground making it all dirty before putting it on.

Weapons were our next dilemma. We wanted to pass the rest of the journey as civilians, which meant we couldn’t go walking around with grenades and M16s on us, but we still wanted to defend ourselves if someone tried something on. We settled on everyone carrying a pistol and a knife, except Adam, who only got a knife. We decided to give Billy some of our money. It seemed fair after he’d looked after Adam and driven most of the way here. He needed to buy or steal a set of identity papers if he wasn’t going to get arrested.

We stuck our packs on. They felt light without ammunition and grenades. We began walking towards town. One of the disused warehouses we passed had an Amanda Trading sign over the front door, it was my Dad’s company. I lifted Adam up so he could see through the broken glass. There wasn’t much to see, just a desk standing in a puddle and a few filing cabinets.

‘That’s our plane,’ Adam said.

He was pointing at an out of date calendar on the wall behind the desk. It was a picture of the three DC3s lined up in front of the terminal in the capital.

‘I’m not surprised it crashed,’ Sami said. ‘Looks like a heap of junk.’

We walked slowly. As we got nearer the centre of town, we started noticing a few more people on the streets. We reached a row of shops and market stalls. Most people out here were civilians. The soldiers tended to stick around the bars near the river.

We went inside the first shop we came to. There didn’t seem to be different kinds of shops in Kisumba, they all sold a bit of everything. Billy and Sami looked excited. Neither of them been in a shop for years.

‘Can I help you?’ A girl sitting on a stool behind the register asked.

She was only about thirteen. The shelves were stacked up to the ceiling. Half the bulbs were blown out and there was condensation dripping off the ceiling, giving me a nasty feeling that we might all get electrocuted.

‘I need some shoes,’ Sami said, looking at her bare feet.

The girl got a ladder out and climbed up.

‘Plimsolls, sandals, flip flops?’

The girl chucked a few different kinds down. Sami picked out a pair of white cotton plimsolls to go with her dress. Billy got himself some flip flops.

'Have you got any kid's clothes?' I asked.

Adam's only set of clothes were wrecked. I'd been able to wear army camouflage and the Aussie's stuff, but Adam had been wearing one set of clothes since he arrived. The girl moved the ladder across and threw down a selection of Adam sized shorts, t-shirts and underwear. Adam picked out a Simpsons t-shirt and a some counterfeit Nike stuff, then he started eyeing up the boiled sweets on the counter. Billy wanted a belt for his shorts. Sami noticed a skirt she liked.

The assistant called out the back door for her two younger brothers to come and help. They started grabbing stuff off the shelves. There was soon quite a pile on the counter and a man who'd been sitting out front in a folding chair decided to come inside and see what was going on. He rummaged through the pile on the counter and looked at me accusingly.

'Do you have money for this?' He asked, raising a single eyebrow.

I pulled a few banknotes out of my pockets and his mouth turned into a wide grin. He put his arm around my back.

'My friend,' he beamed. 'I have beautiful linen suits in your size. Just one thousand dollars.'

I shook my head. He grabbed an orange tasselled lampshade off a shelf behind him and stuck it in my face.

'This would make a beautiful present for a lady, young man. Are you two married?'

I nodded, 'Yes.'

'How long?' The shopkeeper asked.

'A few weeks.'

'Newlyweds, how sweet. Do you want babies yet?'

I grinned, 'Not yet.'

The shopkeeper reached up behind the counter and dumped a giant box of condoms on the counter.

'You want them?' The shopkeeper asked. 'Hundred percent safety.'

I nodded. It was embarrassing, but I'd never wanted anything so badly my whole life.

'What are those?' Adam asked, looking at the box.

'None of your business,' I said.

Adam started to crack up laughing, 'Oh... I remember what they're for now.'

The shopkeeper looked at Adam, 'I have lots of toys over there.'

Adam seemed intimidated by the shopkeeper and put his arm around my back.

The girl started ringing it up. The whole lot came to \$1,300. I peeled off seven two hundreds and told the girl to keep the change. She looked shocked.

'Is there anything else I can help you with?' The shopkeeper asked eagerly.

'You know a good place to get a room for the night?' I asked.

'I'll get my son to show you, there's a little boarding house two streets over.'

Sami jabbed me in the ribs.

'We won't stay there,' she said. 'Lets go.'

We trailed Sami out of the shop.

'You shouldn't have showed off with your money,' Sami said. 'You might as well walk around with a card on your back saying *Please Rob Me.*'

'Sorry,' I said. 'Is that why you didn't want him to know where we're staying?'

'Exactly,' Sami said. 'It's not just your fault. We all got a bit carried away in there.'

Adam ripped the top off a packet of sherbet and poured it in his mouth. Billy bought three beers and a Pepsi off a street vendor.

We wandered for nearly an hour, trying to find somewhere to stay. There were a few hotels, but they either looked nasty or had been boarded up. We eventually got fed up looking for ourselves and asked a taxi driver.

'My cousin owns the best place in town,' the driver said. 'Hop in. I'll take you there, no charge if you take a room.'

'Is there a shower?' Sami asked.

'Private shower is an extra five dollars a night.'

We hadn't washed in nearly four days and Adam was whining about his legs hurting. The four of us piled into the taxi. The driver roared off, blasting his horn and sending a crowd of pedestrians diving for cover.

'Scum,' the driver shouted out of his window. Then he turned to us, 'If you're too stupid to move out of a car's way, you deserve to get run over.'

The driver reached across the front passenger seat and shook Billy's hand.

'I'm Quentin,' the driver said. 'If you don't like my cousin's hotel, I'll drive you back. It's very good value.'

After ten minutes racing down narrow streets and making pedestrians dive for cover, we arrived in a lively avenue lined with stalls selling hot food. Every building seemed to be a hotel or dormitory. Quentin jammed his horn for the millionth time and a doorman walked up to the cab.

'Two rooms with showers,' Quentin said.

The doorman handed Quentin a few dollars for his trouble and opened the car door for us. Another passenger got straight in the cab. Quentin didn't stick around to honour his promise of a free return trip. The reception looked OK, with flowering cacti railing down counter and a shabby looking bar. The doorman walked behind the counter.

'Eighty dollars a night, per room, in advance.'

I was ready to hand over the cash, but Billy moved my hand away.

'Show us the room before we pay.'

The doorman took two keys from a rack behind him and led us along a damp smelling corridor. He opened one door and we walked in. There was a bit of mildew on the walls, but everything looked clean.

'Good plumbing,' the doorman said.

He opened the bathroom door and switched on the tap. A jet of clean water burst out of the shower head.

'Sold,' Billy said.

We paid the doorman and got our keys. Adam went off to Billy's room. I started pulling off my shoes to go in the shower. Sami was admiring herself in the mirror on the back of the door.

'I'm all grown up,' she said.

She pulled her dress over her head and started at herself naked.

'The last time I looked at myself in a proper mirror, I was ten years old.'

I put my arms around her and for some reason she started to cry.

19. PHONE

We showered, got some dough balls and kebab type thingies off a stall outside the hotel and crashed in our room. We set up the electric fan so it blew a breeze over our bed. The fan kept slowing down as the electricity flickered on and off. I hadn't been on a proper bed with a pillow for months. The mattress smelled funky, but I cuddled up to Sami and we slept easily.

Adam woke us up, banging on our door at 2AM.

'Billy asked the doorman to get him a girl,' Adam explained. 'He said I could stay there, but I don't want to be in there with *that* going on.'

We let him sleep between us.

'Sex is so weird,' Adam said. 'I don't ever want to go sticking my thing inside anyone.'

'Bet you will when you're older,' I said.

'At least I'm not a dog,' Adam said. 'Then I'd have to go round sniffing girl dog's butts.'

'Jake does that to me all the time,' Sami giggled.

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I always seemed to wake up first. I had a quick shower. Sami and Adam looked peaceful, so I wandered down the corridor to get a breath of outdoor air. A different doorman was on duty, a short fellow with white hair.

'Good morning young Sir,' he said. 'Sleep well?'

I yawned, 'Yeah, good.'

'Will you be staying another night?' He asked.

'Hopefully we'll be on a bus to the capital by then. Do you know where they run from?'

'The bus station is near the port,' the doorman said. 'There's a few drivers who will take you all the way.'

'How often do they run?' I asked.

The doorman rocked back in his chair, 'I wouldn't expect one with all the rain we've had. Maybe someone will try the journey in a few days, if the roads dry out.'

'A few days,' I said, shocked.

'If it stays dry. Trucks are much harder than busses, you might get a driver to take you, but lots of people will want to make the journey and with no busses running, they'll be able to name their price.'

I thought it best not to mention that we had plenty of money.

'The best thing to do,' the doorman said. 'Is go to the bus station. There's always a few characters around who know what the situation is. If there's no busses, someone there will set you up with a truck driver.'

While we were talking, I'd noticed there was a payphone beside the reception desk.

'Does that work?' I asked.

Not much,' the doorman laughed. 'It's like playing the lottery: sometimes you win, but mostly you loose.'

I pulled a fifty dollar note out of my shorts.

'Have you got change?'

'If you put money in the telephone, it's between you and the telephone company. I can't give refunds.'

I nodded, 'I'll give it a whirl. Someone has to win the lottery.'

The doorman gave me ten five dollar coins from the register. I walked across and picked up the receiver. There was a sign saying *Press 0 for operator*.

The woman's voice was all crackley, 'Kisumba operator.'

'Hello,' I said. 'What number do I dial for Britain?'

'You need the international operator, dial one hundred.'

I hung up and dialled 100. It rang about fifteen times before a surly man answered. I got the impression I'd woken him up.

'International,' he yawned.

'I want to call Britain,'

The operator let out a little groan, 'I'll test the lines.'

I waited a couple of minutes, half convinced the operator had abandoned me.

'Please deposit twenty dollars,' the operator said.

I put four coins in the slot.

'Which number please?'

I gave him our home number. It was early in the morning. Hopefully Mum would be in bed. It rang a couple of times before the operator's voice came back on.

'I'm sorry,' the operator said. 'There are no international carriers available at the moment.'

'Will there be later?' I asked.

'It's hard to say,' the operator said. 'If you keep trying, you might get lucky.'

'I'll try later, thanks.'

I put the receiver back in its cradle and pressed the refund button. One of my four coins tinkled into the slot.

'You trying international?' The doorman asked.

I nodded. The doorman sucked air through his teeth.

'Good luck,' he said. 'You're doing well if you can place a call to the other side of town in less than ten attempts. You'll only get international on a satellite phone.'

'Is there anywhere I can use one?'

The doorman shrugged, 'Rich men and Generals have them, that's about it.'

'Oh well,' I said. 'You can only try.'

'Are you a rebel?' The doorman asked.

'No,' I laughed nervously. 'What makes you think that?'

The doorman smiled, 'If you came here from the west, you'd know the busses only run in the dry. If you were a local farm boy visiting relatives or looking for work, you wouldn't have the money to stay here. By my reckoning, that means you came over the river. If you came over the river, you're either a deserter or a rebel and I never saw a deserter check in with a wife and a young boy. Which makes you a rebel in my book.'

I was frightened by how easily he'd seen through me. I didn't know how to answer.

'Judging by the uneasy silence, I'm on the mark,' the doorman said. 'Don't worry yourself. If I wanted to turn you in, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I'm from a village in east myself. Most of my uncles and cousins died fighting for the rebels.'

'Sorry to hear that,' I said.

'If you stick around much longer, you'll get stopped and questioned by soldiers. They only need to suspect you to toss you in jail.'

'Pack your bags and get out of town this morning. Try and get a bus or a hitch a ride. If you can't get a lift, start walking towards Blake. It's a logging town two-hundred kilometres away. If you can't get a ride before you reach Blake, there's hundreds of truck drivers who'll pick you up from there.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I'll go and talk to my wife.'

I peeled out a fifty dollar note and stuck it on the counter. The doorman shook his head.

'Keep it young man, you'll need it.'

I woke up Adam and Sami and told them what had happened.

'Get Billy,' Sami said, swinging out of bed. 'If the doorman can suss us out, everyone can.'

I hammered on Billy's door.

'Not locked,' Billy groaned.

He was laying naked on his bed, with lipstick all over his face. The floor was littered with beer bottles. The only woman he'd seen over the last five years was Grandma, so it's hardly surprising he gave in to temptation.

'We've got to get out of here fast,' I said. 'If we can't get a ride, we're walking to Blake.'

Billy sat up, holding his head. He took a mouthful out of a half drunk beer. He's face turned horrified and he spat out a drowned cockroach

'Jesus,' he shouted.

I couldn't stop laughing while I tried to explain everything.

'You three should go ahead without me,' Billy said. 'I need to get identity papers before I move on. I'll stay somewhere more down market than this and claim I came here looking for work.'

Adam would be upset, but Billy was right. He wouldn't get anywhere without identity papers. It shouldn't be too difficult to pick a dead soldier's paperwork off a conscript returning from the front. Adam and

Sami were out of the shower and half dressed when I got back to our room. I expected tears when I told Adam that Billy wasn't coming, but he was still miffed about Billy having a girl in their room and didn't seem too worried.

We packed up, hugged Billy and thanked the doorman on our way out. Quietly, the cab driver was parked outside the hotel. We jumped in.

'Bus station,' Sami said.

There were less pedestrians for Quinton to kill at this time in the morning. The station was only a few minutes away. There were beggars all huddled up under rusty metal shelters and a few stalls selling food. The concourse was in a state, with grass and weeds growing out of cracks in the concrete and the conspicuous absence of anything resembling a bus. As soon as we got out of the taxi, a fat man came waddling towards us.

'You looking for transport?' He asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'Buy tickets from me,' he said. 'How far do you want to go?'

'The capital,' I said.

'Four-hundred dollars each,' fatty said.

'Where's your bus?' Sami asked.

The man broke out in a big smile, 'I'm not a driver, I'm a ticket seller.'

'You're a conman,' Sami laughed,. 'Show us a bus and I'll show you our money.'

The fat man seemed to realise he'd been rumbled and sloped away without another word. We walked across to one of the food stalls and bought some of the kebab things for our breakfast. After I paid, I asked the vendor if there was any chance of getting a bus.

'Roads dry out fast,' she said 'Two days, if you're lucky,'.

'What about a truck? Are there any drivers around?'

'There's plenty of guys who'll offer to set you up with a driver,' the woman said. 'But you'll do just as well if you start walking and wave some cash at the passing traffic. It might take a while, but someone will give you a lift.'

'Thanks,' I said.

The three of us sat on a low wall and started biting our kebabs off their skewers.

'I'm starting to think we should have passed through here and kept going in the army truck until we got to Blake,' I said.

Sami shrugged, 'Probably, but what's the point thinking about what we should have done. It's water under the bridge.'

A couple of soldiers were strolling towards us. They were skinny things, who both looked about nineteen.

'Identity papers,' the taller one said.

Sami gave him the three sets of papers. He looked down at Adam.

'How old are you, son?'

I'd told him to lie if he was asked.

'Twelve,' Adam said.

The soldier didn't look convinced.

'Where are you trying to go?' The soldier asked.

'The capital,' I said. 'I want to find a job.'

'Why aren't you in the army?'

'I was born with a heart defect,' I lied. 'Failed the physical.'

The soldier punched me in the stomach and pointed his rifle at Adam. I doubled over, gasping for breath.

'You need to pay us transit tax,' the soldier said, looking at Sami. 'A hundred dollars each.'

Sami laughed, 'I'll pay you twenty. I need the rest for the journey.'

I straightened back up. Adam looked scared.

The smaller soldier stood right in front of Sami and grabbed her arse.

'I've got a job,' the soldier said. 'And my heart's not defective. Why don't you ditch your husband let me show you a good time?'

'Take your filthy hand off me,' Sami snarled.

'Or what?' the soldier laughed, patting his rifle.

'I don't want any trouble,' Sami said. 'Jake, give him a few dollars.'

'No,' the little soldier said. 'I think the three of you better come with us to the barracks.'

The taller soldier laughed, 'The young lady must learn to respect the army of our beloved president.'

'Hand's on your heads,' the short soldier said. 'Legs apart.'

If they patted us down, they'd find the pistols in our belts, but we couldn't do anything to resist as long as there was a gun inches from Adam's face. Sami was on the same wavelength as me. The second the tall soldier let go of his gun to pat me down, we both pulled our pistols.

'On your knees,' Sami shouted.

The soldiers dropped down. Everything went quiet. There were a hundred sets of eyes on us.

'Drop your guns,' Sami said.

The soldiers unhooked their shoulder straps and put the guns on the floor.

'Get them Adam.'

Adam slung the two rifles over his shoulder. Sami grabbed our identification papers back and shot the short soldier in the kneecap.

'Still want to touch me up, pervert?' Sami shouted.

The soldier squirmed in agony. She stamped on his hand and kicked him in the face.

We ran off down a narrow alleyway. We each grabbed one of the rifles off Adam, our pistols wouldn't be much use if we got in a shoot out. We had no idea what direction we were heading in, only that we needed to move fast if we wanted to stay out of prison.

The alleyway branched onto a busy road. There were a few soldiers about. Everyone we passed stared at our guns.

'This is screwed,' Sami said. 'Which way?'

'Taxi rank,' Adam said.

Adam had spotted a line of taxis a couple of hundred metres away. We ran up to the head of the line. I got in the front seat of a Mazda, Adam and Sami in the back.

'Drive,' Sami shouted, slamming her door

She jabbed her M16 in the back of the driver's head. He spilled half a cup of coffee in his lap before hitting the accelerator.

'Where to?' The driver asked, swerving into the traffic.

I looked at Sami, she looked back at me. Neither of us had a clue.

'What's the fastest way for us to get out of town?' I asked.

I grabbed a bundle of money out of my trousers.

'I can pay whatever it takes.'

The driver's eyes lit up when he saw the money.

'I can take you to the edge of town,' the driver said. 'There will be an Army driver who will take you for sure, but offer less money. If he thinks you're rich, he'll probably try and rob you.'

'Fine,' I said. 'Take us there.'

The driver took a couple of lefts so we were heading in the opposite direction. He drove us through the disused docks to a four way junction. There was a signpost with an arrow pointing towards Blake. I dangled a fan of hundred dollar notes in front of the driver.

'What will you say if someone asks us where we dropped you?'

The driver smiled, 'By the old brewery on the opposite side of town.'

'Good stuff,' I said, dropping the money in his lap.

The driver gave us a friendly wave before he pulled away.

'This is stupid,' Sami said. 'This is the first place they'll come looking for us.'

'We could start walking,' I said.

'Maybe we'd be better off going back and hiding out in the docks until things calm down.'

'The army isn't that efficient,' I said. 'As long as we get picked up fairly soon, I think we'll be OK.'

'OK,' Sami said. 'We'll start walking. Anything's better than standing around here waiting to get busted.'

We weren't set up for a long walk. We had no water or food. It hadn't rained overnight and the roads were drying quickly in the hot sun.

A few army trucks passed by. They could be looking for us, so while I flagged them down, Sami hid in the bushes with an M16 just in case. Nobody stopped. One guy chucked a beer bottle at my head and as he passed by. We soon got desperate for water and started to worry that we might have to walk the whole two hundred kilometres to Blake, which would take four or five days.

A few kilometres later, we spotted a white Landcruiser coming towards us. I started waving frantically. It pulled up ahead of us. We chased after it. The woman inside wore a pale blue nurses uniform.

‘Where are you heading kids?’ She asked.

‘The capital,’ I said. ‘We’re hoping to pick up a ride into Blake. I can give you five hundred dollars for your trouble.’

The woman stroked her chin, ‘I’m not heading through Blake, but I can do you one better and take you as far as Nebulae.’

Sami looked at me, ‘Nebulae is in Captain’s notes. Blake isn’t.’

‘Fantastic,’ I said, looking at the nurse. ‘Thanks very much.’

The three of us chucked our packs over the back of the seat into the boot.

‘I’m Maya,’ the woman said, reaching over to shake our hands.

Maya pulled away. The vehicle was air conditioned and made a nice job of the bumps in the road. Sami jabbed me in the ribs. She’d found the page about Nebulae in Captain’s notes:

Prosperous town, centre of gold and oil industries. Second largest city after the capital. Far away from all rebel activity, so there are very few road blocks and soldiers. The local police can be brutal and should be avoided.

I slid the notes over my lap so Adam could read it as well. He smiled and gave me a thumbs up. It looked like we’d landed on our feet.

‘What do you do in Nebulae?’ Sami asked.

‘I’m an assistant to a plastic surgeon.’

‘Nose jobs and breast enlargements?’ I asked.

‘We do a little private work to help make ends meet,’ Maya said. ‘But mostly we help people burned in the war. Our money comes from a French charity.’

Once she got used to us, Maya let Sami take a shift at the wheel. There were a few roadblocks along the way. Maya kept a stash of twenty dollar bills in the glove compartment. The soldiers grabbed the banknotes and pulled the spikes out of the road. We didn’t get asked for our documents once.

Sami offered to drive on through the night, but Maya said it was too dangerous. Apparently the area was notorious for bandits who hijacked cars and left you for dead. Shortly before sundown, we pulled into a petrol station with a small guest house at the back. The owner and his wife came out and hugged Maya.

‘Nice to see you again,’ the owner said. ‘I see you’ve picked up more strays.’

Maya looked back at us and laughed. The owner had a long dining table in his kitchen. He gave us all beers while his wife ran around like a lunatic cooking up something that smelled great. They had a daughter Adam’s age. Once the two kids got over their shyness, they started lobbing food at each other and messing about. I grabbed Adam as he chased around the table and whispered in his ear.

‘Like your new girlfriend, Adam.’

He thumped my leg and wriggled out of my grip. It was nice seeing him able to act like a normal kid for a change.

The food was amazing. Spicy rice, cooked banana, barbecued chicken and lamb. All the hotel guests ate around the table, about sixteen people in all. When we waddled off to our room, I was a bit drunk and so bloated I could barely move. The room was clean, with sleeping mats and a wash basin. There were communal toilets and showers at the end of a corridor. I cuddled up to Sami, and kissed her neck.

'I can feel home,' I said. 'We're so close.'

Sami gently stroked my leg. Adam was creeping around in the dark.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

Adam let out a guilty little giggle. He wasn't far away.

'What are you up to?'

Adam cracked a massive fart right in me and Sami's faces. He ran back to his sleeping mat, shrieking with laughter.

'Little sod,' Sami moaned. 'That stinks.'

Adam started laughing even harder.

'You wait until you fall asleep,' Sami said. 'Then you'll be sorry.'

'What are you going to do?' Adam asked.

Sami laughed, 'You'll know soon enough.'

I whispered in Sami's ear, 'What are you planning?'

'Nothing,' She whispered back. 'I just want to make him paranoid.'

'What are you whispering about?' Adam asked.

'Evil plans,' I said. 'Evil plans.'

30. MUM

We passed a mural at the side of the tarmac road. It depicted an oil derrick, a bag of gold and a row of smiling children, the message read *Welcome to Nebulae, the economic capital*. It was a weird mix of wealth and poverty. There were as many Mercedes and Range Rovers on the roads as in the wealthiest parts of London, but there were also decrepit busses stuffed with passengers and overloaded trucks belching out fumes. Shacks along the side of the highway were broken occasionally by smart business parks containing the local offices of international companies.

There were no soldiers or army traffic. No sense of the civil war at all. The familiar logos of big corporations made me feel comfortable. If they were here, there had to be links to the outside world. Satellite phones, internet, whatever. I didn't quite know how I would get my hands on it, but it was here for sure.

Maya pulled off the main highway and drove a couple of kilometres on tarmaced roads past rows of large, tired looking, houses. They all had cars parked out front and the grass at the sides of the road was neatly mowed. The little kids in the street were on bikes and wore clean shorts and designer name trainers. The road branched in two. Maya was heading up a steep hill towards her home.

'There's no point you going up here with me,' Maya said.

She pulled up at the side of the road. I reached over the rear seat and grabbed our packs.

'You need to cut through the next road on the left, past all the fancy houses,' Maya said. 'Walk until you come to a main road, then turn left and it's about five kilometres to the city centre. There are plenty of reasonable hotels if you want to get a room and freshen up. Watch out for pickpockets, they're everywhere in the city centre.'

I opened the door and started throwing our stuff into the road. Sami leaned forward and gave Maya a hug.

'Thanks for your help,' Sami said. 'Are you sure you won't take some money for the diesel?'

Maya waved her hand in front of her face, 'I would have used that fuel anyway, don't worry about it.'

We slung on our packs and slammed the car doors. Maya gave us a quick wave and drove away. We started heading down the road towards the estate. Following Maya's instructions, we turned left through a set of freshly painted black gates. The houses looked new. They were all detached, with two or three storeys, neatly mowed lawns and expensive looking cars parked on brick driveways. It was quiet, except for the gentle *thrip thrip* of water sprinklers on the lawns. Sami looked impressed.

'I could live here quite happily,' Sami said.

'Our house in England is bigger than these,' Adam said.

We noticed there was a standpipe at the front of one of the houses. We turned on the tap, drank a few mouthfuls each and splashed water over our faces.

'You better move on,' a man shouted.

I looked up. A muscular man wearing nothing but a pair of denim shorts was walking towards us.

'What's the problem?' I asked. 'I'm just having a drink.'

The man smiled, 'I don't have a problem. I'm just the gardener, but if the security guards see you, you'll get a hard time.'

'No worries,' I said. 'We're not hanging around anyway.'

I noticed there were a couple of satellite dishes on top of the house. One dish had a Globeranger logo on it, I recognised it from the faceplate of my Dad's satellite phone.

'Is there a satellite phone in the house?' I asked.

'I believe so,' the gardener said.

'Would you let us inside to use it?'

The gardener laughed, 'Why would I do that? I'd lose my job if they caught me.'

'How much do you earn?' I asked, pulling some money out of my trousers.

'Three seventy-five a week,'

I counted out sixteen hundred dollars.

'That's a months wages,' I said. 'We'll be inside for less than ten minutes.'

'Two thousand,' the gardener said.

I pushed the money back in my pocket, 'Forget it then.'

'OK, OK,' the gardener grinned. 'It's a fair price. Come quickly, before the security car sees us.'

We rushed up the path into the air conditioned house. It was done up with lots of money and no taste. The satellite base station was on a faux antique telephone stand in the hallway. I grabbed the black handset and found the international code for Britain on a laminated card beside the phone. I dialled the number. It started to ring. Adam put his ear next to the receiver. I heard my Mum's voice:

'Hello, this is the Amanda Pascal speaking. I'm sorry I can't come to the phone at the moment. If you leave a message I'll call you back, soon as poss.'

'Mum, it's me, Jake. If you're there pick up the bloody phone. Adam is with me. We're in a town called Nebulae. At the moment we're in a street called The Estate on the northern side of the city. I'll try and contact you again later. I don't know when.'

I put the receiver down.

'Bloody answer phone,' I said.

'Try her mobile,' Adam said.

'Can you remember the number?'

Adam grabbed the handset and dialled it in. It started ringing.

'This is the voicemail for zero nine five six seven...'

I left another message.

'Do you know the number for Dad's office?' Adam asked.

'Its zero two seven something,' I said. 'I never needed to remember it. I had it programmed in my mobile.'

I put the phone down.

'No luck?' Sami asked.

I shook my head, 'She must be at the hairdressers or something. I'll have to try again from somewhere else.'

'Are you leaving now?' The gardener asked.

'Looks like it,' I said. 'She's not home.'

I picked my pack off the floor and shoved Adam towards the door.

We walked down the front path and started on past the houses. We didn't get far before a police siren whooped a few metres behind us. A tinny message came out of a loudspeaker between the flashing lights.

'Stop where you are.'

The car pulled up in front of us. It had the words *Private Security* and a golden shield painted on the side. A fat man got out of the drivers seat and walked towards us.

'What do you know about gnomes?' The guard asked accusingly.

'What are gnomes?' Sami asked.

Acting all innocent eh?' The guard laughed. 'I've seen you kids around. I saw you around two days ago, the night all Mr Tembupo's gnomes were smashed up.'

'We've only been in the city an hour,' Adam said.

'Show me your identity papers,' the guard said, drumming his fingers on the holstered pistol in his belt.

I reached in my pocket to get the papers. I could have grabbed my pistol as easily, but I wanted to avoid trouble if I could.

'Hey,' the gardener shouted.

He was running down the path towards us. The security guard turned his backs to us. He was such an amateur, he wouldn't have lasted two seconds against a real criminal.

'Do you know these three?' The security guard asked.

'Yes, they are staying at the house,' the gardener said. 'There is a phone call for them.'

The security guard handed me back the papers, 'You should have said you were residents. Sorry to have bothered you.'

I ran back towards the house.

'It's a lady,' the gardener said. 'She seems very upset.'

I ran inside the house and picked up the receiver.

'Mum?'

'Oh my god,' Mum sobbed. 'I was in the gym. I got the number on my caller ID. Are you OK?'

'Not bad,' I said.

'Is your Dad there?'

'He stayed on the plane,' I said. 'I'm pretty sure he's dead.'

'How's Adam?'

'He's got a bit of a burn on his head, apart from that he's OK.'

'Can you get to Nebulae airport?' Mum asked.

'I expect we can get a taxi.'

'I'll send one of the Air Amanda planes up from the capital. It should be there in three or four hours. You're not too scared to fly anymore are you?'

'Mum, if it gets us out of here, I'm getting on it.'

'I'll get on the first flight out of London. I should be in the capital by this evening, provided I can get a seat.'

Adam nudged me, 'You better tell her about Sami.'

'Oh Mum, make sure there's a third seat on the plane, for my wife.'

'Your *what?*'

'My wife. I sort of um... got married.'

'Only sort of?'

'We're married,' I stumbled. 'Her name's Sami.'

'That was your Grandmother's name,' Mum said.

'You don't mind then?'

Mum laughed, 'I couldn't give a shit if you've got six wives as long as you're alive.'

'Listen Mum, the guy who's letting us use this phone could lose his job if he gets caught. So I'll just let you say a quick hello to Adam, then I'll have to go.'

'OK Jake,' Mum said. 'I'll see you some time tonight or tomorrow, bye.'

I handed Adam the receiver and gave Sami a kiss.

'That's it,' I said to her. 'Mum's sending us a plane. We're going home.'

EPILOGUE

I turned sixteen the week after I got home. Sami has an educational visa. She's allowed to stay in Britain for two years, as long as she attends language school. She can already hold a decent conversation in English. I'll be eighteen just after she finishes her course. We'll go down the register office and get married under British law, then she'll be able to get a passport and stay here forever.

Everyone says I'm too young and it won't last. If it was some girl I got off with at the school disco I'd take their point, but me and Sami have been through so much our love goes really deep. Some nights I lie awake listening to her breathe and thinking about her. Just watching her sends a shiver down me.

Adam's gone back to being a kid: playing Gameboy and eating too many sweets. When he talks about Africa in the daytime it's all very abrupt and matter of fact, but he gets bad dreams at night. They're mostly about the time his face got burned. He never goes to Mum. He always lifts the bottom of our duvet and crawls up the bed between me and Sami. Sometimes he doesn't wake us up, you just open your eyes in the morning and he's wedged between us.

Mum is pretty lax. My uncles told me she was practically suicidal when she thought we were all dead. She was on pills and spent a couple of weeks in a clinic after a breakdown. When we got home, she was so happy she let us get away with murder. She didn't care that I was sleeping with Sami. Adam got to sit up on his Playstation until midnight; then he'd say he was sick the next morning and Mum would let him off school. She's got a bit stricter now, but we still get away with stuff we wouldn't have dared do when Dad was alive.

I don't feel like the old me. I never had a single detention my first four years at secondary school, now I'm always in trouble. I answer back, I can't be bothered with homework and I even got suspended for fighting. Some kid asked me how Jungle Girl was doing, meaning Sami. I punched his face until my fists were covered in his blood. It took two teachers to pull me off. I let my bad side out the bottle when I was in the jungle and now I'm home, I can't go back to being a goody goody schoolboy. Sami's exactly the same. She head butted some guy who cut the line in Kentucky Fried Chicken. It wasn't even our line.

I think about Africa all the time. There's no news about the civil war. Not on television, in the papers, or even on the internet. Nobody cares about a seven year old war in a poor country. There's no limit to how long these things last. In Angola, the civil war broke out on independence day in 1967 and it's been going ever since. I'll probably never know what happened to Captain, Beck and all the others. The law of averages says none of them will last more than a few years.

A few days after I got back, I looked up Billy Mango on the internet. There's about fifty fan sites out there and I couldn't resist joining the Club Mango e-mail list. Six months after I got back, they finally sent out a message:

Billy Mango sensationally re-emerged at a press conference in the capital yesterday to announce his return to state television. Billy is back in a new quiz format called Would You Like To Be A Millionaire? He is also in negotiations to write his autobiography, which will include sensational revelations about the last five years, which he has spent being held hostage by rebel brutes in the eastern jungle.

Sami says she'll slash Billy's throat if she ever catches up with the traitorous creep. I laugh when she says it. She throws a CD box at my head. We end up on the floor beside our bed, snogging. She's pulling off my school tie and I'm dragging her jeans down her legs. I can hear Adam running up the stairs and I just know he's gonna burst in.