

THE BLACK HAND GANG

and Madame Musseine

by David Edwards

Foreword

Bravery strengthens the will to live, a will for Good against the Evil hidden in our world.

There are many known obstacles put in the way of our heroes but many more are still to be discovered.

However, defeating an evil enemy takes more than bravery and hope.

Therefore, it required a very special boy to lead his friends on their dangerous quest.

In 2013, it was time for Jack George to step forward.

David Edwards, November 2013

Chapter 1

The volcano

The light was intense from 1000 computer screens. A white light interspersed with patches of colour. The light blue of Facebook and the pink of a child's face, usually smiling in the profile photos that were aligned in a horseshoe shape around the silent black hulk.

There were 10 screens mounted vertically and 100 horizontally, creating a modern glass screen suspended from cables of reinforced steel that reached into the darkness above.

But some of the screens had dark grey backgrounds with a black hand turning anti-clockwise at their centre. 30 degrees at a time and twelve times each minute to make a complete revolution. At the midnight position, the hand implied stop! Danger! A signal, warning you away from the blackness beyond, where you would be lost in the bowels of the internet. The hands resembled a reversing set of clocks with three fingers and a thumb etched in the blackest of black. On each hand, the little finger was missing, creating a terrifying claw that reached out from the depths of the screen. The glass wall had hundreds of hands that relentlessly revolved until it was their time to disappear, as a screen saver was de-activated to admit another electronic victim for an online chat with the faceless MM.

Madame Musseine, or MM as she was known to the children playing the game on her world domination website. It was an electronic game with no consequences, a bit of a laugh with a couple of letters to identify your foe. Word of mouth had made it a popular game to play via the sponsored online app within Facebook. The automatic translation between English and Chinese, Spanish and French and every popular language in the world made your distant new mates appear stupid as their sensible comments were mistranslated for you but that made it

even more fun. It was a fantastic game because it could be played 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in real time across the globe. You against the world; a prime motivator in its appeal.

The huge leather chair creaked as Madame Musseine leaned backwards, her giant legs and feet supported on a padded hydraulic rest, barely wide enough to hold the splayed fat and muscle. Her arms were resting either side of the giant keyboard, especially designed for her massive fingers to feverishly jab at the keys as she messaged the junior gamers. Her teeth reflected the variety of colours emitted by the screens as she smiled, but the colours were stained by the brown rot. She was the ugliest person on this earth with bulbous lips and a fat nose, she had no left ear only a gaping hole. MM was dark skinned apart from the lighter coloured scar down her left cheek, a memory from her first knife fight in the dock area of Marseille, Southern France, at the age of ten. Her greasy black hair clung to the headrest until she shook her curly but lank locks in frustration as someone beat her on the game. It was the first child to win in that week and that made her snarl with anger as drool dripped from her lips.

‘Techno!’ She howled the name and listened to it echo off the hidden walls of the volcano. ‘Techno, come here now!’ A shadow of a man slipped into the pulsing light of the screens and grovelled beside her. Techno was 20 years old and had served his mistress for five years as her geeky lap dog. Born in East London, he had run away from home at age 15, leaving his younger brother and mum to fend for themselves. His dad had run away years before and Techno was too scared to assume the responsibilities of running a house, of being a man, and so he had run as well. It was in Marseille whilst earning a paltry living mending equipment in a gaming arcade that Twip Twop had found him. Twip Twop was one of the first of Madame

Musseine's henchmen, a short and vicious albino from Greece. But Techno was tall and gangly, with a mop of red hair above his thin white face. He kept his eyes to the floor as he spoke.

'You shouted me Madame?'

'No you stupid man, I shouted you twice. Where have you been you lazy piece of scum?' He kept his head bowed and moved slightly away from her side but it was too late as her huge hand slapped across the side of his face. He was hit so hard, that he felt the imprint of her stunted hand on his cheek as it immediately glowed red with pain.

'I'm so sorry Madame Musseine, please forgive me. I was redesigning the new stealth gyroscope. So sorry Madame.' He grovelled in front of her as she eased her bulk out of the greasy chair and towered above him. At 160 kilos and 3 metres tall, she scared everyone she met, so it was lucky the real world never saw her now.

'Fix the program geek. I never want to be beaten again.' After kicking him harshly, she lumbered away into the darkness and headed for the distant light pouring through a metal door set in the granite rock. Squeezing through it, she rolled her way down the long tunnel that led to her quarters located 700 metres below the summit of Mount Kibo, the dormant volcano that made up Mount Kilimanjaro. She made a mental note to see the gyroscope the next morning and demand that Techno should resolve the issue with the hydrogen engines or else... Tests had shown that water droplets created within the twin exhausts were visible on radar defence systems and that was unacceptable. She would give him a week to resolve the issue, and after that? Well, in The Black Hand Gang there was no 'after' when a gang member had failed to meet her wishes.

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Jack George sat with his long legs outstretched and perched above his head as he slumped in the red IKEA chair. Each foot lay either side of his PC screen, alternatively tapping to the beat of The Ebb and Flow, the cool new San Francisco based band that all of his friends hated. He brushed the wire of his iPod headphones away from his keyboard and messaged Roger, also called the splodger, since tipping a can of emulsion over his parent's best carpet. The boys chatted every evening using Facebook, as they saw very little of each other during the school term but that would end shortly when Roger Ponsonby-Smythe returned home from Eton, the Public School, to the pretty village of Christleton in Cheshire. Jack lived at the end of the village in a small red brick cottage with a central blue door. It was set into the hillside near the golf course where the old sandstone quarry had closed in the 1930s. This was the working class end of the village, whereas The Ponsonby-Smythes resided at the old manor house at the centre of the upper classes, adjacent to the large pond with its ancient ducking stool. Roger's dad Rupert could afford it, as he was 'something' in the city. Dealing in shares and all that, whilst his mother Maria went to the gym and 'did lunch' with her many acquaintances, usually for this or that charity. Jack never called them Rupert and Maria, they were always The Ponsonby-Smythes to him, Mr or Mrs, this respect was given by most of the poorer locals including Jack's parents. They were defined as poor because they lived in a house worth less than 150,000 pounds as opposed to those of the rich worth more than one million.

'What time do you get home on Saturday splodger?' Jack turned the volume up on his iPod as he waited for a response. The screen was blinking, informing him that his mate was typing. 'Luncheon, old chap. See you then what!' Splodger always wrote and spoke like this, even before Eton. Jack typed quickly.

‘Luncheon? You great woosy. Is that a nice ham sarnie or caviar and champagne mate?’ Jack tapped the keys harder, Facebook was slow tonight but the extra force could not budge the electronic congestion. Maybe his dad was using the wifi again? Silly dad, he had no idea what he was doing on the internet, he could barely find the football reports on the BBC website until his boy had shown him how.

‘Look Jack, one doesn’t eat caviar on a Saturday. It’s like fish – one only partakes on a Friday or Christmas day. By the way, has one seen the app for the world domination game?’

‘Huh?’ Jack kept it brief as usual.

‘MM’s app, I sent it to you as a game request last week. I tell you what, it is absolutely excellent.’

There was a knock at the door and dad’s face slowly appeared as he gently pushed it open. The top of his bald head came first before the green eyes and smiling but apologetic face.

‘Hiya, just a warning. Mum will be home in ten minutes so I suggest you get ready for bed before she arrives. You know what she’s like!’ Jack arched his back making a bridge from the top of his chair to the shelf of the PC table. At the age of 12, he was strong and athletic. Already over 2.3 metres tall, he resembled Alex Strider in the films. A handsome boy with blonde spiky hair cut to a number three and gelled. Jack pulled his headphones from his ears with a pop.

‘What?’ His dad shook his head as he replied kindly.

‘I said mum will be home soon so get ready for bed mate.’

‘Okay dad, love you, night.’ Dad was dismissed and the head retracted as the door was shut softly. Jack loved his dad Jonathan, and spent most of the week in his care. Jonathan stayed at home as a househusband whilst his mum lived away all week whilst she was working on

contract as an IS consultant. But the loss of his mum made Jack love her more. It also made him more rebellious and so he opened the app for world domination instead of going to bed.

“Challenge other children across the countries of the world by selecting opponents and trading the assets of your country. Gold and currency, kilometres of motorway and acres of forest, your fishing or naval fleet. Every asset in your country is available to you to defeat your global opponents who will use theirs. Be clever and use them carefully in this ultimate challenge. Only the best will progress through 1000 levels of dominance to be the ultimate leader of our known universe.”

The computer graphics were fantastic as Jack quickly flicked through the asset lists and names of the competitors in France. He knew some of the cities like Avignon since his school visit at Easter and recognised some of the names from the exchange trip. “*Sur le pont d’Avignon*”, the song rang in his head as he scrolled down the screen. There was tall Thierry, Jean-Claude in his red jeans...I heard a car door as it was loudly slammed outside the cottage and so he rapidly hit the off button on the PC and scampered across to his bed. Quickly, he took off his ‘Man U’ T-shirt and pulled the duvet over his Adidas tracksuit bottoms. A minute later, his mum Jennifer gently opened the door and walked smiling to sit on the side of his bed. She leaned towards him and kissed his cheek. Jack resisted the temptation to wipe the slobber away.

‘Hi mum, did you have a good week?’

‘Yes my love and tonight is the best part. Coming home to you and dad.’

‘And Timmo the dimmo.’ She tucked the duvet tighter around his shoulders as she reprimanded him.

‘Timothy is your brother Jack. He’s not dim, just four years younger than you. You know that makes a big difference.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Whatever, whatever or fabtastic, you have a way with words young man.’ She said this in the patronising way that mums did when they thought they were cool. ‘Both of you boys talk a foreign language to your dad and I.’ He smiled at her. He desperately missed his mum during the week but would never admit to it.

‘Not foreign, just the way kids talk like when they are at PGL.’ Jennifer patted his short hair and immediately he smoothed his hands upwards to re-do it and look good asleep.

‘Mum!’

She sighed heavily. ‘See, I give up. What’s PGL?’

‘Parents Get Lost – you know after the adventure holiday company.’ Jack constantly dreamed of a week at PGL. Kayaking, sailing, climbing and abseiling. It would always be a dream as he knew they were lucky to have a single week’s family holiday in a caravan in Wales. She leaned forward.

‘Remember to clean your teeth PGL man and remember how much I love you when you go to sleep.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Wider than the sky and bigger than the sea.’

‘Precisely lovely. Now go to sleep and give your dad and I, our time. Nightie nightie.’

‘Pyjamas, pyjamas.’ He replied whilst grinning.

As mum left the room, Jack had a quick bout of guilt. He had cleaned his teeth two days earlier, surely that was enough? Reluctantly he went to the bathroom but on his return the temptation was too strong to resist and so he rebooted his PC and started to play the game. He knew his parents wouldn’t bother him again. His first adversary, naturally enough, was Roger

the splodger. Within ten minutes, Roger had trounced him by trading five cruise missiles for Jack's starting assets that had been assigned by the gamemaster – a mere two bazookas. As Jack turned off the PC and crept quietly back into his bed he vowed two things. Firstly, to beat Roger and secondly to become the best player on this new game called 'the world of domination'. He turned on his side and closed his eyes remembering the awesome graphics. It was so realistic; it certainly looked like the greatest game ever.

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As Madamee Musseine and Jack George peacefully slept, there was frenetic activity on level three in the hidden complex beneath Mount Kilimanjaro. Level three, contained the technical department that supported The Black Hand Gang and was bigger than the largest sports stadium in the world. It was gigantic, more than 50 per cent wider than Wembley stadium in London, England. Sector one contained the computer servers and the advanced input consoles, AICs, shaped like the shell of a snail. Inside each AIC was a 1.5 metre Visual Display Unit, a twelve-speaker system including a sub-woofer mounted beneath the soft yellow seat and several methods to both input and receive data. Most of the technicians used the technology designed by Techno, called the encephalitic input and output device, rather than an old-fashioned keyboard. They had nicknamed it "the brain hugger" as eight large, sharp steel clips pressed onto their skulls to link their brains to the servers and thus send and receive data. There were two distinct disadvantages to offset the one hundred-fold increase in speed of data transfer. Firstly, the brain hugger worked better if they shaved their heads each morning before starting work and secondly the clips dug deeply into the outer layers of thin skin stretched across the skull, which caused hideous and protruding scabs to form overnight.

Inevitably, these scabs were accidentally shaven off at the start of each day in the pursuit of technical efficiency. The technicians were used to the daily pain this caused but found it extremely tiresome having to stem the flow of blood with bits of toilet tissue.

Techno was sat in an AIC, his tired eyes bulged as he worked and his head oozed blood from the two brain huggers he had attached. No one else had his giant capacity to process double the amount of information but he was Techno, and that was the way his mind worked. He slurped a slug of 'fat coke' from the can before popping an Oreo biscuit into his mouth. Energy was paramount to get him through the night. He knew the game program needed to be modified by 8 am on the coming day or he would be fried. He set an example for both hard work and superhuman brainpower and most of the other technicians desperately tried to emulate him.

Sector two on level three contained the engineering department. The gyroscope was stood in the centre of it, in pride of position as five top Chinese scientists delicately screwed the new gel shields into the exhausts that would absorb the bothersome water vapour. If the modification worked, they would have to build 20 more of the flying machines by the end of August, which was a tall order.

Sector three, and still on level three, was accommodation. Meals could be taken at the Indian or Chinese restaurant, The Kentucky Fried Chicken and the ever popular McDonalds, only few personnel used the boring canteen which served the odd vegetable. In fact, no one who worked for MM was aged over 25 years and therefore most loved the junk food. All of them had been secretly recruited during her ten-year reign that was building to the climax, a worldwide terrorist attack. Now all the preparations were nearly ready, a few more months and the master plan would be complete. At any time, sector three contained one third of her workers. There were strict eight-hour shifts and beds maintained body warmth as one shift of

workers vacated them ready for others to dive-in. The technicians though, had their own beds and they slept when they could. But the workers didn't dislike the swap-over as it paid in the winter time. Despite the heat from the magma deep in the volcano below them, the extreme altitude meant there were deep snow drifts behind their natural ceiling causing the cold to penetrate into their meagre quarters.

Sector four on level three was the fun zone, which kept most of the workers happy. A games area comprising 5-a-side football, basketball, tennis, table tennis and the latest gadgets from all over the world. The star attraction in July 2013, was the new four dimensional gaming pack that felt so real as one battled through the war in Syria or within the Mysteries of Mars. In addition, the worker's and technician's pay was superb at cowing all thoughts of insurrection. However, Madame Musseine was always concerned that someone would betray her secrets. She paid each worker ten times the salary applicable in the outside world and each technician twenty times the norm. The money was electronically transferred to any bank of their choice from several of her organisation's ghost accounts. The mens' employment contracts stated they could always leave with one year's notice. But nobody left anymore. There were too many rumours about what happened to the leavers...that was where the fear of level two had started.

Level two. Immediately below Madame Musseine's private quarters on level one and thus nearly at the top of the volcano. An ideal location to prevent any enemies from reaching their leader under the peak of the mountain. Level two contained the muscle. Fifty secret policemen for internal affairs and 100 ninja fighters, all men. There were no women in the complex as MM wanted no distractions in her terrorist cell.

And then there was Biceps. The Frenchman was larger than MM. His huge muscled arms appeared to be bursting from his black T-shirt but his waist was thin and his legs were like

tree trunks – strong and thick. Above the monstrous body was a flat Corsican face, he had the same coloured skin as MM and the same black lank hair. Some said he was her brother. Others, that he was cloned by her first rogue scientist who had been her only friend thirty years before. No one would ever know the truth, but Biceps was respected as her general and feared for his ferocity in any sort of fight, whether it was with bare hands, any weapon, in fact anything that could kill. It didn't matter whether he was in a scuba suit or hanging off the side of a cliff. The man was a natural born killer and would die rather than let anyone hurt Madame Musseine. Why? The workers queried.

Because he loved her. That deep unrequited love, like a puppy dog for his mistress.

Therefore a volcano is a deceptive place in more ways than one. At nearly 6000 metres high it is able to contain many secrets. The early explorers of the area in 1848 described the fear of the local tribesmen and their reluctance to climb this mountain because of “resident man-eating spirits”. Eruptions over the last 300,000 years have created passageways and caverns that remain secret, only explored by Madame Musseine and her three henchmen. Level four didn't exist for the technicians and ninjas until they choose to leave MM's employ. Level four contained ancient waters that flowed inland 300 kilometres from the sea. Salty, black water that was best left unexplored.

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That was the volcano in Tanzania, near the northern border with Kenya, sandwiched between the Serengeti and The Indian Ocean. It was a hive of activity but totally secret and guarded for miles around by the Maasai who had been 'bought' by Biceps. Their job was to maintain

MM's external security and every tribesman within the area had sworn an oath of secrecy at a traditional ceremony where they had drunk the blood from a sacred black cow mixed with the beast's own milk. In return they had been given guns to protect their families and fight their enemies, the Sukuma tribe.

The added ingredient was 100 ml of their own human blood. This truly brought them close to their god, Engai Narok, the black warrior.

It was also Biceps who initiated each of MM's new recruits when they commenced work within the volcano. In the depths of Level one was a small stream of hot molten lava and in the flow of this stream was an island topped with a branding iron heated to 180 degrees Celsius by the red stream that curled about its lower edges. Any new recruit pledged his loyalty whilst stood naively afraid in front of the island, wondering what was going to happen. The branding iron's shape was simple but grotesque. It consisted of a hand made up of a thumb and three fingers but with the little finger missing. The words for the pledge by the recruit were etched into the rock holding back the fiery stream and ran like this.

"I join the Black Hand Gang knowing my life belongs to Madame Musseine. She feeds me and protects me and makes sure my family are always cared for. In return, I pledge to her 100 per cent loyalty for the rest of my life."

At the end of the nervously spoken pledge, Biceps who always stood behind the recruit, would grasp their arms and push the left hand forward and onto the super-heated branding iron. Madame Musseine would often lie in bed and listen to the screams as new apostles joined her gang. The immediate pain lasted two to three seconds as the shape of the stunted hand was burnt into the top three layers of skin but the lasting pain was from the loss of the little finger as Biceps ripped the hand of the recruit off the iron and held it in flow of the red

molten rock. He would sniff the aroma of burnt meat as the little finger roasted away and then laugh uncontrollably when he finally let the person slump to the cave floor.

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A scream had woken MM and so she rolled off the triple bed and lumbered towards her balcony. She pressed a large green button and waited patiently as the louvres of the blast screen silently opened. Stretching her arms above her head she stared at the savannah 5000 metres below. She could see for 60 kilometres or more. Immediately to the side shone the pure snowfields and way below were herds of elephant moving towards the West in line astern but resembling a trail of ants at this stratospheric height. Gazelle leapt from the nearest watering hole as two cheetahs sped towards them. The killers divided, one to grab the neck of the oldest gazelle and the other, the youngest, in a pincer movement. She laughed insanely, it was good to be alive that morning. She spoke to the blue sky above.

‘The young die because of inexperience when they don’t understand the rules of the game as they play and learn but the old die because they think they know the rules. However, not if it is a new game! Now the world will succumb to me, starting with the young!’ Her cackling reverberated off the rock walls and out into the fresh air and bright sunlight of East Africa.

* * *

In deepest Cheshire, Jack George jerked awake as a high-pitched scream came from the kitchen immediately below his bedroom. Leaping out of bed, he sped down the stairs, three at a time and pushed the door open to see his dad sucking the little finger of his left hand.

‘Dad! What’s the matter?’ Jack ran over to him and clung to his side as if a young child once again. But Jack was only a head shorter than his dad now and nearly a teenager, nearly a man.

‘Bugger me if it wasn’t the frying pan.’ Jack looked behind his dad and saw the spitting bacon before he registered the delightful aroma. ‘It’s okay, I’ve only gone and burned my little pinkie mate.’ His boy heaved a sigh of relief and grinned as he gently told him off.

‘In that case you can make me a bacon sarnie with extra tomato ketchup for waking me up so early!’

‘So early? It’s nearly 9 o’clock for goodness sake’.

‘And also because I won’t tell mum you said bugger again!’ Dad pushed him away and gently cuffed his ear. As they shadow boxed, they both forget the hurt finger, until Jack grabbed it without thinking, ensuring an even louder scream ripped through the house bringing both mum and Timothy running to the kitchen. It was a normal start to a family weekend in Christleton. Happiness and fun in Cheshire, the opposite of what was lurking in deepest Africa where Evil was about to be released onto the world.

Chapter 2

The gang of four

It was Saturday at last and the warm sun glowed on Jack from a bright blue sky as he paused under the arbour of sweet smelling honeysuckle. He tentatively held out a finger to place it next to the pink and white flowers and watched in fascination as a large bee settled upon it. He could feel all six of its hairy legs as it explored right to the end of his nail, flicking its proboscis in rapid licks before it buzzed off to find a flower that contained nectar instead of blood.

That was Jack, always brave and pushing the boundaries of conventional life.

The black and white cottage in front of him had been Kate's grandma's home since she was born 73 years previously. Grandma claimed she had been born on the night of the full moon at 7 pm on the 7th day of the 7th month and that was why she was psychic, and that meant she could predict the future. Kate had once calculated and informed grandma that her birth date of 1940 was equally auspicious. She had added the individual numbers together, $1+9+4+0$, it made 14 i.e. two sevens and therefore quite magical for many people on earth who believed in the superstitious nonsense of numbers. Grandma had commented on the date too. It was auspicious, it was the start of World War II. Grandma had also told most visiting children that she weighed 7 kilos at birth, which was really far-fetched. But Kate saw things that others didn't, that others missed, and knew that her grandma could have unique insights into the future, and these always came true. But Kate would never share that knowledge, they would think she was as crazy as grandma if they knew she saw things too...

The pretty cottage nestled under a straw thatched roof and stood halfway between Jack's house and The Old Manor house where Roger was due home at 12 noon.

Jack had wandered to the rear of the cottage and seeing no one through the dirty kitchen window, he decided to go in via the backdoor. It squeaked as he pushed it open.

‘Hello, anyone at home?’ He jumped in fright as a large grey shadow leaped onto the floor in front of him. ‘Why do you always do that? You know it scares me silly.’ Wispy the Persian cat appraised him from the floor. Her green eyes blazed and made him feel like Wispy could see straight through him but that was impossible of course. ‘No, I am not going to feed you. Go and find your own food, there are loads of mice in the garden.’

Wispy turned her head on one side and meowed. ‘No, no, no.’

‘Yes, yes, yes’ said grandma walking into the kitchen. He jumped again and clasped his hand to his heart.

‘Goodness me grandma, why is it you and the cat always manage to scare me?’

‘Because we are scary my dear! I’m a witch and Wispy is my peculiar.’

‘Don’t you mean your familiar?’

‘Do I?’ She replied with her head tilted to one side.

Jack felt uneasy again. ‘Well she certainly is peculiar. Too fat by far, as well as the runt of the litter.’

‘Now now young man, she can understand you, you know.’

‘Don’t be daft grandma, she’s just a cat!’ Wispy looked up haughtily at Jack as she brushed past his ankles and jumped on grandma’s knee as soon as she was settled in her rocking chair. Kate appeared with a thump as she jumped the last two stairs that led into the kitchen. She was wearing a short pink dress to accentuate her golden locks and looked like a Disney princess. At age nearly 12, she was still a girlie girl. She kept her soft toys on her bed and preferred reading books to Facebook or TV.

‘Hello Jack’ she fluttered her eyelashes, ‘have you come to take me to the cinema? There’s a lovely film about ponies that has just come out.’

‘Are you jokin or what?’ Jack could be very rude to his best “friend-girl” who adored him. ‘I wondered if you were coming to meet splodger as he’s home soon.’ He stared at her white ballet shoes, making her self-consciously look down. She had put them on as she was reading about the fairy queen and felt the need to look like her. Grandma could see her embarrassment.

‘They were her mum’s Jack. I thought Kate might want to take up ballet. Her mum was really quite good at it.’ Jack felt awkward. Kate’s mum had died four years earlier and now he was sorry he had been so rude. He attempted a joke.

‘If we play footie, you’ll have to go in goal. Goalkeepers sometimes wear pink.’

‘Back in a minute.’ She trilled and then she turned and lightly ran upstairs to change into jeans and converse basketball shoes.

Her “girliness” was becoming more of a dilemma, she didn’t want to change her fashion but the boys in their gang were always taking the Mickey now. ‘Why shouldn’t I wear pretty clothes?’ had been the argument at Easter. They had been playing in the park and she had started to cry when likened to Lady Gaga. However, the boys had been sufficiently ashamed to walk across and pat her on the shoulder. Hugs would never have been considered and even pats were a sign of weakness. In unison they had said sorry and Jack had explained ‘It’s a boy thing, you know, teasing and all that.’ But they were growing up whilst grandma tried to keep her beloved granddaughter as a child. She thought it was a way of protecting her from the loss of her mum. At the time Kate had replied.

‘Well you should show some consideration for others Jack George and Roger Ponsonby-Smythe. We all have a right to be individuals!’

She bounced back down the stairs and stared at Jack waiting for his approval of the new outfit. Jack was sat on a bench by the pine table with his arms crossed. He totally ignored her. However, her tears had dried up whilst in her bedroom and she was back to her skippy self. 'Do you fancy a cup cake Jack? They have lovely pink icing on the top?' He was such a boy with his answer.

'No way. Maybe if they were chocolate.' He left it hanging and grandma smiled as she could see how much Kate wanted to impress him.

'Come on Jack, I helped her to make them and they even have strawberry jam fillings. Be tempted my boy.' Jack selected the largest cup cake and demolished it in two bites. He dwelt on his guilt to persuade him to accept their kindness with an odd 'good' and 'quite yummy'; which made Kit Kat happy again. This was Kate's nickname, given to her by Jack the previous hot summer, when he had caught her licking her fingers smeared with chocolate after she had demolished two of the bars. He had also likened her to Wispy's favourite cat food. Now, whenever he used the nickname it made her feel guilty about the episode and delighted by his attention. Grandma could see he was fidgeting and restless to leave. She sniffed loudly, her fat jowls wobbling.

'I can smell something acrid, a burning sulphurous smell of rotten eggs. It's so warm in here children, have I left the oven on?' Kate and Jack looked knowingly at each other. Grandma was off on one again. One of her silly predictions was coming, they could tell. She slowly walked to the oven and checked it was turned off. Then she flopped back into her brown leather armchair by the old-fashioned range.

'Dear me, I am so forgetful nowadays. I felt all hot and bothered as if I was inside a cave, it was stifling and smelly.' Kate and grandma exchanged glances. Kate knew she had seen the future but it was a skill to be hidden from everyone but themselves.

‘Come on Jack, let’s go and see Roger.’ Kate kissed grandma on the cheek and followed Jack out the door and down the winding path of the pretty cottage garden.

* * *

As they neared the pond at the centre of the village, they could hear a dog barking in excitement. Turning the corner by the ancient church, they could see it was Licko, Roger’s brown shaggy mutt that was running up and down the plank of the village ducking stool. Roger was seated on the landward end, whilst Licko ran towards the seat that precariously perched above the water. The long stool dipped slowly downwards and kissed the pond allowing Licko to sip the dirty water before racing back towards his master and re-balance the seesaw, ensuring the crazy dog stayed dry.

Kit Kat and Jack looked down on Roger and beamed welcoming smiles. As Licko ran to the opposite end of the ducking stool, Roger explained the game.

‘Hello men, I was teaching Licko some basic mechanics that we learned at school this term. Change the weight and distance from the fulcrum to achieve a balance.’ Kate had crossed her arms and was hugging her purple “X-factor” T-shirt.

‘And hello women’ she said adamantly. She admired Roger for his intelligence but not for his old-fashioned views on the female sex. She stared hard at him to remind him she was female. Roger was a lightweight, gawky boy with black hair and heavy black glasses.

He pushed his glasses tighter on to his nose. ‘Oh yes, sorry, just an expression you know.’ He stood up to shake hands with his friends, just as Licko was at the far end of the plank. There was a howl followed by a loud splash as the dog somersaulted into the green stagnant water causing the ducks to complain loudly as they quacked their way to the opposite shore. ‘Oh I

say.' He turned, appalled, to watch his dog paddling towards them as Kate and Jack collapsed onto the grass laughing hysterically.

Jack was the first to recover as he sat with his arms around his knees to hold himself upright.

'I think your fulcrum must have moved dimwit.'

'No Jack, actually no. It was the temporary aberration of my weight, a little displacement rather than a change in pivot point.' Jack was lost with the use of the big words and he certainly didn't understand mechanics, he preferred any sport at school and excelled in them all.

He was shaking his head as he replied. 'What? Is that the same thing as - I forgot my dog and stood up?' All three started laughing as Licko looked dolefully at them through a pile of green algae perched on the crown of his head. But the laughs quickly turned to screams as he started to shake his heavy coat, covering them with mud and water laced by spots of green. They raced away from the dog but were chased by Licko who was full of excitement after his adventure and it wasn't until they had slammed the side door at The Manor that they were safe from the silly mutt.

An awfully posh voice echoed down the corridor leading to the snug. 'Roger, Roger darling. Is that you?' The three friends trooped through the door to find Maria and Rupert Ponsonby-Smythe sharing a Financial Times and a cafetiere of finest blue Tanzanian coffee. They were sat on a large brown settee made out of leather that had seen better days, they were rich but careful with their pennies. Maria carried on. 'Katie and Jack G, how nice to see you. How were your exams last term, did you get all A's?' Maria smiled at them giving time for Jack to reply.

'We didn't do no exams Mrs Ponsonby.' Maria tilted her nose downwards to peer over her Dolce and Gabbana reading glasses.

'Smythe.' She completed her name for the boy. 'Dear me, what are state schools coming to Rupert?' The beautiful dark-haired woman with a large nose tried to encourage her husband to join in the conversation.

He grumped instead. 'FTSE's down again Maria. Dashed inconvenient that BP oil spill off Libya.'

She encouraged him gently again. 'Darling, look who's here!' He briefly raised his bald head to appraise the three children.

'Watch you don't get that mud on the carpet you three. Now toddle off and play, whilst we get on with adult business.' They were dismissed by the busy parents and immediately disappeared to Roger's study in the attic. On the second floor he also had a cavernous bedroom, his own lounge to watch the latest Sky 72 inch 3D Sony TV and an Apple PC in his equally large attic study. Roger's "occasional" living area in between the boarding school terms, was the size of Kate's grandma's cottage! They settled down to play "world domination" on the sofa in the study. Jack fetched Roger's laptop from the bedroom and Kate borrowed Roger's iPad Air from the lounge. Although she was new to gaming, the boys were surprised how quickly she picked it up and over the next two hours she had amassed an exciting batch of new assets. 15 houses, 100 horses and a commercial stable for breeding racehorses. Jack now had 25 destroyers, 6 stealth fighters and an army of 1000 men. Whereas Roger had diversified into gold and diamonds on the "futures" market i.e. trading the valuable commodities today based on the expected prices in months to follow. He found he had the knack for this sort of trading, which imitated his dad. He looked like his dad, he traded like his dad and he was intelligent like him. By 5 pm the three friends called it a day and went their separate ways vowing to play the game that evening and keep in touch via

Facebook chat. The next morning they planned to visit “The Place” at about 10 am, their secret hideout on the outskirts of Christleton, near the playing fields.

As Jack walked into his home, little did he realise that a faceless technician under the volcano in deepest Africa had logged a statistic on his computer that named Kate, Jack and Roger in the world’s top ten newcomers to the Facebook game of “world domination”.

‘Mum...is tea ready, I’m starving.’ Jack always shouted each demand at home.

‘Ask your dad,’ she partly turned from the computer screen where she was looking at the work emails from the day before that she hadn’t had time to review. ‘He’s in charge.’

‘Dad... what’s fur tea?’ Jack shouted again at the top of his voice without knowing where dad was. Timmo, Jack’s brother came into the kitchen and slid on his stocking feet across the shiny tile floor before ending his skid next to Jack.

Timmo announced in his best BBC voice. ‘Fabtastic, Tim - nice and thin, has now perfected his skiing technique, whilst waiting to be summoned for training with the British squad in Val D’Isere.’

Jack ignored his younger brother’s ambitions. ‘Dad.....what’s fur...’

‘He won’t answer you bro, he’s on the bog.’

Mum closed the lid of the laptop. ‘Timmo! Please don’t use that word.’

‘But isn’t it better than crapper, like they constantly use in America?’ Tim had an answer for everything. Jack turned and vigorously pushed him along the floor as Timmo balanced in a perfect snowboarding pose before collapsing onto an armchair with a ‘yippee.’

‘Boys, please!’ She remonstrated.

They stopped giggling as soon as Dad appeared. ‘Did someone want me?’

‘Yes’ the boys said in unison, ‘what’s for tea?’ Dad busied himself by the cooker and mumbled something. ‘What dad?’ He mumbled again and found his wife had approached from behind to give him a hug.

She whispered in his ear. ‘Did we forget tea my wonderful man? My hunter-gatherer who guards the nest until mummy bird comes home?’ Jack turned to Timmo and made a poking sign with his finger prodding towards his open mouth.

Jack mouthed the words ‘love’ just before his mum turned to announce. ‘Fish and chips is what we are having for tea my honey buns, so who wants to come and fetch them with their mum?’ Raucous shouts of ‘me’ surrounded her as she found her car keys to drive the boys to King Louie’s chip emporium in the next village. Which left dad with a single task to complete that Saturday teatime, the best part of the week apart from later when watching Match of the Day. He gratefully opened a can of cold lager and sat down with a sigh.

As England slept, the same faceless technician was on duty at 11 pm GMT, Greenwich Mean Time and was surprised to see Kate, Jack and Roger had been joined in the top newcomers to the “world domination” game by someone nicknamed Timmo, who happened to share a computer IP address with the boy called Jack. This new boy’s Facebook profile photo was a Bentley Mausanne Cabriolet and Timmo had been busy all evening trading in sports cars, mainly Ferraris. His Facebook profile said that he was brother to a complete twerp who kept calling him dim, when indeed he was not. The notes also said his only interests in life were Top Gear and fast cars. One of his family picture albums showed a nine-year-old boy, who was the spitting image of his brother who lay snoring on his back in the small bedroom next door. The Facebook age restriction didn’t matter to the technician, all that mattered was skill playing the game.

* * *

It was also 11 pm in East London and all good children were asleep to make sure they were fresh and alert at school on Monday morning but Marshall Hines couldn't sleep. His dreams had become too scary recently. He was tall and gangly, with a mop of red hair above his thin white face. His mum was at work in Canary Wharf, as a cleaner on the 27th floor, as Marshall crouched in front of her netbook playing "world domination". As she flicked her feather duster across the PC's of the world's biggest bank, he studied his assets and guessed at which to trade. He wasn't particularly good at it, he bounced around the world buying and selling assets made from cocoa because he liked chocolate and then he bought some sugar cane because sugar went into the chocolate. He couldn't understand why he was doing so well in the league tables as he only played three evenings a week and always when his mum was at work, but somehow his scores were terrific. He sold a tonne of cocoa powder to a trader in China and turned the netbook off. Now he was sufficiently tired to go to sleep but he still dreaded the newly recurring dreams of his dad running away and the brother he vaguely remembered making a crystal radio set. The ongoing nightmare was his mum not returning from work. An illogical nightmare, as she was just a cleaner in the big offices of The City, so nothing could possibly happen to her. However, the emotional scars of desertion ran through his heart and straight into his brain as he slept.

What he didn't see later, was his mum kneeling by his bed to stroke his hair and kiss him goodnight. After coping with her husband's desertion, she had thought of suicide when her eldest boy had runaway. It was the love of Marshall that had kept her alive and when she

stared at the lights of the city from the heights of Canary Wharf she would sometimes cry into her reflection as life was so hard.

* * *

Twip Twop was quite a nasty piece of work. Techno had given him the crazy nickname after seeing the Twitter site called “*Twop Twips*”, which was one of his favourites. Now the name was commonly used by everyone in the volcano rather than the real one, Les Teppes. Twip Twop was uncontrollable and unpredictable, like the Twitter website. His white hair, and small pink eyes made him scary. He was an albino 1.5 metres tall with stooped shoulders and pigeon toes. He had met Madame Musseine and Biceps in the grimy French prison near Nice. The judge who had sentenced MM, had decided she was stronger and more ferocious than any man and so had decided a man’s prison was the only safe place for her. No one had ever dared approach the black duo but the French albino idiot called Les Teppes, felt compelled to sidle up to them one day. His nonsensical mind had no boundaries and so fear of the two brutes was not on his agenda.

‘Getting out soon are we?’ The gruesome twosome ignored him. ‘If not getting out, maybe I can help you leave?’ MM signalled to Biceps with a nod.

He asked the obvious question in a rough and accusing voice. ‘What do you want?’

‘I have a plan that involves garbage from the kitchen.’ Les Teppes squirmed his feet in the dusty yard and rung his hands together as he waited.

‘And your point is?’ Said the brute.

‘My point, my giant friend, is I work in the kitchen and I put the garbage in the refuse lorry each day.’

MM turned to the albino and smiled with brown teeth ruined by years of hashish. ‘Dear little man, or should I say Les Teppes? May I be so bold to call you that, my new friend?’

Twip Twop giggled uncontrollably, his mind was warped. ‘Yes Madame, you can call me anything you want based on the numbers of men you have murdered with your bare hands!’ He giggled again before she led him aside to work out the escape plan and arrange for his reward. But Les Teppes was never paid, he wanted a job. One of power and in submission to his dearest love, Madame Musseine. That was why the technician delivered the computer printouts of the world league tables to him at midnight GMT. It was Twip Twop who delved into the software matrix that controlled the core of the game and it was he who manipulated Marshall Hine’s scores to make him win, no matter how badly he played.

MM had told him Marshall must be a winner and what MM said, Twip Twop did.

Chapter 3

Cloak and dagger

Somerset House in London, England was best known for the official departments who had worked there to maintain the country's record of births, marriages and deaths and of course the dreaded Inland Revenue, the tax man. The beautiful and very large mansion had always contained important societies over the centuries. The Royal Academy of the Arts, The Royal Society, the oldest scientific society in Britain. Now it is still a centre for art and culture but some government departments remain hidden away from the visitors of the general public, who form a perfect front, for the most secretive of secret departments.

It is an imposing building, a Georgian aspect with giant columns either side of a large wooden door that leads into a colossal hallway that extends to the sky above. It is a building where anyone used to be able to ascertain who or what they are and where they came from. It was all a matter of public record, your data. However, people who have signed the official secrets act and belong to section electronicA have a lot more data than meets the official eye. No one truly knows who they are and where they came from, even the recruiters for this section of MI6, Britains' secret intelligence agency.

If you walk up the marble staircase and turn right, there is a lift. Standing inside this lift, you can go up and down to the various exhibitions as many visitors discover each day. But the government employees of section electronicA can also go through the lift. All you need to press is the level one, three and six buttons in a strict order making a secret door open onto a bland corridor that ends in a metal door. After pressing one's eye against the retina recognition scanner you hear the hiss of the door sliding back, allowing you into a glass

cubicle. The door closes behind you and the extra security checks begin. Firstly, the gamma radiation scan that is similar to an x-ray but takes a scan of your digital skeleton and compares it to that on your personnel file. Secondly, the air around you is analysed for explosives and tobacco – it is a strictly no smoking zone and then finally you have to speak a few words. Usually, most employees recite a few lines of Shakespeare, occasionally a bright spark sings some “One Direction” to annoy the security guards who monitor every action. If you meet all the entry criteria you are allowed into the department, which is rather boring after all the high technology for entry. There are a series of medium sized desks mounted with large PC screens, telephones and personal junk, complemented by rather smart and comfortable black leather chairs. The real technological secrets of section electronicA are in the giant super computers housed in the basement 100 metres below ground. The section naming using the word Electronic was an obvious choice but A was a designation by the previous Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. At a cabinet meeting one summer morning he signed off the £100 million expenditure to create the department. J, the new head of the section had asked him what he wanted to call it and the PM hadn't clearly heard as he was signing the order, obviously distracted by the huge expenditure. Therefore he had rudely replied 'A?' in a broad Scottish accent, and thereafter the section was called ElectronicA as J's little joke with the Civil Service bureaucrats.

In the darkest corner of the department, Wolf had both his feet on the beech desk. No senior agent ever objected, they always left Wolf alone and although he was truly a loner that was not why he got the nickname Wolf, as everyone knew that wolves hunt in packs. No, the nickname was earned from his colleagues because of his cunning ability to electronically stalk his prey and bring them down in a swift, clean movement that never failed. No one

knew his real name anymore as he was a persona non grata but Wolf was the best there was in the entire section of ElectronicA. Wolf, real name John Smith, a nobody, a no one. He had been acquired by the section from a deprived area of Manchester called Moss side. At age 13 he had been running a successful set of internet shopping scams for the gang masters of the area. When his talent had come to the attention of the local head of CID, who was a former colleague of J, he had been sent to meet the head of ElectronicA, rather than enter a juvenile detention centre. John Smith had been tough since he was a baby. As hard as nails with no family, only a succession of brothers to fend for him and the black brotherhood who had been using his talent for committing crime. Smith was skinny, 2 metres tall and sported dreadlocks. He always wore yellow and green clothes to advertise his Jamaican roots and if he chose to speak to a colleague in the section, it was always about work or how he was proud to be black and equally proud of his Bob Marley music. He was also a Rastafarian and wanted the people of the world to live in peace and harmony but Wolf never touched drugs unlike the idiots of the brotherhood. He was too clever for that.

Wolf's keyboard was slung across his lap. His dark brown dreadlocks touched it as he sat contemplating the latest data on MI6's WA program. WA - Walking Attributes was an old system now, The BBC had suggested it might exist on the TV programme called Spooks in 2011. It was four years old then and was considered useless now. Wolf sometimes still played with it as he liked the simplicity of the concept. The computer software would track a person caught walking on CCTV, Closed Circuit Television, when their face could not be seen and therefore identified. The program conceptualised the person's size, weight and sex against known parameters. These were stored and used to review other images on cameras in the vicinity and when a match was made, invariably the change of view meant that MI6 could see the face. A simple ID system but only useful when reviewing CCTV footage near to the

initial illegal activity. Wolf had taken the idea a stage further and was in the process of testing his new program. His amended software took the image of individuals near known terrorist targets or places under surveillance and broke them down to their individual pixels. These were analysed by the computer to determine how the pixels immediately alongside each other moved and shimmied, and it was this relationship that allowed Wolf to determine the type of fibre that had been used in the clothes worn. With a little help from The CIA's grey spectrum analyser, the result was changed into a full colour spectrum, which could be applied on all the UK's CCTV coverage that was piped into the giant computers in the basement. It was simple, colours and fabrics for known terrorists could be traced across the UK's grainy and black and white CCTV pictures. The system was so close to success but he needed time to perfect it. Time that was in short supply as Wolf's expertise was deemed more important by J for working on MI6's – spatial awareness module, or SPAM for short. It was also SPAM that was driving Wolf nuts that afternoon as he reassembled the program code. SPAM took all the known electronic messages from digitalised telephone signals, to Facebook, emails, Twitter and electronic images on the World Wide Web and automatically assembled a profile against known intelligence concerns. Once the search criteria had been input into the SPAM search engine, it would identify potential digital signals that were related to the query and the electronic sources of any potential terrorists. However, that Monday morning, the program was looping and finding false negatives. Wolf pressed the search button again and waited impatiently for a result. SPAM returned a positive hit within ten seconds but it was a massive database of names instead of a handful of people. The result suggested a few thousand IP addresses i.e. the computer address by which every PC on the World Wide Web can be identified and therefore physically located. It was an impossible result against his advanced search term "*Euro debt crisis*". Wolf threw his keyboard on the desk in disgust.

'Computers – nothing changes, garbage in and garbage out. Such rubbish.' He grumbled constantly when working at his desk and longed to be out in the field. He thrived on action and the adrenaline that pumped through his body when in a dangerous situation. However, he secretly loved every minute of his job and seven years after joining the team he was the main technician surpassing the brightest minds in the country. He was always quiet around the other technicians, which they took as smugness, but in fact he was simply a loner, that belied the name - Wolf.

A red on white "Urgent" message flashed across the width of his computer screen and simultaneously the telephone on his desk loudly buzzed three times. It was the signal to attend the operations meeting room as quickly as possible. Wolf blew out a loud sigh, 'more boring chat and no action.' He surmised it would be about Peru or Chile as "the South American Spring" gathered pace against the dictatorships. A new thrust for freedom by the people, that was threatening to destabilise the world like in the Middle East in 2011. Reluctantly, he rolled his legs off the desk and replaced his "Vans" that were waiting on the grey carpet. Smoothly pushing himself upright showed his athleticism as he moved at speed and without a sound. Nonchalantly Wolf strolled with long slow strides to the far end of the giant room, furtively he glanced to his left and right to see who else was moving for the meeting.

Inside the operations meeting room, J the head of MI6 was worried. He sat waiting patiently for his electronic elite team to arrive and was considering the red "Top Secret – for your eyes only" file that was open on the desk in front of him. It had been placed there a few minutes earlier by Brett Smart, of the CIA, a graduate of Princeton University, not just an honours graduate he had been way above honours. Brett glanced at the man called Johnson.

He had been told that the Brit was one of the best, but J's appearance suggested he had been one of the best. Porky, with heavy jowls resting on his starched white collar, the top British agent had run to fat from his last decade in The Office. J used to be a field man, a ruthless agent known to have eliminated some of the top Al Qaeda leaders in the Yemen and Afghanistan, including the real Bin Laden, ten years before the double's death in Pakistan. Johnson still had steel grey hair and piercing black eyes. They made him look shrewd but the Tweed jacket with leather elbow pads and brown trousers that needed pressing made him look like a well-dressed tramp. Brett glanced at the man again. He never judged anyone by their appearance. He judged a fellow agent by what he said and what he did. That was what counted under pressure. J pushed the file back to Smart and appraised him carefully. Smart by name and Smart by nature. The Yank had a short crew cut, he appeared to be a typical Ivy Leaguer - athletic, a smart dresser in his dark blue suit, white shirt and yellow tie and like all CIA men the shoes hidden beneath the table would be highly polished.

Brett spoke. 'As you can see, I am here on behalf of The American President.'

J ran his hands through his grey hair. 'I know Smart, the PM took your President's call. That is the only reason I am entertaining you.' J didn't want any American help. He held a personal grudge against the Central Intelligence Agency. The section head in Yemen had let him down badly and four British agents had died with three more still languishing in squalid hell holes that the Yemenis called gaols. But not for much longer, the SAS would sort that soon enough. 'I've read the report but I want you to brief my team. Okay?'

'Sure thing, J.'

'Next time and at all times you call me Mr Johnson or sir. Okay B?' Brett took the point and dropped his gaze. It was pointless arguing with a knight of the realm, Sir Donald Johnson, order of the garter, Victoria Cross and known hard man. J had gone beyond the call of duty

when serving his Queen and country. He had given up the lives of his friends when duty demanded. All for Britain. J watched the five elite members of his team gradually assemble in the soundproofed room.

Wolf was the last man to arrive. Brett raised a mental eyelid at the untidy Rastafarian in the dirty yellow and green T-shirt proclaiming “love is free, so was Haile Selassie”, across the front.

Once Wolf had sat down, J introduced each of the team members. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of our American friends who wants to shares some news with us. His name is Brett Smart. I can assure you that both the PM and the Home Secretary have authorised total cooperation on this matter.’ He paused for breath. ‘On your left Mr Smart is Sybil – head of counter-intelligence. She and her team comb the world for snippets of information and make them into a cohesive whole.’

Sybil nodded. ‘Like a jigsaw’ she murmured.

J continued. ‘On your right is Matthews – he deals with matters in a more physical way.’ Brett looked at the dude. He looked hard, 2.4 metres tall and built like Shrek but Brett reckoned he could take him. ‘Next in line is Claypole, who is our money man. I can’t afford to ditch him, although in my day, a budget meant less than a budgie and both went cheep.’ Smith smiled at his boss’s little joke. ‘That leaves Morrison – an agent who is the master of twenty languages and a top impersonator and of course Wolf, our head technician.’ J turned to Brett and nodded for him to begin. Brett stood immediately and went to the front of the room as a screen slid from the ceiling. It was the latest LG 96 inch, high definition. Brett pressed the remote control in his left hand and the first image appeared. It was labelled, “Top Secret”.

Brett talked slowly with a southern drawl. 'I am here on behalf of The President'. As an afterthought, he added 'of America.' He said it, to make them sit up and pay attention but it had the opposite effect on the irregular team.

Wolf spoke for the rest of them. 'Well as a Yank, you wouldn't be here on behalf of The President of France would you?' Smart talking Wolf was always ready with a quip. The rest of the team pretended to yawn, waving derisory hands in front of mouths.

J stepped in immediately. 'Mr Smart, this team is the best we have in MI6 and they, like me, don't suffer fools gladly. You will find they become interested when the subject becomes interesting.'

Brett decided to cut the preamble and flicked through the remaining images within five minutes. 'We, The CIA, need help from the top experts in the field of counter espionage. In particular, we need people on side who understand and question what the hell has been happening in the world's Stock and Money markets.' A series of graphs flashed across the screen showing the demise of the FTSE, Dow Jones and Nikkei. 'The arrows in purple indicate the days when we have all seen, that is every one of the G8 countries, the most unstable of trading.'

Sybil queried. 'We know how bad it has been, so why those particular days and what does unstable really mean in CIA terms?'

Brett explained. 'As an example, the FTSE and Dow Jones plummeted by 10 per cent yesterday in a coordinated, yes even a synchronised way. No one understands why and of course, statistically it was an impossible event. The time delays, the difference between the computer systems, the type of stocks that fell. There was a definite pattern, a blip that has been seen before. Tracing back, we have three other blips in the last year across the main trading countries i.e. the G8, the eight richest nations on earth.'

Matthews joined in. 'But there is no major catastrophe in any of the world's richest countries. So that doesn't make sense.'

'Precisely' said Brett, 'it was as if the computers had been taken over. Trades were made automatically that caused the freefall in stocks and share prices. The other examples also involved commodities like gold and copper, even cocoa for god's sake.'

Claypole rubbed his chin as he helped the brainstorming session. 'The falls – you say were coordinated across all the major trading floors from Tokyo to London, New York to Frankfurt?' Brett nodded and allowed Claypole to continue. 'Of course, we know that they are totally integrated in one massive computerised neural network. But do you realise that most of the world's debt is owned indirectly by the Chinese and oil rich Arab nations?'

Morrison threw his pen on the table and joined the debate. 'That might explain everything, those damned Chinese are trying to destabilise The West.'

It was Wolf who commented. 'Why would they want to do that? Our stability is fundamental to the growth of their industry as they supply 23 per cent of the world's production, they are the number one player now and much higher than the Americans at 18.'

Morrison was out of his depth. 'Erm, well it must be the Arabs trying to make us realise that money isn't everything and Islam answers all our needs.'

Sybil joined in. Her tone was exasperated. 'Get real Morro, even our CIA man knows that can't be true. Smart by name, but not dumb by nature. True followers of Allah want us all to live in peace and harmony...except for the Iranian hard liners of course.'

Brett showed the detailed breakdown of the four blips. 'Lady and gentlemen, we are at a loss why this happened. We have no idea who might be behind it. Nor how they managed it and finally, what the hell they will do next time? As I said, these are blips on the event horizon.' He turned off the screen and sat down opposite Wolf.

Wolf looked daggers at him. 'I don't know you Smart, but I don't like yanks. In fact I don't like Smart Yanks asking for British help when usually you profess to know it all.'

Brett remained calm. 'And I don't like Brits, Limey. But I do what I am told and my President and the head of the CIA must mistakenly believe that you and your colleagues have some sort of special talent... boy how wrong can they be?'

The two men slammed their chairs to the floor as they stood in anger and faced each other. 'Boys, boys, boys. Anyone would think you were back in school.' J's calm demeanour held a steely warning as they backed down and reluctantly picked up their chairs. Both men continued to sit in silence and glare at each other. J continued as the heat and testosterone dissipated from the air. 'We know from the heads of state in each of the G8, that nobody triggered any rumours to make the markets melt down. We know that there are no adverse disasters in the world as Matthews pointed out, no Tsunamis or volcanoes. So what do we know?'

Wolf filled the silence with a quiet but assertive opinion. 'There can only be one answer boss.' He paused as J turned his piercing grey eyes on him. The stare was scary and made Wolf swallow hard before continuing.

J queried, 'one answer? Think before you speak please or don't speak at all.'

Wolf didn't need to think too deeply. He had been playing scenarios for global domination on his MI6 disaster recovery program for weeks. 'It's something I have been computer modelling on our SPAM system. I think someone else is controlling the world financial network behind the scenes. The thing is, they are playing at it, ducking and diving but having a nibble here and there. Almost like a test program.'

J asked Brett if he understood what was meant by SPAM.

'Yes. Yes Mr Johnson.' J paused and glared at the yank.

‘In that case our internal security is not as tight as it should be!’

Brett laughed loudly and turned his attention to Wolf. ‘Come on you crazy Limey, your postulation would take hundreds of the best brains in the world and a monolithic amount of computing power, three times more than the Cray computers we have in The Pentagon at Washington DC and boy is that an awesome amount of computing power.’

Wolf opened his arms in offering on the table, palms face up. ‘Precisely, so where do you get those experts and who has been buying hundreds of servers around the globe?’ They all reflected on Wolf’s wise words. It was just possible, wasn’t it? He added a final rejoinder. ‘If they are serious, this is cyber-terrorism like the world has never known.’

‘How so?’ Brett was now interested in the theory. Wolf was more like himself than he realised behind the crazy demeanour.

Wolf gave his opinion. ‘It seems like they are testing a system. That means the real event could provoke a meltdown of the world’s financial systems, provided they can engineer their resources correctly.’

‘What do you mean by that Wolf?’ Brett started to be more polite out of respect.

‘More brains behind the technology, computers never make decisions which are as intuitive as the human brain. Humans make the real decisions and humans must lurk behind your blips.’

J loudly clapped his hands together. ‘This is your brief then gentlemen. Examine all server sales over the last three years and try and find a pattern. Also, start laterally thinking within your departments and tell me where the devil they could find enough people to do this. We reassemble at 4 am, you have 24 hours to answer these questions.’ He stood quickly and marched out of the room, leaving the others to slowly follow.

Chapter 4

The Place

Sunday morning was always taken at a slow pace in the George household. Jack and Timmo sat on the bench drawn against the breakfast table and waited impatiently for one of their parents to rise and serve food. The very thought of helping themselves to cereals was totally abhorrent to the pair of them. Jack was showing his younger brother a few of the fight moves he had learned at school before the summer holidays. Timmo the dimmo hadn't quite worked out why Jack did the moves and he suffered each time because Timmo, being a dimmo, hadn't asked to try the same moves on his elder brother.

'Do you get it yet?' Jack had Timmo's head tucked under his left arm in a vice-like grip and was proceeding to bang his head on the hard pine top.

'Ummmm....umm noo...' came a muffled reply.

'I said do you get it?' He let Timmo go free.

'That was a good move bro. It really hurt!' Jack ruffled his brother's hair. He didn't hate him, it was just that he got in the way sometimes. Timmo continued as he straightened his clothes.

'Did you learn anything else from your mates at school?' Jack smiled with glee at his brother's innocence and grasped Timmo's bare wrist with both his hands.

'We call this the Chinese burn.' Twisting opposite ways the skin was stretched to breaking point. A scream rent the air, causing dad to rush into the kitchen from the bathroom upstairs. He had half a face covered in shaving cream. 'What is it? Who's died?' He relaxed immediately as he saw the Chinese torture occurring on the breakfast table. At least there was no blood to clean up, this time.

He said, 'boys will be boys' and turned to leave them to it, as his wife followed him into the kitchen and spun her husband around to join in her recrimination.

'Brainless boys and clever girls. Sometimes I wish I had had a daughter, a nice charming girl like Kate.' Her boys both put their tongues out and pretended to gag at the thought, whilst nudging each other in the ribs. Timmo nudged a little harder than Jack expected and then a little lower than expected, which winded Jack for a good two minutes. Dad was placing Shreddies and Coco Pops on the table with full fat milk.

Timmo asked in his nicest, creeping voice. 'Dad...can't we have croissants out of the freezer today? Please dad?'

By this time, Jack had recovered and joined in. 'No, you need to eat healthily, especially after the F and C last night.'

Jennifer put her arms around her two boys. 'Are you going to promise your mum you will behave all day? I can't think what you might find to do with all this holiday? Let me try – what about cricket?' They both shook their heads negatively. 'Fishing in the pond then? I know, you want to clean your dad's and my car?'

It was Jack who remonstrated first. 'Mum... we have only just broken up for the holidays, chores are definitely out.'

'Even for £5 a car?'

He thought for a moment. 'It's a deal, £10 for two but no chamois leathering.'

She wagged her finger at him. 'No, £10 with chamois leathering and including hoovering out the insides.'

Jack hesitated too long as Timmo offered his services. 'I'll do it mum. And yours dad.'

His dad was apologetic. 'You can't do it Timmo, you know you always leave marks on the paintwork or get distracted spraying the hosepipe everywhere.'

Jack closed the deal. '£10 for two, right? Leathering and hoovering but cash in advance.'

His mum stepped back and looked down at her beloved boys. She had her hands on the hips of her pink fluffy dressing gown. 'It's a deal but you have to let Timmo help and pay him £3.' Jack sulked and didn't reply. 'And also, I will bake you both some croissants'.

'Deal mum!' came in unison.

The boys were hyper, making dad turn away in despair. 'Why do I bother? All my discipline through the week and then your mum blows it away.' But he was joking, he too wanted to spoil his boys.

* * *

Roger and Kate called at The George's house to collect Jack and set off towards their secret hideout – The Place. Licko the dog, ran in front of them and sniffed each post and rock in strict sequence, whereas Timmo lagged 20 metres behind the group, pretending not to follow them, although he knew exactly where they were going. 20 metres behind Timmo lurked Wispy the cat, happy to tag along in the background and always hoping the children would share any food.

Jack turned back and shouted at his brother. 'Get lost dimmo, you are too young to come with us.' Timmo politely imitated Jack by loudly shouting back.

'I'm only four years younger and remember that last time when I made you all a cup of tea.'

Kate looked knowingly at Roger before addressing Jack. 'It's no trouble at all if he hangs around with us Jack, really no trouble.' Jack picked up a stone and turned to throw it at his brother. It landed close to Wispy, making her leap to one side and stop her pursuit. She thought it was meant for her personally and so she slunk off home.

‘Get lost I said.’ Roger tried to appease his mate as he turned back around.

‘Really, it is really no trouble at all Jack. He did make a rather spiffing cup of tea last time we were at The Place.’

Jack shrugged his shoulders as he spoke. ‘You two don’t understand what a pain younger brothers can be. I love him dearly but...’

Kate clasped Jack’s arm making him immediately pull away. She said plaintively. ‘Don’t ignore him Jack. The love within a family is everything in life, nothing else really matters apart from your health.’ She was of course making him feel part of her pain, as her words reflected the sadness when she lost her mum.

He sighed and shouted over his shoulder. ‘Okay Timmo, you can make the tea again and for goodness sake, don’t come too close to us until we reach the house. Somebody maybe watching!’ They were two poor excuses to welcome him and reject him at the same time but Timmo was delighted to be considered old enough to join in with Jack’s gang.

‘The Place’, was an old Georgian House with beautiful columns either side of its huge panelled door. It had been built in 1786 and was set slightly outside of the village with five acres of formal gardens, which were now Christleton’s playing fields.

The red brick walls were still very much the same as when it was built, but many of the windows had been broken with stones thrown by the children of the village and all the blue paintwork had nearly peeled off the window frames and doors. No one in the village knew who owned it, They knew it was built for the Jones’s who had controlled the canal basin and locks under Chester’s city walls. The Jones’s fortune had been built on the trade up the Dee estuary, from larger ports like Ellesmere and Liverpool. Moving products by barge on the inland waterways, but as the river silted up, and the first railways were built, the family’s

fortunes had gone into decline. Some distant relative who lived in Spain, now owned the old house but they never visited it. They considered it as “money in the bank”, an asset to be sold as a nursing home someday after the debt crisis had come out of its treble dip recession.

The children glanced up and down the road to make sure no one was watching them and then in a single line, they clambered through the hole in the beech hedge facing the morning sun. Scrambling up the overgrown and steep lawn, they approached the side of the house and surreptitiously lowered themselves one by one down the open hatchway that led to the cellars. Licko was told to ‘stay’, by Roger and the dog crept under the nearest stand of privet to relax in the shade with his tongue out as he panted from his exertions up the road.

Timmo was always scared at this point. ‘I dunno if them bats are still here? What do you think bro?’

‘I told you not come!’ His brother was harsh.

‘But I really hate bats Jack. I don’t mind snakes and spiders but bats remind me of vampires and I’m too young to die.’

Jack softened his tone. ‘Stop worrying dimmo, bats don’t move in the daylight and if they did, they would miss us as they fly around using radar or something.’

‘Sonic radar, that’s what they have. An amazing piece of genetic engineering.’ Roger would have continued if encouraged but the darkness of the cellar kept them all quiet now. Creeping across the floor on tiptoe, the children placed their left hands on the damp slimy wall and edged to where they knew the stairs were hidden. A sudden scream ripped through the dank air.

It was Kit Kat who shouted shrilly. ‘Jackkkkkkkkkkk...a rat just ran up my leg! Oh my god, a flipping rat.’ Kate never swore and flipping was the worse word she ever used. Roger stifled

a laugh. 'Roger! Was that your hand and not a real rat?' She was mortified as all three boys laughed out loud. 'I promise you Ponsonby-Smythe, that one day I will get my revenge.' The boys laughed louder at the girlie girl. 'Be scared Roger, no matter how long, I promise you.' Now her panic was over, she was more worried by the fact a boy had run his hand up her leg to her bum. Kate had been more aware of boys since the biology lessons at school.

'Whatever girlie girl, I thought you were tough like Wonder Woman?' She stayed silent after Roger's taunt. A rat or a hand, both were equally as frightening. Timmo took heart from her fear, if she was scared it was okay for him to be scared. He still couldn't see much as they neared the old wooden stairs and so he clung to his brother's T-shirt in the darkness in front of him.

He whispered. 'Yeah you great girlie girl, I'm four years younger than you lot and I'm not scared because I'm a boy.' As he finished his sentence, a squeak came from immediately above him and a rat fell off a roof beam and landed firmly on his head. Another even louder scream penetrated every room in the house as they all bumped into each other in a blind panic to reach the stairs and safety. They clambered up as quickly as possible and slammed the cellar door shut. Quaking, they stood in a group in the welcome light of the old kitchens with their giant Victorian windows.

'Flippin flip, and flip again' said Timmo but one of the words was ruder.

'Stop swearing dimmo, you know only dad is allowed to swear and then only an occasional bad word.'

His brother calmed down as he listened to his younger brother air his fears. 'I felt its claws on my neck. It was horrible and its whiskers were tickling me as it crawled off.' The group examined the back of Timmo's neck and finding there were no injuries, they headed for the main staircase and the top floor where they had made their camp.

The view out of the windows towards the playing fields and Welsh hills in the distance was magnificent. They had discovered their secret entrance a year before and therefore had experienced every season from Mr Jones bedroom window. The best time had been after the big snows, when they had taken snowballs up to the top floor from outside and thrown them at passers-by from their high vantage point. It had been a delight, listening to people wondering how a snowball had hit them and watching them run behind the nearest hedge to search for the young culprits. Jack's wasn't a bad gang but they were certainly full of mischievous fun.

Timmo lit the Gaz stove purloined from his dad's shed and admired the single blue flame as he started to make the tea. He opened the cardboard packet of dried skimmed milk and noticed the mouse droppings. Timmo flicked them out with his middle finger and placed the packet next to the bottle of Evian taken from Kate's house the week before. There was no sugar but Roger always told them it was bad for their teeth. They sat perched on the old brass bedstead, forlorn without its mattress. Four children line abreast, facing the windows and watching the grounds man rolling the cricket square 300 metres away. Jack was still too young for the village cricket team but he and Roger played with the juniors every Tuesday evening during the holidays.

Roger commented on the work. 'A nice sward mate.'

'Yeah.' Replied Jack and after a minute's silence. 'Where's the sword, I can only see the roller mate.'

'Sward, you know the green, the turf, a nice English sward.'

'Whatever. I wish I was playing today. Dad said he is going to be there.'

‘So’s my dad. He says your dad is rubbish and never scores any runs.’ Roger was gloating.

‘My dad scored two last week,’ proclaimed Jack before realising it was a poor score.

‘Precisely.’

Jack needed some revenge. ‘Well my dad says that your dad only bowls people out because he throws the ball and his action is totally illegal but missed by the poor umpires of the village league.’

‘My dad doesn’t throw Jack. He has a unique action like Muttiah Muralitharan.’

‘Who is Mutt Murlitheran?’ It was an impossible name to pronounce. ‘He can’t be English with a name like that.’

‘He plays for Sri Lanka’, pronounced Roger for everyone’s benefit.

‘There you go then, a whole team of throwers.’ Jack imitated the action and grabbed his mate around the neck to drag him onto the bed for a mock scrap. As they wrestled, Timmo joined in by jumping on the top and finally, unable to resist the rough and tumble, Kate jumped on the mound of three writhing boys and started tickling all of them, a typical girlie girl. As the pile collapsed she found her face an inch from Jack’s. Her mouth was within kissing distance, he paused and thought about it, and then he smelt the garlic she had eaten with her pasta the night before and he pulled away.

‘Oh my god, dog’s breath, how disgusting. Didn’t you clean your teeth this morning?’ He could be very rude at times. She blushed bright red, rejected by her adventurer and rushed out of the room and downstairs to escape to the safety of home and grandma. In her embarrassment, she even forgot about the rats as she raced through the cellar and out onto the road.

‘You should be less hard on her Jack. You know she fancies you.’ Roger stated the obvious but Jack’s reply was meant to cover his own hard embarrassment.

‘Whatever.’ As he muttered his reply, there was a woosh of flame as it leapt up the curtains at the rear of the room. Kate’s hasty departure had rocked the old floorboards and unseen by the children the gaz flame had ignited the old cotton curtains. Now they were burning fiercely. Jack leaped into action. He dragged a cushion off an old chair and started to hit the flames with it, but the harder he tried to extinguish them, the higher they reached. Within half a minute the curtain pelmets were also on fire and the old lime plaster on the ceiling started to glow and then crumble, allowing the flames to ignite the slatted timber beneath.

Jack turned to the two immobile boys. ‘Don’t just stand there. Shout out of the window for help.’ He valiantly turned back to the fire and realised their escape was now cut off. He joined the other two, who were yelling out of a window facing the road.

Licko was one of the first to hear their call. He had accompanied Kate as she stomped off, homeward bound but she had slowed to a walk and then stopped to sit on the bench under the ancient Chestnut tree. Whilst wondering how good the conkers would be this year, she had decided she would go back to be with the brainless boys, after all they didn’t know any better. Licko growled and pricked up his ears at the distant cries. Then the dog stood and faced back up the road and lifting his large head he loudly howled. The hair on the nape of his head stood to attention as he howled again, a demented, deep howl that reverberated through her heart. Licko turned to Kate and barked ‘let’s go.’ She understood immediately as she heard the faint cries.

‘Help! Fire!’ She heard Roger first and then Jack. Immediately, she jumped to her feet and started to run as fast as possible back to The Place. As she approached, she could see three heads hanging out of the upstairs window, through which smoke poured into the clear summer air. Immediately beneath them was the grounds man who was already talking to the emergency services on his mobile phone.

She called upwards. ‘Get out you three, get out now!’

Jack shouted back, the other two were too terrified to speak as the heat built behind them and the smoke made them choke. ‘We’re trapped Kate! The doorway at the back is blocked by the flames.’ A billow of smoke enveloped him and the other boys making them choke again. The grounds man leaned towards her. ‘I don’t know what we can do miss. I telephoned the fire brigade but it will take 15 minutes to get here from Chester. I think they are doomed by god.’ She hit him across the chest with her right arm. ‘You snivelling coward, we have to save them!’ Immediately she jumped down the hatchway and entered the cellar. It was writhing with rats, hundreds of rats disturbed by the fire that they smelt and feared. ‘Oh god no.’ She lurched upwards, screwed up her eyes and took all the courage she had into her heart and stepped back down into the wriggling darkness. The rats crawled across her feet as she walked across the rat filled floor. Two or three scampered up her bare legs and she wacked them away, but more came and reached her pants, nestling under the safety of her short dress. ‘Get off, get off get off!’ She screamed at them but couldn’t move any faster, as no way did she want to trip and fall in the dark. After what seemed an eternity, she reached the stairs and quickly climbed up. By the time she reached the floor below the bedroom, the smoke was so thick, the boys couldn’t shout anymore. They were suffocating. They coughed on the floor above her and she knew she had to act quickly or it was the end for them. The fear spurred her on as she searched around the room. Near the window and immediately beneath the boys was a tall set of steps which were sat on rollers. It was obvious! The Jones’s library had moveable steps that reached right up to the floor above. She searched around for anything that she could use to prise open a hole in the ceiling and then she spotted an old wooden box in the corner. On the outside was a faded advert, it said “Croquet set – fit for The Queen.” Wrenching open the box she grabbed a mallet with a long handle and started up the steps.

They creaked as she went up, they were full of woodworm and each step bowed downwards as they were so weak. On reaching the summit, she started to hammer at the plaster above and immediately exposed the floorboards of the bedroom.

‘Jack! Help me! Can you hear me? I am hitting the floor below you!’ There was no reply. She hit harder and aimed for the end of a floorboard. Immediately, she saw two nails appear as the board lifted higher. Suddenly, the floorboard opened further and a smudged face appeared behind the grimy hands that clasped it. It was Jack, her lovely Jack. ‘I’ll hit the one next door, make the boys help lift the boards.’

He choked as he answered and spat dirty saliva to one side. ‘Can’t. Not moving.’ He struggled manfully to help as she thrashed each board into submission. His strength of will was overcoming the physical danger as the adrenaline surged through his young body. Within twenty seconds there was an opening big enough for an escape. The fire wooshed behind her, it was spreading down the stairs and within a few minutes, she too would be trapped.

‘Quick Jack, it’s now or never.’ A pair of legs appeared through the hole. They were Timmo’s. Carefully she placed them on the rungs and supporting him as he climbed down she left him gasping at the foot of the steps. Roger came next, but after a few steps he fell, nearly taking Kate with him and collapsed unconscious on the floor. Timmo crept close and started slapping Roer’s face to wake him up. Finally, Jack’s legs appeared and he moved next to her on the steps. He smiled, a white, brilliant smile through the black grime on his face.

‘Thought you’d come back,’ he kissed her on her cheek and together they dismounted and grabbed the others. Dragging and pushing each other, the four friends went down the stairs to the kitchen as the roof collapsed into the library. Ten seconds earlier and they would all have been fried.

The four friends sat on a bench adjacent to the cricket pavilion and stared in silence at the inferno in front of them. Old houses certainly burned well. Licko had run off home, flames were the scariest thing in his doggy life. Even an autumn bonfire made of a few handfuls of leaves scared him when lit by Roger's dad in the garden at the mansion. Chester Fire Brigade had sent two normal fire engines and also 'a snorkel', much to Timmo's delight but even Timmo felt too guilty to talk about the fascinating machines. The Fire Chief had given up on the house, it was too far gone. A column of smoke rose a kilometre into the perfectly blue sky and then dissipated to the south, making a large grey cloud that drifted over Beeston Castle. Jack took another swig of the water provided by the firemen before he spoke. 'You saved our lives Kit Kat. We can never forget that. You are so cool.'

She squirmed in her seat. 'I would always save my friends' lives' she said modestly. In her heart she wanted to say 'and especially yours Jack,' but it was an unrequited teenage crush that he hadn't recognised yet.

Jennifer and Jonathan stood talking to Maria and Rupert behind the ambulances. The paramedics were assuring them that their children were fine. It gave time for grandma to wander over to the bench. She stopped in front of the children and looked down her glasses with her piercing eyes.

She spoke gently with her arms crossed over her chest. 'We had a comedian in my day. He always said "*that's another fine mess you have got me into*". Hardy was his name, part of Laurel and Hardy if you have ever heard of them?' They kept their heads down. They knew the duo as they had seen some of the old movies at Roger's house. 'But in each film, he always forgave his friend Laurel because it was never really Laurel's fault.' She leaned forward and pulled all four children into a massive hug. 'Come on, let's go and face your

parents.’ They sheepishly moved towards their mums and dads, more scared by the retributions than by the fire.

The cause was obvious. Rickety floorboards meant a gaz stove would easily topple over, whether it was Kate’s fault or whether it would have been one of the boys. The Fire Chief said they were lucky to be alive. The local newspaper shots showed a mournful set of children and parents with a smouldering house behind. The headline was a trifle unfair. *“School holidays encourage arson attacks by bored school kids.”* It was an accident. They never meant it to happen, but boy did they get the biggest roasting of their lives off their parents. Kate got off lightly with grandma, nothing more was said, but Kate was extra good for the next two weeks. All the boys were punished. No seeing their friends for a week. No PC’s, TV or music and they were all made to read books for six hours a day – unbelievable, they were in total shock...after all, six f...flippin hours each and every day!

Chapter 5

A cunning plan

The monstrous woman leaned on the parapet of the gallery that her engineers had cut into the rock above level two. She was breathing heavily after the short walk from her bedchamber, hidden deep in the rock 200 metres above her head. The gallery was wide enough to take a Landrover and could be accessed at three points from the training floor set below her. Once on the gallery there was a single exit for vehicles, which led out onto the barren mountainside. It was the fastest way for her teams of ninjas to pour onto the slopes and take up defensive positions.

Below her were parked 200 Landrovers. None were conventional above the axles and drive trains as her engineers had been given specific instructions on how to modify each one to make them mean fighting machines. Twenty contained the pointed missiles of the Chinese SAM's, the latest Surface to Air Missiles. Although lightweight, they packed a real punch and were effective against slower moving aircraft or helicopters and absolutely deadly if anything was travelling at less than a 1000 kilometres per hour. This met the anticipated scenario of any force attacking the massive volcano. The Russian SAM's had been bought for longer range use on the fastest jets but were extremely heavy in comparison to the Chinese versions. Therefore, they were in camouflaged bunkers at strategic points on the exterior of the mountain. Teams of ninja manned these hideouts 24 hours a day and seven days a week in case any governments got wind of MM's headquarters location. Between the Russian Sam sites were rows of landmines, carefully located to protect the terrorists within, from an advancing army. The mines were the latest American design, bought on the black market in Serbia and could only be disarmed by an ultrasonic sound, beamed on a specific frequency.

As the ninjas knew the frequency, it would allow them either to attack down the hill across the mines, or to sit behind their defensive shield and watch their enemies die crossing the lethal lattice.

Other Landrovers contained RPG heavy machine guns or mini-rocket launchers. Both were incredibly effective at up to 3 kilometres and the abundance of ammunition stored in the volcano allowed the ninjas to practice twice a month on the animals roaming the savannah of Northern Tanzania. The local tribesmen were always permitted to follow behind the mini-army and to collect “the kill” to feed their families. As they preferred the taste of the fast moving and leaping Gazelle it suited the ninjas too, as they were harder to hit and therefore better practice. The Maasai had learned to be careful when eating the meat as too many teeth had been broken on bullets lodged deep within the carcasses.

The remaining Landrovers were an assortment of service vehicles. They carried spare ammunition, canisters of napalm which would be illegally used in the flame throwers as the governments of the world had banned the lethal substance. Illegality to a terrorist was like eating icecream 7 days a week. Wrong and right at the same time. Diesel for the vehicles, food and water, full engineering toolkits and also spares for most repairs. All the 4 x 4's were painted in camouflage colours, dull browns and greens and all had a single antenna in the roof that spun through 360 degrees every ten seconds. This was another one of Techno's pieces of wizardry called RNT – Radar Networking Technology. Not only could an attack team see the other terrorist vehicles on their screens in the drivers' cabs, they could link all of the 200 RNT's to form a vast array that could be used in two different ways. Firstly, to detect any incoming land or air forces up to 1000 kilometres distance, and secondly, under MM's sole control, the RNT's could send a pulse of high energy from each Landrover to her control vehicle in the centre of any deployment. When the pulses reached MM's giant antenna

mounted on the back of her truck, they were combined into a supersonic beam that could scorch an area of 10 kilometres in diameter, burning everything within. That was called the land setting but the weapon also had an air setting. The same beam could be directed skywards and create a vertical force field that nothing, absolutely nothing could fly through. Any aircraft attempting to fly through this powerful force field would simply implode and collapse into a lump of molten aluminium.

MM watched her twin brother training with the ninja's far below her. Poor Biceps, his brains had been mashed at their joint birth. The incompetent back-street surgeon in Marseille had failed to realise that her brother was lacking oxygen because the umbilical cord had been wrapped around his neck. When their mother had died nine years later, she had made MM promise to look after him for the rest of his life. MM, a pseudonym of power but chosen by her as a private joke. Her real name was truly Musseine, the blending of a French mother and an Iraqi sailor but her pretty forename was Melanie. She had been a lovely, sensitive child until the age of nine and then the bitterness swept into her as she protected herself and her brother Bosquet from the mafia controlling the French port. That was when she had started to call him Biceps as his strength saved their lives many times. Their father had long since disappeared and was never heard of again.

Three ninja stood line astern as a fourth approached at a fast run. He leaped into the air and placed his left foot on a comrade's right shoulder. The comrade grasped the ankle long enough to make the leaper twist in the air to leave him head to head, upside down above the second ninja in the line. This man was holding a dagger horizontally above his head, which the leaping ninja managed to grasp in his mouth. As the leaping man continued his somersault, he managed to transfer the knife to his right hand and therefore, as he hit a third

man in the chest, he thrust the knife forward in a mortal blow to the heart, before landing on top of the stricken man. The leaping ninja stood with the knife outstretched ready to repulse any attack.

‘Bravo, bravo my little friends.’ MM applauded silently high above them as all four men stood facing each other and bowed low after their mock training exercise. A Japanese tradition, a courtesy to the other warrior, even if only in the training arena. On occasion, they could afford to kill each other whilst training, because The Yakuza or Japanese Mafia always had spare recruits ready to fill the ensuing gap. This ensured only the best survived. Madame Musseine watched another group as they stood 50 metres from targets that resembled attacking troops. In a flash, the ninjas threw their shuriken, lethal star shaped discs. Each disc hit a separate target and each deadly shuriken dug deep into the neck area severing the carotid artery. In reality, after a few spurts of blood, the enemy would have passed out from lack of oxygen. It was the lack of oxygen that killed most people. None to the brain, none in the blood to the heart, or a lack of air in the lungs. Oxygen depletion in any form was a killer and the ninjas practised the deadliest methods to stifle the oxygen supply in an enemy.

A staccato of shots rang out to her right, it came from near the assault course. She looked across and saw the ninjas were practising with some of the newest batch of machine guns. As three men slid down a sloping wire rope on a pulley, they were shooting at targets beneath them to their left and right. She knew each target would have multiple shots to both the head and hearts when their trainers inspected the deadly work.

Happy in her warzone, MM saw Techno approaching on foot. He kept his eyes averted as he stopped in front of the bulbous black mass.

She gave a brief order. 'Fetch Biceps and Twip Twop and make sure you pick me up here in my personal Landrover. You have five minutes maximum.' He turned away and made for the rungs of a ladder hanging off the edge of the gallery. MM looked at the partly hidden Landrovers in the dark of the far corner of the training area. Her personal vehicle looked like any Landrover but it had three modifications. Firstly, the additional bullet and rocket proof armour. Secondly, a command and control computer that doubled up on the system in Techno's vehicle. He could never use it, as she controlled the passwords but it was useful as backup. Thirdly, apart from the seat for the ex World Championship rally driver who accompanied her everywhere; it had one enormous seat that allowed her to remain in total comfort, no matter what angle the vehicle was tilted. Inside her seat were mini-gyroscopes that ensured it was level at all times by activating independent air suspension struts. Unlike the rest of the vehicles, the colour was also unique...no, not black, as that would attract attention from an enemy. It was in a special "total cover" paint recently invented by ICI in the UK. This paint was destined to be used by the British Army from 2018 but MM's spies had stolen the secrets a month before. Inside the volcano under artificial lighting, the paint colour resembled that of vomit. It even had bits of orange carrot-like flecks in it but when the Landrover went outside, the dynamic paint changed and assumed the exact colour of its surroundings. No enemy would ever see her and therefore would not attempt to knock out the nerve centre of her personal army.

She watched it move and assumed her three henchmen were on their way up. Three minutes later it pulled up, Techno was only just in time to avoid a punishment. Biceps and Twip Twop were sat outside the cab, on the back of the vehicle next to the satellite antenna and Techno was driving. The two idiots sat outside, were grinning like little school boys as they were excited to be going outside of the volcano. MM struggled into the Landrover, forcing her

bulk through the narrow doorway before plumping herself down on the specialist seat. It bounced up and down for a few seconds until the suspension compensated her weight.

She rasped at Techno next to her. 'We need to discuss the plan with the two meat heads behind.' Her finger was jabbed rearwards. 'Do you have it with you?'

Techno pointed to the yellow canvas bag on the floor between the seats. He always used his thumb to point rather than a finger. A product of technological life in the world, where thumbs were evolving faster than fingers because of portable computer devices.

She smiled. 'In that case, I think the fresh air in the crater of the volcano is as private a place as we can find. Drive!' He moved away and headed around the gallery to the exit. Pressing a switch on the dashboard activated the blast door, which quickly slid upwards and within two minutes they were winding their way down to the bright green lake sat in the bottom of the crater. Techno pulled up away from the fumaroles that were belching smelly steam but next to MM's favourite hot pool. Sometimes she would take lunch there in this special place, it appealed to her as it resembled Hell. Three months earlier she had been there with just Biceps and a cook. The cook would normally delight her by boiling five large lobsters in the heat of the pool at an average 98 degrees Celsius. There were always wire baskets with long handles at the side of the pool and virtually anything could be cooked within a few minutes. Her love for this alfresco cooking wasn't because of the speed however, it was because of the flavour. She especially loved to eat eggs. The mix of silica and calcium with a touch of radioactive radium in the hot waters added a little spice, a little *je ne sais quoi*, especially as she ate the blackened shells of the eggs, making a crumble on top of the soft yellow and white interior. In the volcanic hellhole of the crater, the waters permeated all cooked foods and gave them a tang that she loved. She also believed, like the Japanese ninjas, that each egg that was cooked and eaten in this way would add extra time onto one's life. Everyone else in her gang thought

it was a disgusting method of cooking and eating but when with Madame Musseine, you did what you were told.

Twip Twop was given the job of cooking and so he immediately fetched two dozen eggs from the rear of the Landrover and placed them in the baskets. These were then lowered into the boiling water for two minutes and 21 seconds exactly before being served to all her cronies. Any difference in the cooking time would result in severe punishment. The lobster cook had been twenty seconds over the allotted time as he had prepared the second course and had joined the second batch of eggs in the pool. Only Biceps remembered the cook's screams after she had thrown the little Chinese into the steaming greenness, but he had enjoyed it.

As a gigantic full moon loomed above the lip of the crater, the yellow light gleamed on the plotters making them look uglier, if that were possible. The moon shadows made every one of their features grotesque as they munched on their acrid tasting eggs. It was a double bout of sulphurous fumes, the whiff of egg and volcano but without any toast.

'It's time to finish your eggs.' She brooked no dissent, each of her team were ordered to eat a minimum of 12 eggs a day. 'Eggs contain the protein albumen and hundreds of amino acids. Last year our scientists proved that they stimulate the brain. So you can all think about me and creating my huge evil empire rather than dreaming your days away.' She slapped her tree-trunk of a leg at the thought. She watched her team as they cracked the shells of the black eggs and munched on the contents to consume them as fast as possible. None of them looked her in the eyes, each was subservient, a slave to their mistress but for one reason it bothered her. She trusted no one and unfortunately it would only take one of them to betray her master plan at this crucial last stage. 'Techno, the contents of the bag.' He carefully unzipped the bright yellow bag and handed IPad4's to each of the henchmen after inputting a

secret lock code. They all sat on warm rocks as Biceps and Twip Twop turned their iPad every which way as no one could read the display. 'Gentlemen, I give you the last stage of my master plan and your roles within it.' The two idiots dumbly carried on turning the screens, the words were incomprehensible to all except MM and Techno.

He spoke for her. 'What you see is mirror writing as developed by Leonardo da Vinci. If you looked at the display when reflected in a mirror, then you could decipher it.'

Biceps grunted. 'But we don't have a mirror!'

MM nodded. 'You are so perceptive Biceps, firstly you couldn't understand the cipher and secondly you have no mirror. That is how you preserve our secrecy as you carry the iPads around with you.'

Techno helped them. 'Press the control alt and delete buttons all at the same time.'

'But even I know that reboots any PC and if we do, it goes back to the start up screen.' Said Twip Twop.

'Precisely, so everyone thinks, but try it on these iPads.' They all pressed the keys and gasped in amazement as the jumbled images on the screens reverted to words in English.

'That's amazing' says Biceps 'it's real writing now.'

Twip Twop was holding the screen above his head to avoid glare from the moon. 'That is cleverer than holding it in front of a mirror but it's a shame that Biceps still can't read it!'

The beast of man remonstrated loudly. 'Are you calling me thick?'

'No,' said Twip Twop, 'just illiterate.' They all laughed except Biceps who glowered at Twip Twop. He didn't know what to say because he hadn't got a clue what illiterate meant.

MM asked them to sit closer to her and they moved positions on the large boulders, ensuring they were always below her.

‘These are the latest I Photo images of Windsor Castle near London but with a twist.’ She input a code and a 3D miniature model arose from the iPad screen. ‘Another reason why I choose to employ Techno. He can take anyone’s ideas and make them better.’ She turned the image and using her fingers like on an iPhone, she opened and closed doors and spread areas apart to enlarge them. Over half an hour she explained how they would take over the castle on MD day plus one month.

‘What’s MD day?’ Asked Biceps. He was struggling to understand world domination and how it worked. All he understood was that he and the ninjas would land in the castle square using the stealth gyroscopes and surprise the garrison of crack marines. They would have one hour to make it safe for MM to take up position as world president. MM’s new palace would be Windsor Castle the headquarters from which she would dominate the world as by then, she would own half of it.

‘MD day my dear little Biceps, means Musseine Domination Day. The day the world’s Stock and Money markets fall under my control.’

He shrugged. ‘Does that mean I get a pay rise?’

‘You fool’ she screamed, ‘you are the head of my security and want more money. More money indeed! When you should be proud to serve me for freeeeee.’ The sense of power always went to MM’s head and therefore she hadn’t noticed Techno’s increasing frustration with his mistress. For nearly two years now, he had started to think he wanted out of her evil empire but he was too scared to run away.

Biceps hopped from one foot to another in pure delight. ‘When we get the castle MM, can I have the arsenal of weapons belonging to all the soldiers based there?’

Twip Twop joined in. ‘And can I have the crown jewels your ladyship?’

MM looked at them and sighed loudly. 'I said it will be my HQ. Do you get it? Mine, all mine, including the jewels and weapons.' The henchmen bent their heads and protruded their bottom lips. But nobody questioned her judgement.

Techno sat on his warm rock and thought positively, at least it would be near his mum and brother in East London but his dreams were rudely interrupted.

Once MM's anger had dispersed, she told them a final fact. The one piece of the jigsaw to be put in place on MD day. 'You all know about level four and what it contains, my little pet...'

'Yes Madame Musseine.' They all chimed in obediently.

'Well, she is there to protect the key. Techno has created a software key, which is the catalyst to take control of the markets. All he has to do is fetch the key and broadcast the elementary binary code to the world's computers.'

Twip Twop was gurgling with delight. Saliva dripped from the sides of his mouth.

'And when Her task is done, we can all eat Calamari for a week.' MM slammed him to the floor with a massive blow from her right fist.

'You forget your table manners Twip Twop. She must be kept alive for later.'

'What's Clamm-are-rorry?' Biceps was confused by the Spanish term.

She sighed. 'Never you mind Biceps, focus on shooting people and blowing up things.'

He smiled, he preferred it that way. Thinking was too hard. It hurt his head thinking what to have for dinner but pointing a bazooka was child's play. A child in his mind, he was truly to be pitied.

'Techno must fetch the SD card with the key code, twenty minutes before noon on MD day. The timing is exact, when all the major world markets are available for my attack. Then it will roll around the world like an electronic tsunami.' She cackled with maniacal laughter. '50 per cent of all transactions will be credited to my bank accounts as the markets start to

plunge. A futures hedge fund created and manipulated by a few hundred children. How brilliant am I?’ No one spoke and she glared around. ‘I said, how brilliant am I?’

‘Brilliant,’ ‘yes so brilliant MM’, the congratulations poured out of Techno, Biceps and Twip Twop’s mouths as quickly as possible.

‘What happens if Techno is ill, you know, like he has got a cold or something?’ Biceps was a complete moron.

‘You stupid idiot, if only you weren’t my...’ she stopped herself. ‘Any SD card that contains the secret encryption codes to start the real “world domination” game must have been created.’

Techno proudly advised the others. ‘But I designed it so I know the codes without the SD card.’

MM looked mockingly across at her Techno. ‘You fool. You think I would only have one software geek in my team. Everything you have done has been checked and double-checked by another who lives in America. That way, no one can double cross me.’ Techno was shocked. He was used and abused but still she distrusted him. It made him feel worthless and it amplified the growing discontent he had felt over the last year.

MM bathed in the moonlight, she was always more alert as it approached midnight, the witching hour. ‘So my little “henchies” we are so close now, yes so close.’ She stretched her arms towards the moon. ‘First the world and then the universe. If I own half the world’s resources I will explore the galaxy. The poor can go hungry, it’s natural selection at its best after all and the rich, those in my gang can possess the Moon and Mars.’ Techno stood directly in front of her with his head bowed. MM’s monstrous shape blotted out the moon.

She resembled a giant bat with moonbeams radiating from around her, a black angel of death.

He shuddered.

Twip Twop reminded her of the final part of the jigsaw that the others hadn't been told about.

'And do you remember my little kidnapping assignment?'

'Of course I do fool. I was leaving it until we all went below to sleep our nervous little nightmares.' She cackled again, it was a horrible sound at 12.30 am with a full moon and evil resident living in the volcano beneath them. 'You must leave tomorrow my albino. The helicopter will take you north to the International airport at Nairobi and then direct to London.'

Techno queried immediately. 'London? Why London?' It was a place dear to his heart, his old life.

'Because my Techno, I think we need the company of your mother here in Tanzania.'

He gulped. 'But...why? Why my mother after all these years of never seeing her?'

'Why, why, why – you are always questioning my motives. All you need to know is that it is part of my cunning plan. That is all you need to know.' The conversation was ended, she would brook no further interference. As Techno walked away towards the Landrover, his first thoughts were for his brother. What might happen to him, if his mum were 1000s of kilometres away. He could be no more than 14 years old.

When they were back in the volcano and heading to their separate sleeping quarters, it was only Biceps who accompanied MM.

She turned to him. 'Keep an eye on Techno. If he knew my real reasons for the kidnap, he might stop working for us.' Biceps emitted a grunt and stared menacingly at the thin

retreating back with a shock of red hair. Biceps had never liked Techno. He was too clever by half. If he could hurt him, it would be an act of enormous pleasure.

Chapter 6

Daggers without cloaks

24 hours is only 1440 minutes, but if you maximise the time by not sleeping, that effectively increases it by 440 minutes. No one from the MI6 team in Somerset House had slept, nor in the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square, where a CIA team had also been wide-awake. So a lot can be achieved by the brightest brains in the Intelligence Services, even in such short a time. Each operative had a specific task.

Sybil, MI6's head of counter-intelligence had contacted her counterparts as far afield as the DCRI, The Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur in Paris, France to the Kempeitai in Tokyo, Japan. Agents of the greatest Intelligence Services across the globe had been asked two specific questions. 'Who in their country, had been buying large numbers of computer servers or associated hardware like UPS's – Uninterrupted Power Supplies and could the purchases be linked together on the national level? Her team then took this data and merged it on an international level to find the source of the purchases.

Matthews took a more physical approach. He asked each British double agent working within numerous foreign governments to investigate who had been recruiting some muscle. 'How many men, for what job and how were they were being armed?' This was extremely dangerous in case the agent's cover was blown but the PM had sanctioned action at all costs. It was only later that the unexplained deaths of two double agents were attributed to this specific investigation.

Smith, the MI6 moneyman, called in favours from the top financial experts in the major markets of the world. The CAC in France, The DAX in Germany and fifty others. They were all asked the same questions. 'Could they explain the blips in the Share and Money markets

on the four specific days identified by the CIA's analysis and were these blips accidental or contrived? The subsidiary question was obvious. If the latter...was it deliberate?'

Morrison, the agent with languages, was thinking laterally. International terrorism crossed borders and the most common languages in the world are English, closely followed by Mandarin - Chinese. He set up a trawl of known websites, which were linked to terrorism, and asked his team to report on any instances, in both languages, for the use of three words linked in any format. "Finance, stability and computer."

Brett had gone back to Grosvenor House and created a shadow team to ask exactly the same questions as the MI6 operatives but in order to widen the search, the shadows had asked those governments not contacted by the Brits. This was a trickier task as the CIA had to talk to the smaller countries, leaving the bigger ones to MI6. These smaller countries bordered on anarchy and revolution with unstable finances and dodgy dictators. However, politicians in such countries were more open to bribes to extract secrets and the CIA spent \$10 million in 24 hours. That showed how important they considered the matter. It was the same amount given by Facebook in January 2012 to small American businesses as free Facebook advertising in the form of ad credits. Facebook had been trying to boost jobs and promote themselves, the CIA were trying to find people without jobs and were equally happy to promote their interests worldwide.

Wolf did only what Wolf would do as Wolf was unique. Firstly, he went to the local multiplex cinema to watch Transformers seven – "*Departure of the machines*". He loved every minute of the film and sat smiling in the dark, with with his full fat coke and salted popcorn. He then went home to bed and slept soundly until lunchtime the next day before wandering lethargically back into the office at 4 pm. This gave him exactly half the time to find something pertinent to the case. But that was how Wolf worked. By switching his mind off,

by indulging in pleasure, he allowed it to think without any thinking! It was a clever move adopted by only a few clever people, because 90 per cent of human decision-making and thoughts surrounding those decisions occur deep within the subconscious.

He sat down in front of the three computer screens on his desk and logged into the central systems three times to give him three sessions running in parallel. Then he brought up the search index for SPAM on each screen. His latest software allowed all three SPAM programs to integrate in a giant neural network. Three versions of a problem were input and the three sets of answers would be cross-referenced. He input the three questions and then went home to sleep some more as the Cray computers in the basement of Somerset house did their work.

The questions were:

Number one machine – The application linking the most people on the internet on December 14th, 2012. This was when blip one occurred in the world markets.

Number two machine – The application linking the most people on the internet January 6th, 2013. This was the blip two date.

Number three machine – The World Wide Web application that linked the most people on these two days based on searches by all the major search engines i.e. yahoo.com, bing.com, ask.com, google.com, and finally dogpile.com.

In effect, Wolf had created a massive search across the two blip dates and all the major search engines involved in a neural link between all three SPAM searches. It was so complicated, only Wolf could have entered the code, devised the programs and thought of the questions.

At 2 am in the morning, he came back to his desk and scribbled a few notes in his scrawled writing on a yellow postit note. He didn't work hard, he thought hard, and the answers were astonishing even for Wolf.

* * *

J was already sat in the meeting room at 3.50 am. He had poured himself a black coffee, and hoped the caffeine would stimulate his tired brain. He was still in his black dinner suit with a white shirt and black bow tie as he had come straight back to the office from The Palace. The Queen had hosted a reception for the Emperor of Japan and all of the London heads of Intelligence from the countries of the world had been present. They were all classed as attaches at the various embassies spread across London but everyone knew they were the top spies. J had carefully sounded out each one to make sure there was full cooperation for his team in their quest. There was no dissent as global terrorism affected all of their countries. This was an unprecedented event and he was pleased with their enthusiastic response. Even the Iranians wanted to help. The last person he spoke to was Culver who was the head of the CIA in London. They had known each other for many years but contact had always been restricted to warning each other off a particular project when either of the secret services had stepped on each other's toes. This time both men pledged to be 100 per cent transparent in everything appertaining to newly named "Project Conman". The "special relationship" between the Brits and Yanks was working again after years of insults between the two countries.

The ElectronicA team started to assemble in the operations meeting room. J watched their faces, looking for a sign of hope but all he saw was fatigue and frustration and then Wolf bounced into the room as fresh as a daisy. He was shaved and showered, his eyes were bright and alert and his clean clothes didn't need the Lynx "I am the one" spray to hide any hidden smells. J smiled inwardly. The kid was an exceptional operative and he thanked God his friend in Manchester had pushed the reprobate his way.

Leaning forward, J placed his hands flat on the table. ‘Sybil, if you would like to update us first please?’

She coughed nervously before opening her folder to a single summary sheet.

‘I won’t bore anyone with the details but please know that my summary has been verified by two other agencies apart from my opposite number in Brett’s team.’ She paused and looked around for effect. ‘We found no national or international links, no patterns on purchases of computer servers or UPS’s over the last three years. Absolutely nothing gentlemen.’

The team were horrified, surely it must be a mistake. She could see their doubts. ‘But we didn’t stop there, although we need more time sir.’ She looked around at the quiet faces.

‘When you make a server, there is one key component, namely the mother board. And, when you make your own servers you want a common type of mother board.’ Now she smiled.

‘There was no national pattern but when we looked at all purchases of the Intel 666 RX extra chipset we found an International pattern. Odd orders in fifty countries of the world by 150 purchasers came back to a single global enterprise. “Handblack Inc” based in Miami, Florida.’

Brett gave the answer they were all looking for. ‘Even this business was daisy-chained through other international businesses but the ultimate owner is Madame Musseine, the ex mafia queen in Marseille who went underground ten years ago. The bad news is we can’t physically find her. We know her bank accounts, we know her businesses, but everything is controlled by a bean counter,’ he corrected himself, ‘an accountant as you say here.’

It was Matthews turn to add another piece of the jigsaw. ‘But we do have two alternatives where she may be hiding. Our double agents have pinpointed Japan and Tanzania as countries of extreme activity, which has been detected by the intelligence agencies of many other countries. Arms shipments that were stolen or bought have disappeared or been transhipped

in Tokyo, Japan and Dar Es Salaam, the major port of Tanzania. Top mercenaries from around the world have heard rumours about the assembly of a deadly task force.’ Matthews nodded at Brett to chip in.

‘Then we got real lucky. The Chinese had placed a spy in the Japanese Intelligence service, the Kempeitai, to monitor their nuclear program and hopefully steal some technological secrets about nuclear fusion.’

J shook his head as he commented, ‘but nuclear fusion is theoretical Smart.’

‘Not anymore sir. The Japanese have cracked the problem of controlling the mini nuclear explosion by spreading it out around the ten kilometre circumference of an underground torus.’

J queried. ‘A torus?’

‘Yes sir, like CERN in Switzerland, a set of magnets every 50 metres in a giant particle accelerator, except in the Japs case, they use it to decelerate the outplosion of nuclear fusion.’

Brett sat back smugly.

J clapped his hands together in mock appreciation as he spoke. ‘Bravo for the Japanese, it could change humanity. Or it could be the deadliest weapon ever developed. How ironic after Hiroshima.’ He sighed heavily, it was 5 am after all. ‘But this is all to the credit of the CIA. I hazard a guess that you “found” this spy in Beijing and persuaded him to join you in the States?’

‘Yes sir, he was turned very easily after we had pointed out that his father had been imprisoned and tortured to death by the Chinese government following the Tiananmen Square uprising.’

J spoke again. ‘Back to the plot Smart. What else did the Chinese spy tell the CIA?’

‘Well after we promised the second million dollars, he told us that small numbers of Japanese ninja used extensively by the Kempeitai for “black ops” had gone walk about.’

Matthews rejoined the conversation. ““Walk about”, meaning definitely left Japan. So now we know all about the Japanese link, it must by default leave Madame Musseine somewhere in deepest Africa.’

Brett added. ‘Doing god knows what.’

Morrison confirmed the news. ‘You don’t need to ask God, Smart. Our trawl of dubious terrorist linked websites for the keywords “finance, stability and computer” gave us two hits. One in English and one in Mandarin. Both were vague and unsubstantiated actions that have taken place in the last two years in Northern Tanzania and Dar Es Salaam.

The room was silent for a few minutes. Everyone waited expectantly for J to speak as the chairman. ‘Claypole came with me to the Palace earlier to talk to a few economists. He has confirmed that at least four other G8 members think the blips were deliberate and contrived. Like us 24 hours ago, they know nothing, but have committed to help us in any way we need. That leaves us with one fresh, confident young man at the end of the table who isn’t paying attention.’ J banged hard on the table with the flat of his hand. ‘Wolf, would you kindly turn off your IPod and tell us why you are so cocky?’

‘Sorry J, I did listen to what the others said.’ J sighed but didn’t complain, he thought he knew the boy was going to come up trumps. ‘So a lady called Madame Musseine might be in Africa with a load of computers. She probably has a small and highly trained army with the latest weaponry from around the world except from the Brit’s and the Yank’s as we refuse to sell our technology. Is that correct?’ Everyone around the table nodded yes. ‘We also know that they want to deflate the shares and money markets and must have a motive. Correct?’ They all nodded again. He stood and went to the front of the meeting room to lower the LG

screen. Picking up the wire-free keyboard from the top of the drinks cabinet, he wandered slowly back to his chair. Wolf tapped a few dozen keys and within seconds his three questions appeared on the giant TV.

He commented on the images as they were presented. 'I am now in the heart of SPAM. The neural network program has answered my three questions together and also in isolation. That is a first, lady and gentlemen! Usually we have single answers to solitary questions direct from SPAM. These are the answers.' The screen flickered.

'One – The application linking the most people on the internet December 14th, 2012 was Facebook.

Two – The application linking the most people on the internet January 6th, 2013 was Facebook.' He looked at the attentive audience. 'And please don't tell me that is impossible, that a social networking site cannot affect commercial operations in the world's financial markets because I do know that!' He looked around defiantly before continuing.

'Three – The application linking the most people on the top search engines, namely yahoo.com, bing.com, ask.com, google.com, and dogpile.com was Facebook.'

He fell silent allowing J to ask the obvious question. 'And the neural network answer linking all three SPAM results?'

Wolf had an ironic smile on his handsome face. 'I came in at 2 am and saw the three results and thought – no way, that is impossible. So I tweaked the neural network program to review all social networking sites from Friends Reunited and Wordpress to Tumblr and Blogger. The result was astonishing...it identified an App on Facebook called "world domination".' At least three mouths gaped in shock or possibly admiration. 'Yes, a mere game ladies and gentlemen. A social networking game that is played by hundreds of thousands of children age 9 to 16 years old, across every country in the world.'

Brett threw his tired head into his hands and rubbed his eyes before he wearily replied. 'I can't believe that anyone could be so clever. A game, open to everyone on Facebook, that is hiding the biggest hacking scandal in IS history. I really need to get some sleep.'

J stood up. 'So now you have the strategic answers. We know their objective – at some time they will attack the world markets and make them plummet. No doubt they will hedge the futures markets and take billions of pounds in profit as the markets fall. Then they control a proportion of every asset, in every country around the entire globe.'

He paused and continued in a grave tone. 'This is the cleverest and most diabolical plot ever conceived in the history of terrorism.' He said this more to himself than the others, who were sat speechless in the darkened room. 'Claypole, when would be the best time for them to attack the markets?'

'Late September would be my guess. The markets start to function post the summer blues. The political conferences are out of the way and The American President will be trying for re-election. It's a prime time, one serious coordinated blip, one e-commerce attack and the world stock and money markets will experience hell on earth.'

J asked for a guess. 'What do you think would be the maximum percentage fall in a single day?'

Claypole rubbed his chin thoughtfully. '40 to 60 per cent. By the end of the day, banks would start to fold and the gold reserves of the G8 countries won't be enough to guarantee the key currencies like the dollar and euro. They would have to inject cash they don't have into the markets to stabilise the situation. As I said sir, it would be hell on earth – a complete meltdown.'

J stood up and leaned forward on the table. 'In that case, we have a maximum of three months to stop this happening. Stand your teams down and give them two days holiday. They

need to be fresh when you reconvene because you have to put the details into project Conman. By the end of August, I want to know everything about Madame Musseine and her ambitious plan. Goodnight.' He walked out of the door to telephone the PM. It was 5 am.

Brett followed Wolf down the corridor towards the exit from Somerset House. He clasped the younger man's muscular shoulder as they reached the door.

'Thank you Wolf. I never judge a man by what he looks like, I judge him by what he does and this morning, I sure am impressed.' Brett turned to stroll ten metres to the black Chrysler Jeep with the waiting driver. Now it was up to Wolf to cement their relationship. The two men would be working together to tackle the potential cyber attack and at some stage, lives would depend on their leadership.

* * *

Throughout a glorious August, Kate, Jack, Timmo and Roger gradually regained their freedom. The Place was forgotten by parents concentrating on work and summer childcare arrangements and in the case of the dad's, also on the cricket. England beat the Aussies to retain The Ashes for the third time in a row and maintain their number one spot in the world rankings. The Christleton village team struggled along at the bottom of the league, watched by the four friends each Sunday that the team were playing at home. The children built dams across the stream behind Roger's house to create deep pools, where they could strip to their underpants and dive in. Kate always left her T-shirt on, as she blossomed into womanhood but the boys were still oblivious to her, preferring to look at the freshwater crayfish that blended into the crystal-clear water. The four friends were forever climbing ropes, making

tree houses and racing their BMX's around tracks they had created in the woods above Jack's house. Part of the fun was to modify their bikes in Jonathan's shed, using parts from a variety of old bikes found at the council dump in Waverton.

It was a summer of outdoor fun, but every evening all four of them would enter the "world domination" game and try to outdo each other. Gradually, their scores increased and they were all classified within the top 100 players out of the 750,000 playing across the world.

* * *

As the children innocently played, oblivious to the terrorists controlling the game, the teams of Intelligence officers followed up every clue about Madame Musseine and her potential cyber attack.

At 10 am on Tuesday 27th August, 2013, the Conman project team reconvened in the operation meeting room at Somerset House.

Brett was having an animated conversation with Wolf. 'How do we trace her then? No one else seems to have an idea after a month's search.'

Wolf knew what the problem entailed. 'I can't access the true location of her IP address and hence her computers. They must have a technical whizz kid on board because their IP masking software led me across five continents from server to server and then repeated itself from the start point. "A forever wrapper" in our terms.'

Brett was being over assertive. He knew time was running out. 'But we have to know where her base is Wolf.'

‘I understand that Brett, we all understand the need.’ Wolf put his hands behind his head and leaned back on his seat with his eyes closed. ‘The only way, would be to pretend that I’m a player within their game.’

‘Just do it Wolf.’ Wolf opened his eyes and wagged a solitary finger at his new colleague.

‘I can’t! They have closed off all access to the game now. Only children who have been playing over the last year can continue to play and there also seems to be some process of selection happening, i.e. only the best players in the world are still active.’ The team sighed in unison; they were fighting a hidden enemy who could not be attacked. ‘Look everyone, the terrorists have been extremely clever in harnessing their resources but...’ they all looked at Wolf in anticipation, ‘I suppose I could hack their computers if I put a tracker within three of the top player’s PC’s.’

Brett asked immediately. ‘What’s a tracker and why three?’

‘It’s hardware built to my own design. I have to insert it on the motherboard of the players’ PC’s. It inserts a hard-wired tracking code as they play the game e.g. an extra asset like a battle cruiser and then the terrorists won’t notice it and hopefully ignore my tracker. If it’s successful on all three PC’s, I will receive three return messages from the gamemaster and then I can triangulate their true IP address.’

Brett smiled. ‘And bingo, I believe you Brits say. We have our man and their location.’

Wolf smiled at his new friend. ‘Or woman, all the rest of the “intell” still suggests it is Madame Musseine, ex the Marseille Mafia. The French Intelligence team, the DCRI have given us ten names of cyber terrorists known to have been active in the last decade. She went “missing” a few years ago but this scam has the hallmarks of her organisation and she seems to own all the shell companies involved.’

‘What is it called?’ J was impatient but it was Brett who replied.

‘The Black Hand Gang, BHG for short.’

‘Profile?’ J tapped his hands on the table as he waited for a reply.

Sybil looked up. ‘We have nothing apart from rumours sir. An occasional arms purchase such as SAM, Surface to Air missiles hijacked from either Chinese or Russian shipments and always no trace afterwards. However, there was one defector six years ago. He had a black hand burned into the palm of his left hand and his little finger had been scorched off.’

‘Had Sybil?’

‘Yes sir. The man was a young Spanish scientist from The University in Madrid, who had majored in computer sciences. He walked into the Spanish Intelligence offices, Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (CNI), at 10 am one morning and demanded to see the head of intelligence as he had vital information. Within five minutes he was lying dead on their reception floor, poisoned by a micro injection made to his left shoulder.’

J stroked his chin. ‘So they were waiting for him outside. A touch on the shoulder as he entered, a tiny prick and a “lo siento” sorry, from the assassin. It means we are talking about a ruthless organisation with a widespread network of deadly operatives.’

She continued. ‘They are all ninja we believe sir. The closed circuit TV cameras in the surrounding streets pinpointed a team of four Japanese based on their size and gait. No faces had been recorded as they had all wore baseball caps and kept their faces averted from known cameras positions. So yes your assumption is correct, they are a sophisticated and deadly team of silent killers.’

Matthews had come into the office. ‘We think we have a positive ID on her location everyone. She disappeared off our radar ten years ago as we all know but now she appears to be holed-up, that is literally holed-up in the depths of Mount Kilimanjaro.’ He pressed the remote control to show an image on the giant TV screen. ‘This is it. The photo was taken two

years ago. It's nearly 6000 metres high and has been dormant since the last eruption 200 years ago.' Further photos ranged across the screen. 'You can see the active fumaroles which we think may be steam from their generation of electricity. We want you to sanction a close approach by the SAS sir. We can sample the vapour with a drone and perform a chemical analysis.'

J was unimpressed by the suggestion. 'That is far too dangerous. Her radar systems would detect anything close-in. Even a drone could be picked up, so my answer is definitely no.' He was tempted to say 'what's happened to your judgement Matthews' but drew back remembering the excessive stress his man was under. None of the team knew about Matthew's daughter's terrible illness.

Brett had a better idea. 'A neutron image was taken by one of our satellites yesterday but the results were fudged. It proved impossible to get a reliable image because the magnetic field is bent out of true. So we used the satellite's magnetometer readings to analyse the zone and found that the flux density around the volcano was reversed.'

J commented. 'Because of the iron rich basalt, thrown up by the volcano over the years?'

'No sir, it has reversed since when we last measured it five years ago.'

Wolf concluded. 'That proves something then. Someone is messing about inside that volcano.'

J stood up and walked around the table assessing the new information. A photograph of Mount Kilimanjaro remained on the screen. He stood adjacent to it and tapped the image.

'We can't attack the volcano directly. Firstly, we have no physical proof she is there, despite the odd Landrover or helicopter flight coming and going. Secondly, the government of Tanzania would be distinctly unhappy. Thirdly, we know she has SAM sites so our aircraft would be at risk and fourthly, she must be deep below the surface. Even a cruise missile can't

fly into very long shafts and I am sure there would be many blast doors.’ He paused, hand on his cheek. ‘What can we do team?’

Sybil clarified the situation. ‘The Government of Tanzania may well be helping Musseine. We are obtaining more information but this appears to be the case. Since the 2010 elections in the country, we thought things had improved but we should remember that it has always been classified as one of the most corrupt governments in the world. The elements are telling. A weak National Assembly and a dictatorial President with no army worth worrying about. The People’s Defence Force has 27000 men, good Soviet weapons and a handful of tanks. Suffice it to say, they have nothing around Mount Kilimanjaro at present. That in itself is strange as historically it was always a training ground for the army. If an SAS unit did go in to determine the setup, I suggest they are best heading north in any exit contingency plan. The border with our friends in Kenya is only 20 kilometres away.’

J reasserted his decision. ‘As I said Sybil, we cannot risk any approach at present. So we must try Wolf’s tracker first. Any other issues from anyone?’

Brett spoke up. ‘Musseine is hacking with a superlative virus, 128 encryption and then some. Only a month ago no one believed that the world’s financial systems could be hacked en-masse. No one believed that someone could assemble so much computer power and the knowledge to use it. Your Home Secretary and Prime Minister spoke to The President again this morning to reaffirm the urgent need to cooperate and get a result. Remember, if this country’s finances suffer another blow, Great Britain will no longer be great. Not only will you lose your job you will also lose your pension.’

J was abrupt. ‘Your point is?’

It was Wolf who responded. ‘Brett’s point is dastardly. Musseine’s game is to entice the top 100 children to the volcano to hack the world’s financial systems. Therefore MI6 must recruit

the best gamers in England, on the assumption that they will shortly be invited to join her team in the volcano.' He distributed a list of names. 'We only need one spy on the inside and these are the best ten gamers in Britain. In fact, the top four are all friends from a little village in Cheshire called Christleton. Therefore, I suggest we send the top five gamers to our SAS training facility at Brecon. That is Jack George, his younger brother Timothy George, Kate Shore, Roger Ponsonby-Smythe and finally Marshall Hines from London. That should cover any eventuality.'

J was appalled. 'You want children to go into the lair of this maniac?'

Brett immediately replied. 'Of course, we have no other alternative.'

* * *

Less than a mile down the road from MI6 headquarters was a privately rented house. The entrance was via a tall black metal gate set in the high wall surrounding the property. It was a red brick Victorian house, in its own grounds and was therefore extremely private. A car would enter or exit the gate each day with two to three Japanese sat inside, each wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. They invariably went to Waitrose and always bought food piled high in three or more trolleys. No one saw MM. She had arrived by stealth gyroscope in the middle of the night. Just to be certain that her flight wasn't detected, Techno had blacked out the whole of The National Grid on the West side of Central London. The only light left on was beamed vertically upwards from the massive garden of the mansion to guide her safely to the landing site.

Techno was watched closely by Biceps and he knew it. There was no chance of escape to see his brother. His mother was already living "in luxury" according to MM in the safety of the

volcano. Each day Techno felt more and more compromised. He had sold his soul to the devil and could do nothing about it. He also realised that the MD plot was being discussed by MM and the others and they deliberately left him out of the discussions. So it was a miserable two weeks for him, living without his laboratories back in Tanzania. At least there, he had the technicians for company. In London, there were just guards who spoke no English.

MM was at the house to complete three objectives:

Number one, Finalise the attack date and business details with her shady accountant who controlled her many companies. Number two, to create a temporary base where she could control MD on the actual day, now set as September 30th. And finally, to observe the English child recruited as her spy. Her geek in America and Twip Twop had made sure the child was in the top 100 players of the “world domination” game and therefore he was certain to be selected by MI6. The problem with Intelligence agencies is that everyone has double agents – agents willing to betray their country, out of belief, or for money. MM was a past master at deceit and was pleased that Twip Twop had devised a double deceit. Matthews, The MI6 agent had a daughter who was dying of cancer. The little girl reputedly had a year to live at the most. The only treatment that would extend her life was in San Francisco, California. At a cost of half a million pounds, it was an impossibility for Matthews to save his three-year-old girl. But MM’s pet albino had befriended him in the local park one Sunday morning in early August. Matthews was watching his daughter play on the swings and was in an emotional turmoil. J had given him compassionate leave to see more of his little girl and therefore he usually worked from home and for no more than 20 hours a week. It was no justification for a professional agent. But he had been persuaded to allow the albino access to his computer twice a day and never when Matthews was about. That assuaged his conscience. Whatever the albino had been doing could therefore be denied, but it was still treachery of the highest

order. It meant Madame Musseine knew every move to be made against her by MI6 and the CIA.

Chapter 7

Somewhere near The Brecon Beacons

J had decided that Brett and Wolf should travel to Cheshire the following evening and meet the parents and grandma of the top four British players. However, as the fifth player was in the care of social workers because he had no parents, it was deemed satisfactory to tell him what was going on once all the children had arrived at the SAS training camp near Brecon. This was an ultra secret satellite to the main base in Hereford, located in the shadow of The Black Mountains and The Brecon Beacons of South Wales. The general public thought everything happened at Hereford further to the north, but the £200 million investment by the last labour government, had allowed the SAS chiefs to secretly relocate to the new and more sophisticated base. The core of any training remained the same – physical endurance and mental strength in the wildest places on earth, man against nature. But the new establishment had taken this three stages into the future, ensuring the SAS would remain the best in the world.

Brett and Wolf pulled up outside of the Ponsonby-Smythe's mansion in Wolf's silver Range Rover at precisely eleven pm. The local police had asked both sets of parents and grandma to be available from 10 pm and to keep the appointment confidential. It also meant that all of the children would be in bed and asleep, two policewomen were sat in The George's and grandma's houses as babysitters. Therefore, the circumstances and unknown agenda of the meeting meant that all of the parents were in a high state of anxiety. All they knew were that representatives of Her Majesty's government wanted to speak to them about the children. Grandma was asleep in the corner, she wasn't anxious at all, which was very surprising. She

had also drunk a couple of sherries and now she was snoring loudly and oblivious to the others who were arguing about nothing.

Maria was pontificating. 'Eton is such a good school Jennifer. They sit the international baccalaureate you know. It is so much harder than GCSE's, much more of a test.' The tone and the subject made Jennifer seethe inside. The snobbishness of Roger's mother was particularly offending that evening, probably because she was so worried about why they had all been pulled together. What could the four children have been up to now?

She bit her tongue as she politely responded. 'I'm sorry Maria, any exams are only as good as the child. They all have the same brain power but some choose not to use it.' This response was sufficient to keep Maria quiet and gave Rupert an opportunity to chide Jonathan about their recent cricket match.

'Shame about your six missed catches old boy. If you had managed a 33 per cent success statistic we might have won the game.'

Jonathan had his arms crossed. 'What is a success statistic Rupe?' Rupert hated being called that. 'The flipping ball was wet for god sake's; anyone with steamed-up glasses would have found it hard to make those catches.'

Jennifer looked daggers at her husband to make him tone it down. As they stared at everything in the room except each other, there was a welcome knock at the door and Rupert quickly rose to answer it. He quickly let the visitors in and noted the two police constables standing in the shadows of the garden.

Wolf and Brett walked into the lounge and shook hands with them all. They introduced themselves as Edmunson and Halsall, briefly flicking open their false passes, which declared them to be employees of The Ministry of Defence. Grandma studied Wolf's ID card closely and sniffed as she handed it back. She noted how athletic they both appeared and the smart

cut of their dark blue suits. Once everyone was settled back in the chairs, it was Brett who started to speak.

‘Our government have been monitoring an online gaming scam and unfortunately the four children have all been caught up in it. However, there is absolutely nothing to worry about.’

Grandma wagged a finger at Brett. ‘You are spies aren’t you?’

He was relatively honest with his reply. ‘We represent the nation’s security services Madame.’ His face was expressionless as she replied. ‘We were always taught that when someone says “there is absolutely nothing to worry about” – we should worry.’ Grandma sat back after delivering her words of wisdom. Wolf noted the word taught and wondered what grandma was inferring.

Wolf decided to give them some more details. ‘We have selected your children to receive special Facebook training as they are the best in Britain at a particular game called “world domination”. This is where the potential scams may occur.’

Jonathan was sceptical. ‘So not scams actual. Just scams potential? And what might be the objective of these scams Mr Edmunson?’

Wolf opened his hands in supplication. ‘Simple manipulation of stocks and shares Mr George. A financial scam, to be auctioned sometime in the future and utilising the players of this Facebook game called “world domination”. That’s why we want to work closely with the best players, ones who can be trusted and that is the four friends.’

It was Jonathan again who bluntly replied. ‘Come off it, you should tell us the truth and maybe, just maybe we can understand why you are here. You do know that this is my area of expertise in The City?’

Brett took over from Wolf. 'Mr Edmunson and I can't tell you the whole truth sir as it is covered by the official secrets act. In fact, the truth is totally bizarre sir. If we tell you everything you become a security risk.'

Jonathan was annoyed too. 'Tell us what our children will do over the next three weeks and where they will be.'

Wolf answered. 'We can't tell you where. We can't let you speak to them and the specialist training might help one or more of them on their mission.'

Jonathan laughed loudly. It was a very strained atmosphere and he was nervous for his boys.

'Mission? You make them sound like mini James Bonds.'

'And Jane Bond' said grandma.

Wolf continued. 'We want them to understand all the threats they may experience whilst playing the game for real and to develop a mindset to never give up. But! This will be done in a fun way. As if they were on a PGL holiday.'

Jennifer added. 'Jack will enjoy that,' but Jonathan wanted nothing to do with the faceless men's vague plans.

'Hold on Jennifer, just hold on. I want to know how safe they will be when training and I definitely want to know what they will be doing if selected.'

Rupert and Maria held their heads up high. 'Our Roger can come on the training Mr Edmunson and Mr Halsall and we hope he is the one to go on the mission. We know our son would do anything for God and The Queen.'

Jonathan was on his feet. His wife was pulling at his trouser leg to encourage him to sit down. 'It's easy for you two to say that. We have both Jack and Timmo to consider and Timmo is only 9 years old for god's sake.'

'Duty is duty Jonathan.' Rupert was adamant.

‘Duty or not, Rupe. We are talking about two children who represent our dreams and hopes for the future.’ The rest listened to Jonathan and silently agreed. There was a pregnant pause and the two agents remained quiet. They had been trained to leave a silence, it tempted others to fill it and say more than they should. Two ears and one mouth was the maxim.

Grandma had also remained quiet, she was eyeing up the two officials. She decided the messing about needed to stop. ‘Show me your gun Mr Halsall. I know that is probably a false name.’ He looked across at her and pulled out his Magnum. ‘Thank you, I just wanted to know how serious you were.’

Brett asked quietly. ‘Do you have any questions m’am?’

‘No I don’t. You know why, don’t you?’

‘Yes m’am. You were an agent of the Secret Service in World War II and served four years in France as one of the greatest spies in history.’ Wolf was staring at Brett in disbelief, the yank knew more about the Brits than the Brit. ‘Your records were exemplary and you received The George Cross for bravery. It was for the action on the day your husband was shot by the Gestapo. If I remember the files, you blew up the bridge at Meaux in order to stop the Nazi advance.’

Grandma was nodding, the memories still made her very sad 68 years later. Her eyes were watering as she replied. ‘Yes my boy. So I know what you are and therefore I also know that what you are telling is true and necessarily vague.’ She sighed deeply, this was a difficult decision. ‘I have no hesitation in saying my Kate can help you out. She is a brave girl and I know she will come home safe.’ Everyone wondered how she could know that but there had been rumours in the village about grandma’s predictions. ‘However, I want to know how serious is this matter that takes our children away?’

Wolf turned to them all. 'I can only tell you all that it is a time when the whole world is under threat and your children can save it.' All of them were shocked, but now they realised why they were being asked to allow the impossible. Allowing their children to be used by the government's Intelligence Services.

The George's were in a predicament. How could they now refuse to allow Jack and Timmo to be trained when both their friends had already been volunteered? The world was threatened... Jonathan caved in. 'Okay guys, but we need a liaison officer. Someone to come and chat every couple of days, even if it is only for a cup of tea. We don't need the detail, we just want to know they are all safe or...' he swallowed deeply. There were tears in his eyes. He couldn't say safe or not.

Wolf acknowledged the emotion. 'You have my word Mr George. But now we must leave. At 5 am a bus will collect all the children from here. They don't need to bring anything with them, not even a toothbrush and we will provide suitable clothing at the training centre.' There were nods all round. 'Please help us by telling them three things before they leave.' He slowed his words to make them stick. 'Firstly, their gaming skills might help the world avoid a catastrophe. Secondly, they are going to a training camp like PGL. A place to have fun. Thirdly, tell them you love them and that you are supporting this decision.' Wolf and Brett stood immediately. He walked behind Brett to the lounge door held open by Rupert.

Wolf turned back a final time. 'Please trust my colleague and I. My personal experience of life is without parents and it helps me to understand how you must feel. It also helps me mentor the children over the next few weeks. I promise to do my best for them.' He swivelled on his heel and joined Brett in the Range Rover to head to their hotel in Chester and a welcome four hours sleep. There was no further discussion to be had. The George's and grandma walked home in silence.

At 3.45 am, Kate sat on grandma's rocking chair in the kitchen. There was a single lamp on top of the pine dresser and its light cast eerie shadows.

She spoke to the cat who was cradled in her arms. 'Sometimes, I swear you can read my mind Wispy. Please take care of grandma for me, she is all I have left.' She ruffled the fur on the cat's furry belly as it squirmed on its back and then she placed her on the floor and turned away with tears pouring down her red cheeks. Kate heard grandma coming down the creaky stairs and hastily dried her eyes.

'I see you've been crying Katey? Grandma cuddled her close.

'It's the fear of the unknown.'

'You have nothing to fear my dear. There is no unknown. You and I have our paths which are already set and there is nothing we can do about it.'

Kate thought about the wise words and hugged grandma closer. 'You always know what is going to happen, don't you?'

'Sometimes Kate. In fact most times, if the things are important to you or me. I know that you are doing incredible good for our world and I know that you will return to Wispy and I. That is sufficient knowledge.' Kate picked up her small bag containing a reading book and some make-up and then she and grandma left the cottage hand in hand to walk to Roger's house. There was a full moon and it momentarily emerged through a break in the clouds and bathed everything to make it nearly as light as day. Then it went back behind the dark low clouds that forebode rain.

At the mansion, Licko was sat next to Roger. Licko's dark brown eyes looked extremely sad to Kate as she walked into the lounge and sat beside them both.

She touched Roger's arm and then ruffled Licko's head. 'They say animals sense things.'

'Urm,' he wasn't quite awake.

'Are you Okay Roger?'

'Urm,' She gave up trying to have a conversation as Jack and Timmo waltzed in.

'Hi, isn't it fabtastic, that we are going on an adventure.' Jack was full of excitement.

'Urm,' said Roger.

Jack continued. 'Like on a PGL holiday and even better, training to be spies!' Kate and Roger hadn't appreciated that.

'Spies?' Asked Roger as he suddenly woke up.

'Yes, so we can go on a mission to save the world.' Jack's mum had told her children a lot more than the other parents. As Jack walked animatedly around the room, Timmo curled up on the sofa and closed his eyes, it was very early for a 9 year-old boy. Kate now had her hands to her mouth, shocked by the enormity of it all, whilst Roger was trying to remember the plot of the last James Bond movie he had watched on his iPad.

They heard a squeak of brakes outside and were soon ushered onto an old military bus to sit uncomfortably on thin brown leather seats. The last hugs with their parents had been too quick and the only words said were 'be safe'.

* * *

Wolf had stood by the driver and shook hands with each child as they had climbed aboard. He called them by their surnames alone. Timmo was deemed to be Little George and Jack was just George. They sat quietly and obediently near the front of the bus and were surprised

when Wolf introduced the fifth boy, who was hidden in the shadows on the bench seat at the very rear.

‘My name is Wolf and that’s Hines. He’s also on your training course.’ No words were exchanged between the children and they all lapsed into a reverie as the rickety old bus rolled steadily through the early morning dawn as it started to rain lightly. Marshall Hines had woken from a brief nap as the others had climbed quietly aboard. Since being collected from the children’s home, he had used sleep to drive away his fears. His mother had failed to return from work a month previously and when he had gone to the police all they could do was involve the local Social Services team to ensure he was safe in shelter. No one had told him why he was on the bus, he had guessed that he was being taken to another home.

All the children remained awake and chatted quietly, physically well away from Marshall Hines. He felt left out of everything, shunned by the boys and on occasion stared at by the girl; all he could think about was his mum. He missed her desperately and tears poured down his face in the dark. He glanced down the poorly lit bus towards Kit Kat. She was such a girly girl with a yellow and white checked dress and black pumps. He said ‘god knows’ under his breath for the hundredth time and focussed on the never ending road in front of the driver. He had memorised every road sign since leaving London in case he wanted to run back to his home, but what was the point? By now the council would have re-housed someone into their flat.

‘What does SAS stand for?’ said Timmo, ‘Is it an airline or something?’ Hines listened closely for a clue about his new location.

Jack teased his brother. ‘You dimmo, Timmo. SAS means Sausages And Sauce, that’s the only food you are allowed to eat in the training camp.’

‘Urm! Yummy scrummy, I can’t wait to get there and have breakfast then.’ Replied Timmo the complete dimmo. Jack delighted in misinforming his brother but now he had also confused Marshall as well. Roger was looking out of the window and being serious compared to The George brothers. It was pouring with rain by now as they headed southwards on the M50 motorway but the sun occasionally glinted through gaps in the clouds. The spray from passing lorries meant he could barely see the rolling green hills of Herefordshire through the condensation running down the glass of the old army bus.

He corrected his best friend. ‘SAS stands for Special Air Service as you well know Jack. One of the top anti-terrorist units in the world, renowned for their work in Afghanistan for example, when they took out the Taliban HQ in Kandahar. Their motto of course is ‘who dares wins.’

Wolf turned to face them all from his vantage point by the driver, by the door. A place to be defended or a place to prevent escape. There were no other doors on the bus.

‘Heads down everyone! I don’t want any guards or passing soldiers catching site of you inside the camp.’ The five children dutifully squatted behind the seats and stayed in position until ordered to rise by Wolf as the bus pulled up ten minutes later. ‘Out! Shore, you go first.’

‘Why?’ She was feeling peeved by Wolf’s attitude, she didn’t like the use of surnames to address colleagues and certainly not friends. ‘What’s your name then?’

‘Firstly you get out because I told you so, it was an order.’ He wavered slightly, it was a child after all, ‘and secondly because you are a lady and lady’s should always go first.’ As an afterthought he added, ‘My real name is unimportant, everyone just calls me Wolf.’

‘Thank you Mr Wolf’ and she flounced past him and walked down the metal steps. As Kate stepped onto the pavement, she noticed Sergeant Sargent standing on the wet pavement,

thankfully the rain had stopped. He was standing to attention with a large burnished stick in his right hand. He cocked his left eye and stared at her before barking an order.

‘Line up next to me please Miss.’ She shuffled next to him and waited for the others to alight. With the boys he was less polite. Each time he barked out an order, ‘come here boy’ or ‘not that way George’, the commands made her jump each time. ‘Hoy! You!’ He stopped Hines walking the wrong way. ‘Now then, now then,’ he prevented Roger from crossing the road as a silver Range Rover pulled up. Eventually the five children were lined up alongside him and the two adults joined them.

‘My name is Brett. This is Sergeant Sargent and we will be looking after you. You have obviously met Wolf who is on the team.’ He gave them a moment to stare around at their surroundings.

Jack was the first to comment. ‘This training camp looks more like a caravan park. A lovely place, just like when we went on our “hols” in Wales last year.’ Wolf looked around sharply and stopped himself asking the boy to remain quiet. He was struggling with the fact they were children being asked to perform an adult’s job. Sergeant Sargent forced the line of children to bundle closer to one another. He too had forgotten they were just kids and not SAS recruits.

Wolf used a softer tone. ‘You are very much mistaken George. This is the holiday from hell. Do you understand?’

Jack gulped. ‘Yes sir.’

Wolf’s reply was still quite hard and cold. ‘Yes Wolf.’ He demanded their respect in the most insignificant of ways.

‘Yes Wolf.’ But Jack wasn’t afraid of him. He was being polite.

Brett stepped in. 'This is an SAS training facility where you will be taught many exciting new skills. Each day you will receive specialist anti-terrorist training. For example, using aerial ropeways, shooting machine guns, firing bazookas, driving tanks and fast boats etc. Maybe learning to fly and to parachute but only in case of an emergency.'

'Wow!' Timmo had finally woken up. 'Tanks! How fabtastic.'

'Follow me!' Wolf led the way into a large cream static caravan labelled St. Davids and turned sharply right towards the rear double bedroom. They stopped again whilst he lifted the foot of the double bed. Instead of stored duvets and sheets, they were astonished to see a wide set of steps lit by a single fluorescent light. 'Come!' He was a man of few words as he stepped down without looking back. Sergeant Sargent followed up the rear to ensure no one "got lost". 'Sergeant, lower the bed behind you.'

'Yes sir.'

At the foot of a dozen steps was a passageway. The walls and ceiling were painted with white gloss and the floor was in a dark matt green. It was immaculate without a smudge of dirt. After walking a few hundred metres they came to a metal blast door with a large round handle that Wolf spun anti-clockwise to unlock. It swung open slowly and ponderously to reveal a hive of activity.

He stood in front of the group. 'You train here and sleep upstairs, okay?'

'Okay' came a mumbled reply in unison as the five children stared transfixed by the new underground facilities of the SAS. To their right was a gym and beyond it a boxing ring where two soldiers were sparring. To the left were more than 100 men and women sat in front of a dazzling array of computer screens. Some displays showed aerial shots of Afghanistan taken by the stealth drones circling high above the Taliban camps. The small aeroplanes were controlled by the joysticks mounted in front of the operatives, at a distance of 6000

kilometres from the drone. Other screens monitored SAS soldiers vital symptoms such as heartbeat and brain activity as they mounted an attack against a terrorist base in Southern Yemen. There was too much to take in, but at the centre of the facility was a training operation that excited Jack and Timmo and made Roger and Kit Kat swoon with fright. Soldiers were leaping off a 100 metre high tower with a bungee cord fastened to their ankles. Free falling with their arms outstretched, they reached the limits of the rubber cord and stopped within a few centimetres of the floor before bouncing back. This gave them time to grab the blissfully unaware sheep that was bleating plaintively beneath them. As the soldier jerked upwards, the sheep was clasped safely in his arms but was jerking about trying to free itself from his strong arms.

Jack spoke first. 'How cool is that! But why the woolly whiner?'

Wolf explained. 'A large Welsh sheep, preferably four years old, gives the best feel for a real human being. It struggles and shouts and so do our captives sometimes,' he glanced at Kit Kat who was deathly white, 'and women must also learn "the snatch" as we call it.'

'Because?' she said.

'Because whether from a helicopter or a bridge we may need to snatch back hostages or snatch the baddies. Okay?' She didn't reply, the concept had made her stricken with fear.

'Right, let's get some breakfast. How about it Sergeant?'

'Yes sir!' The sergeant spoke in a loud bellow, he had no volume control. Ironically, the only food left in the soldiers Mess were sausages and brown or tomato sauce as jokingly predicted by Jack.

Marshall sat next to the other children for the first time and chatted. It was Kate who asked him where he lived, did he like the "world domination" game and what did he think of the training camp. He gave her short answers but at least he and they felt more of a group,

especially when the ice was broken by Timmo. The dimmo squeezed the ketchup bottle towards his brother and the top dropped off, squirting the red mess over nearly everyone. They all laughed together and that was a start.

* * *

After breakfast, they assembled under a large oak tree in the centre of the caravan park. There could be no prying eyes as the high fence extended all around the camp and was a minimum of 3 kilometres distant. The fence line also had fast growing conifers planted outside of it and all the SAS trainees living in the outermost caravans wore casual holiday clothes. It was a perfect ruse. Underneath the oak tree was a 20 metre square mat.

The sergeant started their training. 'Right you lot, can any of you scrap?'

'Scrap?' said Roger, 'whatever do you mean by that?'

'I mean fight my little Toff. Have any of you had a fight at school and more importantly did you win?'

Jack owned up to a rumble with the local bully but admitted it was harmless rolling around on the floor until they both got tired.

The sergeant gave his first piece of advice. 'That's a good place to start. Number one – stay on your feet and face the opponent. Number two – circle around him whilst poised on the balls of your feet so that you are ready to attack or defend.'

'Number three' said Jack, 'pull out a gun and shoot the baddie.'

Sergeant Sargent wagged an admonishing finger at him. 'No, young man. Definitely not that. Once you pull a gun, we say that you must use it.' They waited expectantly for him to continue. 'Have you ever killed anyone George?' Jack stood sheepishly. 'Precisely boy. It is

not a trivial thing, nothing like these stupid computer games make out. Killing someone is the last resort. Okay?’

‘Yes sergeant.’ All five were learning how serious the training was going to be.

Marshall spoke up. He had a timid voice, he was a weak looking boy for his age and his voice complimented his demeanour and physique. ‘I’ve seen a boy stabbed in the stairwells under our flat in London. It was a gang that did it and so the boy told his brother and his brother’s gang had guns.’

The sergeant quietly asked him ‘was there any trouble?’

‘No sir, the police came just in time and separated the gangs but two youths were put in jail “cos” they were over 18.’

‘That is what should happen in an open and normal society but where you may end up, well it could be dog eat dog and laws and the police don’t apply.’ Wolf passed out five large kit bags and told the children to open them. Inside were an assortment of clothes, they appeared to be cycling trousers and full sleeved T-shirts. The clothes were black and made of a fine mesh that had a spring to it when they put the clothes on over their underpants. Kit Kat had disappeared behind the tree to maintain her privacy but soon they were all dressed with the new tight fitting clothes lying beneath their jeans and shirts.

Wolf stood with his arms crossed. ‘The clothes I have given you are in fact a specialist suit. The latest in body armour that improves your strength 100 per cent. Think about it. A child of 12 becomes a killing machine as if aged 20.’

‘Cool,’ said Jack.

‘Fabtastic,’ said Timmo.

‘And very tight,’ said Roger.

‘But definitely not my style and not my colour,’ said Kit Kat.

‘Watch and learn.’ Wolf sidled around the sergeant and taunted him. ‘So you’ve been an SAS trainer for 30 years. That makes you a bit old for this sort of thing.’ Wolf and the sergeant were smiling at each other, they had known each other for many years.

The sergeant moved in a circle keeping his distance from Wolf. His voice was deadly quiet. ‘You see children, lesson one is to upset or distract the opposition so that they make a mistake.’ Wolf rushed him and within two seconds, it was Wolf who was flat on his back on the mat, with the sergeant’s hand above his windpipe and poised ready to make a fateful chop. ‘Do you really remember any of your training Wolf? Maybe working in the office has made you a little soft!’ He reached out a hand and helped the agent to stand.

Wolf brushed himself down. ‘I remember you are the best there is...and that is why the children are here with you.’

The sergeant turned to the children and said ominously ‘but even if any of you can beat me, it still means there is someone better than you out there.’

Roger spoke. ‘Your point is?’ This was one of his dad’s favourite expressions.

Kate interrupted, ‘his point is very simple Roger, don’t be too cocky.’

‘That is correct young lady and think harder than you have ever thought before by asking The Reason.’

Kate queried. ‘What’s The Reason sergeant?’

‘Some call it God or Allah, The Buddha, whatever god - it is your choice kids. I’m an atheist but I believe in a higher being, hence The Reason’. They were all silent for a minute staring at the leaves on the trees above them as they rustled in the early autumn wind. Odd colours, brown and yellow but all crinkled as they floated to the ground. They could feel The Reason, that something that is good that you can never understand. They just hoped it would be there when they needed it.

The rest of the morning was spent learning to disable an opponent. The children got used to the power suits, which gave them a sense of security. Wolf and the sergeant showed the children some basic tricks to use in a fight and this particularly impressed Roger. Unlike Jack who had been Victor Ludorum at school, he had always felt physically inadequate. However, as he leaped 1.5 metres into the air to kick Wolf in the chest, he was elated. The power suits were an amazing invention and he quietly pledged to take it home with him, not realising he would need to wear it on the mission.

* * *

The boys were starting to like each other. It was late that afternoon and everyone was excited but getting very tired. Sergeant Sargent was 100 metres away at the end of the aerial ropeway and Wolf was on the platform above their heads. He was securing Kit Kat's harness to the pulley that she would hold onto as she was sliding down the taut rope to where the sergeant stood.

Jack was pushing Roger against Timmo and Timmo was pushing Marshall against Roger. Jack mimicked the sergeant as best he could but he wasn't beefy, broad and 45 years old. 'Come at me without your glasses on you Toff. Come on splodger, if you want, you can take your glasses off and fight me like a man.' Roger pushed Jack and missed, falling over in the process.

Roger sat on his bottom on the soft grass. 'I realised after luncheon' he said, 'that the sarge probably eats his baked beans with the can included. In fact, I bet at breakfast he can manage four shredded wheat.'

Marshall took the Mickey. 'Luncheon? One doesn't eat beans at luncheon as it would make one frat.' All the boys laughed as a scream was heard from above them. Kate had closed her eyes and launched herself away from the platform and into the air suspended 5 metres off the ground. Now the scream faded as she swooped between the trees before hitting the tyre that stopped the pulley with a jerk. She opened her eyes and smiled at the sergeant stood below her.

'See my dear, nothing to it!' He climbed the rungs of the ladder at the side of the anchor tree and slowly let her down. Immediately she was safe he signalled up to Wolf by criss-crossing his arms. Wolf started to pull in the lazy rope on the pulley and it gradually moved back to the start point.

Wolf shouted to the boys below him. 'George, you're next.'

'Watch this boys.' Jack climbed to the platform and his harness was fastened to the pulley.

'Go' said Wolf and Jack threw himself backwards with his arms and legs apart in a star shape. He hurtled down the ropeway whilst admiring the passing trees as he spun around and around.

'Cool' was his only comment when he reached the bottom.

'Cocky' was the sergeant's reply and then he noticed Kit Kat's adoring eyes focussed on her Jack. 'Young love' he thought and signalled to Wolf to retrieve the pulley.

Marshall and Roger both did their best to emulate their hero Jack. As Roger hit the tyre stop on the anchor tree, his glasses flew off and disappeared into the undergrowth. It took half an hour to find them, even with everyone carefully searching to avoid stepping on and breaking them.

Which left the youngest until last. Timmo was nervous as he climbed onto the platform.

'Don't worry' said Wolf, 'You can't fall off, the safety harness will hold you.' Timmo plucked at the harness to make sure it was tight enough. He was white and felt sick. Partly it was fatigue at the end of a very long day.

He confided in their mentor. 'I don't want to let the others down Wolf. They mostly let me tag along at home but I am always considered the baby.' There were tears in his eyes.

Wolf bent down and straightened his shoulders. 'Do you want to prove to them that you are the best?'

Timmo thought about it before replying. 'Course I do but it's scary, I can't throw myself off backwards like the other three.'

Wolf considered the situation. 'Do you trust me yet?'

'Yes, I think so Wolf.'

'Well let's make them jealous hey?' He carefully secured the safety rope on Timmo's harness and then a second one. They were both attached in an unusual way. 'Are you ready to impress Little George?'

'Urm...' before Timmo could say no, Wolf had twisted him upside down and thrown him down the ropeway. Hurling through the air upside down, at 20 kilometres per hour ensured Timmo couldn't utter a sound and inform the others he was truly terrified. Luckily, he was sick at the start of the aerial ropeway so that the others didn't see the sausages and sauce reappear. As the sergeant trapped him at the end, Timmo swung in the air way above his friends. The sarge whispered a quiet well done so the others couldn't hear. When Timmo arrived at floor level the others had stopped whooping in amazement and were immediately clapping him on the back.

'Why did you do that?' Asked Jack.

A modest Timmo replied with pride. 'Cos I am in the SAS.'

The group of tired children were in bed by 7 pm, worn out by the excitement of their first day and the early start. They were so tired they forgot to fret for their parents and were all soon sound asleep and dreaming happy dreams.

* * *

The days passed quickly. Every evening they played “world domination” as a group but always supervised by Wolf. All five sat in a circle with their laptops on their knees. Each would advise the others what they were manipulating on the world markets and then the others would bet against it. Wolf’s advice inevitably made their top British rankings safer as they scored far higher than any other players. It was Jack who noticed that Marshall wasn’t a very good player. Jack was sat next to him in the ring and could see how slow he was on the keyboard and how he faltered at each decision. Therefore, as Marshall’s scores were always so high the next evening, he was perplexed. But Jack told no one, he liked Marshall and felt sorry about his circumstances, the lack of a home and mum. He couldn’t believe how Mrs Hines had not returned from work and that upset Jack. He imagined what it would be like if his mum wasn’t around and so he ignored Marshall’s lack of playing skills and became close friends to support him.

During the day, they continued their anti-terrorist training. Shooting machine guns was child’s play. The latest design of minimi gun gave very little kick and hitting a target at 100 metres was easy for everyone. Jack grouped his five shot burst through the head. Roger and Marshall preferred to target the heart and Kit Kat and Timmo competed for how far apart they could make their bullet holes. But it didn’t matter, at least they could hit the target, they knew how to turn the safety on and off and how to reload. All just in case. That was what the

sergeant and Wolf reminded them. All, JIC - just in case. Brett joined them again during the second week. He needed to spend time with Wolf and bring him up to date on the latest "intell". However, Brett's specialities were boats, planes and parachutes and so he prepared a day of pure excitement for the mini SAS team.

They assembled as usual at 6 am for their early morning run and forged their way around a 7 kilometre circuit on the perimeter of the assault course. Each one carried a 10 kilogramme pack on their backs and ran in their army fatigues but without the power suits as that would be cheating. Part way around they took off the packs and scaled the parachute practice tower. They had been shown how to land by bending their knees on impact and by the fifth attempt they were all happy to drop off the edge of the platform and into oblivion.

Kate joked with the others. 'It's easy from 50 metres on a slow descent wire, thank goodness we won't have to do the real thing.'

It made the boys think, 'will we have to. Really have to?' No one commented out loud, the thought was terrifying.

By 8 am they were tucking into a fried breakfast with extra toast, strawberry jam, croissants and cereals. The training was definitely building them up and although physically easier for Jack, it was of a much greater benefit to the others. It built their confidence as they realised that they could do things they had never attempted before. Roger in particular was buoyed up by the running. Until the second day of training he had never run more than 20 metres in his life. Brett and Wolf joined them at the table as they sat back with full tummies.

Brett gave them some exciting news, 'we are going for a RIB ride. Does anyone know what that means?' They all shook their heads. 'A Rigid Inflatable Boat is a fast attack boat, in our case it has a carbon fibre hull, interlaced with the latest in Kevlar armour plating and powered by twin 300 horsepower diesel engines.'

'Fabtastic' said Timmo, 'can I drive it please?'

'Of course Little George but on condition you do not perform any high speed turns. However, the SAS's special attack ribs are currently based on the River Severn estuary and that unfortunately is too far away to make it today.' He watched as they were visibly deflated.

Wolf nudged his partner. 'Go on, don't tease.'

Brett smiled. 'Fortunately, if you have the latest Lynx Wildcat helicopter we can be there in half an hour, so let's go!' An excited group left the mess hall and piled into a waiting lorry. Sergeant Sargent was given the day off and they headed out of Brecon for some fun. Within five minutes they were in the noisy helicopter and soaring skywards, their teeth juddering in unison with the rotor. The view was awesome, the caravan park seemed tiny as they hovered above it at 3000 metres and then Brett pointed out the town of Brecon to one side. It made them realise how far the SAS camp truly extended. The helicopter started to move. Sweeping over a valley cutting through The Black Mountains, they headed south towards Cardiff before turning east to travel parallel to the South Wales coast. The children were ecstatic, none of them had ever been in an aeroplane, never mind an attack helicopter. Brett and Wolf let them move around the fuselage during the flight. They had told the pilots to avoid any rolls and to save them for The Black Cats helicopter display in Farnborough at the weekend. The excited children shouted to each other as they spied landmarks and everyday items from their new perspective. Railways with high speed trains heading towards London, seemingly slow in comparison to the helicopter. Container ships barely moving towards the port of Bristol and then they swooped lower to follow the Severn estuary as it curved inland and were speechless with delight as the pilot went under the Severn Road Bridge.

'That was a treat girl and boys, it is totally illegal for anyone except the SAS, so tell no one about it!' Brett was pleased they were having so much fun. It placed the mission far into the

future in the children's minds but in fact he knew it would come very shortly. The helicopter hovered a metre above the sandy shore of the estuary allowing the occupants to leap out and race to the waiting RIB. Two guards appeared from nowhere with their guns aimed at the group but as soon as Brett and Wolf had shown them their ID's, they were allowed to jump into the RIB and set off up river. The guards adjusted the bits of twig and branches sticking out from their uniforms as camouflage and smiling at the thought of children in a £500,000 attack boat, they slowly merged into the vegetation of the shoreline and disappeared again.

Brett shouted to everyone to 'hold on' and accelerated as fast as possible. All of them were pushed back into their seats as the RIB easily hit 100 kilometres per hour. 'Are you all having fun?' He received a shake of heads and knew the ride was fabtastic in their parlance. He slowed the boat after blasting it for a mile and motioned Timmo to the driver's seat. Quickly Brett showed him the throttle, neutral, reverse and forward and urged him to nudge the lever with the palm of his hand to gently accelerate the boat.

'Holding on?' Shouted Timmo to his passengers and then he thumped the throttle as far forward as it would go. 'Flip me,' he used his dad's forbidden expression, 'it is flipping fabtastic!' Brett let him do what he wanted; he needed the youngest team member to be the most confident before the mission. As Timmo swerved his way up the estuary, the others shouted at him to slow down. It wasn't until Brett signalled him to slow, that he took any notice.

As the RIB settled off the plane and wallowed in the water, Brett stood next to the steering wheel and faced his team. Behind them was the sea, behind him was the narrowing River Severn. Brett glanced at his watch, 11.03 am, before looking into the distance behind the children.

'Bang on time!' he said. They all turned around, coming up the estuary was a giant wave.

‘It’s a tsunami,’ shouted Kate, ‘we’ll all be killed!’

Brett and Wolf remained calm as the children panicked.

Wolf gave them a sharp order. ‘Stop panicking! Always remain calm and think. Remember that,’ he paused for effect, ‘always. Now then, would Brett have brought you out here if there was a tsunami due?’ The five calmed down and listened to Wolf. ‘It is in fact The Severn bore. Tell us all about it Roger.’

‘This is so exciting, we are in an estuary which has the second largest tidal range in the world.’ Everyone stopped listening; Roger was off on one. ‘It funnels into the estuary and can get up to 13 kilometres per hour and sometimes it actually hits 3 metres in height. Can you believe it!’

‘Thank you Roger, and now it is a mere 200 metres away.’ The bore looked like a giant wave but it wasn’t breaking at the crest. Wolf nodded to Brett who gunned the engine to position the boat at 45 degrees to the oncoming wave. As it came closer, he slowly increased the speed of the boat but he was still allowing the wave to catch them. As it thrust the boat upwards and surged underneath, they could feel the power of millions of tonnes of water funnelling northwards. Brett was an expert; he gunned the engines and incredibly stayed on the top of the wave. The RIB was surfing the Severn bore to everyone’s astonishment! After five minutes of adrenaline pumping action, he slowed the RIB and dropped off the back of the wave. They watched it thunder into the distance as it ran northwards up the river.

‘Are you still having fun?’ Asked Brett.

‘Cool, fabtastic, fabulous...’ they were delighted.

‘In that case we need to head that way.’ He pointed to the waiting aeroplane, sat on the “disused” runway on the riverbank near Chepstow. ‘The airfield is officially closed but the SAS have managed to purloin it for the day.’

‘Can I fly the plane please?’ Asked petrol-head Timmo.

‘No sorry Timmo, I need Jack, Roger and Marshall to spend time learning the controls before the day is over.’ Timmo was disappointed, but he understood their time aloft would be limited. The Cessna 208 only carried six people due to the large amount of specialist electronic equipment that was on trial within and so Wolf went back down river in the RIB to leave it with the guards near The Severn suspension bridge. This meant that the team could land back at the same airfield and their helicopter could collect them. They would pick up Wolf on their way south before heading back to base.

The Cessna’s take-off seemed tame compared to their experience in the helicopter. There was no sinking feeling like you get in a fast rising lift and no immediate impression of height. Brett explained how to adjust the petrol mixture as they gained altitude and showed them the key control dials including the airspeed. He said most light aeroplanes would lift off the runway at about 120 kilometres per hour. Jack, Roger and Marshall took turns piloting the small plane. They pushed the steering column forward to drop the nose and dip downwards. They pulled it back to climb and when they turned the half-wheel to the left it went left but then they realised that the plane lost altitude. With a little tuition from Brett, they learned to increase the amount of throttle as they turned and thus maintain their altitude. All three were full of bravado as they told the others how easy it was and then Brett pressed a black and yellow switch marked “auto” as they came close to the airfield and their landing. He stood up and walked towards the door as if to leave despite the height.

‘No!’ It was shouted as a single chorus. They thought they were going to crash.

‘Don’t panic, remember that, always. Don’t panic. The plane is on autopilot but with an SAS twist.’

‘How do you mean?’ Asked Roger.

‘See the helicopter on our left?’ They could, it was flying in formation. ‘Well the SAS experts inside are controlling the plane and can listen in on every word I say.’

‘No way’ said Timmo, ‘Even BMW haven’t got their remote control car doing that yet. It has to learn the circuit first and then they have to program the computer.’

Brett spoke into his hidden microphone. ‘Turn 90 degrees left control.’ The plane turned as instructed. ‘Turn 90 degrees right control.’ The plane turned again.

Timmo was laughing. ‘Okay I take it back, that is truly and doubly fabtastic.’ The others were gawping as the steering column moved to Brett’s voice command, which was relayed to the controller sat in the helicopter. He in turn sent a computer signal to the auto-pilot of the plane.

Brett spoke. ‘Stop the engine and climb.’

‘Oh god...’ It was Kit Kat, ‘please for goodness sake, we are going to die.’

Jack interrupted her. ‘Don’t panic. That’s what we have been taught.’ The plane went into a slow stall as it lost all its lift and then as if by magic, the nose dipped and it went into a gentle dive.

‘Start the engine and level off.’ The noise of the engine came as a welcome relief to the friends. The whole thing took no more than two minutes. ‘You see, when flying you have to be methodical and slow. Understand that the engine weight will lower the nose. Know that a loss in speed reduces lift and you will fall.’ The plane was flying straight and true and 400 metres above the airfield. ‘Right pilots, you said it was all very easy, is that correct?’

‘Easy peasey, lemon squeezy’ shouted Jack, Roger and Marshall in unison.

‘Just like driving the boat’ chorused Timmo.

‘In that case, who dares wins. Correct?’

‘We all know that Brett, so what’s new?’ Jack was feeling particularly cocky.

Brett appraised him. Jack was the natural leader and now he wanted to test his leadership to breaking point. 'What's new, is that I want you to put on the parachute under your seat and dive out of that door.' Jack sat back down in shock. His brain whirled in panic and then he looked around at the others. They were waiting for him, waiting to be led.

He summoned up all of his courage. 'Let's do it then.' Brett helped him put on the parachute and then the door was opened. Jack looked out of it, his eyes were drawn downwards in terror. He couldn't speak because of his fear, but a feeling of courage was deep within him as he looked around at the others. He gulped before croaking out the words. 'Who dares wins.' Brett pushed him before he was ready and suddenly he was in the air and plunging towards the fields below. His heart was pumping, the sound in his ears was an express train rushing past and then the static line attached to the plane activated the ripcord and he jerked upwards beneath a giant white mushroom.

They say that people in Bristol heard a loud yippee from the sky and they were 30 kilometres away and 200 metres below Jack. It had taken the parachute 300 metres to fully deploy and in that time he had been terrified. Jack was the leader of the gang and now he had proved it. Bring on the mission.

After that special day, firing bazookas and driving tanks was mundane. They were being honed into a team. They were being persuaded that anything a trained SAS soldier could achieve was achievable as a child.

* * *

Too quickly, it was their last evening in the SAS camp. They were sat in the corner of the mess eating lasagne with Wolf, Brett and Sergeant Sargent. The men were allowed to drink alcohol and had chosen a local beer brewed in Brecon. Time was weighing heavily on the three men. The responsibility of sending all five children on the mission was unbearable. No one in MI6 or the CIA teams had anticipated the Facebook messages the day before.

‘Attend the pontoon next to The Houses of Parliament at 12 noon on Friday. Be there or be square. This is your opportunity to meet MM. But remember, it is a secret from everyone you know including your parents and friends.’ Kate’s, Jack’s, Timmo’s and Roger’s message had a further sentence. ‘Come with your friends, you will be safe.’ MM’s gamemaster obviously knew all about them.

The children could tell Sergeant Sargent had drunk too much, his voice was a little woozy, a lot boozy. It made him more human.

‘Listen up you lot, I’ve taught you everything I know and soon it will be up to you but just assure me that you will remember The Reason.’

‘Sarge, not again.’ It was Marshall who spoke but he immediately regretted it as the sergeant bellowed back. However, it was a good-natured reprimand, a little joke on their last night.

‘Sergeant Sargent to you lad,’ he smiled kindly, ‘now listen carefully, I will say this only once...or maybe twice.’

‘Three times at least’ said Jack.

‘Okay sonny, I am just an old man trying to protect some nice kids but listen to me as if I was your dad.’ He drank the remaining half a glass of beer before continuing. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he looked around at the seven attentive faces. ‘God – The Reason, do you believe in it or not? Is it a mythical force? No, it’s a way of believing you will always succeed no matter what the odds. At some point, you will be faced with alternatives. Left or

right, up or down, help or hinder. But there may be no logical reasons guiding which action you should take. No history, no emotion, no practical answers. That's when I used to use the reason. It stood me well in Afghanistan and in Northern Ireland during The Troubles.' No one spoke, they listened and thought of the hidden terrors to come. 'I clear my mind of everything and let the choices choose themselves. The reason – others have their God. I have The Reason, it's the same thing but without a badge, without bureaucracy, without power held by a small number of individuals.' No one queried it; he had been their dad for three weeks of hard training and they trusted and respected him.

'Everyone get to bed, tomorrow your mission starts.' Wolf had never talked so softly and gently. They all went to bed in a thoughtful and quiet mood, scared to meet the next day but also full of confidence.

After all, they had their friends with them.

Chapter 8

A boat ride to hell

There were no rickety bus rides for the children on departure day. September 14th, 2013 was bright and clear at 7 am, with a slight westerly breeze that ruffled their hair whilst they were standing in the meadow near Brecon. Wolf could see a difference after three weeks of hard training. Even the youngest, Timmo wasn't tempted to explore the River Usk to their left as the trout leapt from the surface to gobble the early morning insects that buzzed above its clear waters. They were all serious and quiet, contemplating the visit home. The helicopter landed like a noisy tornado assaulting every one of their senses, which were already strained to breaking point. The children were about to start a mission that brave SAS soldiers would fear. Quickly they climbed aboard the machine as there was only a few hours left before meeting up with Brett in London.

The aerial trip from Brecon to Christleton was still novel but because of the occasion it wasn't exciting. As the helicopter landed next to the village duck pond, Wolf reminded them that they had precisely one hour to see their parents. He had agreed the strategy with Brett. Any longer and they all might let their emotions overwhelm them. Marshall remained hidden inside the fuselage of the helicopter, whilst the others quickly ran to their homes. It made him realise how important it was to have a mum and dad. In fact, it made him extremely sad. Wolf deliberately left Marshall alone, instead he stood outside talking with the pilot and co-pilot in the early morning sun and telling the odd nosy villager that The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge wanted privacy during their secret visit.

The first person to reach home was Roger. His mother air-kissed his cheeks, first the left and then the right and his father shook hands like a real man, but Roger really needed a hug. He also felt hurt by Licko's lack of attention. The dog avoided Roger for the first time since he was a tiny puppy. Licko had a manic look across his muzzle and was flailing saliva around the room, as he leapt from chair to chair in non-stop motion.

Rupert shouted at Licko but without any success. 'Licko, come here! Come here now!' The dog ignored his master for a full minute before careering out of the open door and racing down the street towards Kate's house.

The father turned to his son. 'They say animals pick up on things Roger. They have keen senses and understand our emotions better than other people.' He patted Roger's head, 'come and sit in the kitchen old boy and tell us what you have been up to.' He looked at his son. 'You will tell us everything? Won't you?'

'Of course father.' Roger replied. Whilst the adults sat at the pine kitchen table drinking their cafetiere of coffee and staring at him, he proceeded to tell them 10 per cent of what had really happened over the last three weeks. He made it out to be like a PGL holiday, pure excitement and no stress, all so that they wouldn't worry about him.

Their only comment was how much stronger and fitter he looked, 'turning into a fine young man.'

Brett had visited Jack and Timmo's home the day before, as their parents were a special case with two sons involved. He had talked to Jennifer and Jonathan in the privacy of the garden.

'So that is the plan. No one else knows all these details but we wanted to tell you the truth as it affects both of your children.'

Jonathan was holding Jennifer's hand as he asked, his voice quavered. 'Why us and why give us details now? You said it was all covered by the official secrets act.'

'Because you Jonathan were the most worried about everything and because you can talk to Roger and Kate's parents if...' there was a pregnant pause.

Jennifer intervened. She squeezed her husband's hand as she was speaking. 'There will be no if anything happens. My boys will come back to me and so will their friends.'

But that was yesterday, now they could hear their boys rummaging around the kitchen as they searched for a bottle of Coke. For a moment the two adults stayed still and silent as they sat in the lounge. They listened to the excited chatter, the love and support between the brothers. Jennifer and Jonathan followed them to the kitchen where they were shown a Swiss army penknife by Jack. He was excited as he demonstrated the specialist tools. A mini-drill, a screw driver, Allen-keys and of course a sharp knife. Timmo had gone up to his room immediately upon his return. Now he looked like an ant as he was wearing a pair of 3D glasses he had stolen from the local multiplex cinema. After Oreos and Coke, the boys happily hugged their mum and dad goodbye and insisted on racing back to the helicopter without them. It was a good idea, it left the parents to cry in private. Neither of the boys could appreciate the seriousness of their situations, but now one set of parents truly realised the magnitude of the mission.

As Kate pushed the kitchen door inwards, she saw Wispy the cat jumping from the table to a chair and then immediately back to the table. She then repeated this without a pause three times before leaping to different chair. She continued her erratic rampage across the furniture and completely ignored Kate as she entered. The cat only stopped when grandma appeared

but as she came down the stairs, it immediately prompted Wispy to shoot through the open door and scurry up the nearest tree.

‘Katey my dear, come here and have a big hug.’ Kate stepped lightly across the tiled floor to her grandma who immediately pulled her close. Grandma whispered into her ear, ‘since your mummy died, I have tried to teach you all I know about life and living. Not existing, anyone can do that. I mean living, making a difference in this world and...’

Katey interrupted ‘Please grandma, no emotional thoughts today, it’s too hard leaving you as it is.’

Grandma decided not to tell her that she was a spy in World War II, any good advice on how to behave would wait. ‘Listen my lovely girl, I love you more than you will ever know, and I know, your mummy is proud of you.’ They both started to sob gently whilst still in each other arms. ‘She came to me last night in a dream. Your mum, she spoke to me.’ Kate pulled back slightly and looked into her grandma’s serious eyes.

‘What?’ She took a deep breath, ‘what did she say?’

Grandma grasped Katy’s hands tightly in her own before she responded. ‘She said that when all seems lost you should be yourself my dear.’

‘I’m sorry grandma, I don’t understand the message.’

‘Neither do I my dear, neither do I, but I know you must remember the words, because you are travelling into peril.’ Both of them remained silent for the rest of the time before Kate’s departure. They said their goodbyes and then Kate kissed her cheek and slowly walked alone down the cottage garden path towards the helicopter that already contained Roger, Jack, Marshall and Timmo. At the gate, she turned to wave goodbye and was nearly knocked off her feet by Licko as he sped into the garden and ran around the oak tree madly barking at Wispy who was sat high in the branches.

Grandma blew her a second kiss and shouted in a wavering voice.

‘Be yourself Katey, remember, be yourself.’ And then she slowly closed the cottage door on her granddaughter to make the parting a little easier.

Inside the helicopter, she whispered to Jack, telling him about the conversation with grandma.

‘I felt strange Jack. It wasn’t just the emotions surrounding leaving or apprehension about our mission. It was as if there was a hidden presence watching me. Even Wispy and Licko were acting strangely.’

‘So what was it all about do you think?’ Jack asked as she settled into the leather bucket seat and fastened her seat belt.

‘Something and nothing. We shall see.’

The helicopter rose smoothly and rotated towards London with five quiet children contemplating the families left behind them in their past, their old lives, and wondering about the unpredictable future of the mission.

* * *

The children waited with Wolf and Brett in a black Transit minibus in the secure underground car park located deep beneath The Houses of Parliament. There were no other vehicles nearby as the police had quarantined the area, although no one would have seen their faces hidden behind the darkened glass. The situation was tense, everyone had remained quiet since boarding the bus at the RAF Northolt airfield in West London.

Wolf handed Jack a bright red memory stick. ‘We need to know more about the planned cyber attack. You have to find access to the brain of the neural computer network that the

terrorists are using and then plug this search and acquire device into a USB socket. Notice that you can twist it to alter the type of connector. If in doubt plug it in to anything connected to the brain.'

Roger was sat next to Jack. 'Won't it be detected by their anti-virus software as a bug?'

'No, we have better boffins than that, but the search and acquire program will take at least two minutes to function correctly. Allowing 30 seconds for your access and the same for an exit, you need three minutes with no prying eyes.'

Jack weighed the memory stick in his hand. 'I'll hide it inside the secret compartment in the heel of my Nikes. But how do I get the data back to you?'

Brett clasped a gentle hand on his shoulder. 'I will be at The Outspan hotel in Kenya as your back up. It's no more than 30 kilometres away. The only way is to physically give us the device. Maybe through a trusted informer? Even by bribing a local native with your secret stash of dollars? We can't predict anything, but you will find a way. I trust you Jack.' He gave Jack a slip of paper with the latitude and longitude of the hotel written on it. 'Learn it and remember it, you have one minute and then I need it back please.'

Wolf spoke. 'It's time.'

They all emptied out of the van and followed him towards the secret passage that led from the carpark to The Embankment and MM's boat that was berthed 100 metres above. Little did they know, but the tunnel and stairs was on the exact spot where Guy Fawkes had failed to blow up Parliament. After a few minutes climbing, Wolf moved to one side and let the children file past. He stood next to Brett. Wolf called after them as they turned the final corner in the passageway and were lost to sight. 'Remember your training everyone. Remember to stay safe, nothing else really matters.' He turned abruptly and walked back

towards the minibus. Both men were quiet for a few moments before Wolf's comment. 'The dice have been rolled my friend, let's hope they win the game.'

Wolf drove the Transit back towards Northolt to drop off Brett. The yank faced a long flight to Nairobi, Kenya, where he would pick up his CIA modified Hummer and drive to the Outspan hotel at Nyere. Then all that both men could do was to sit and wait for the enemy's next move.

* * *

Twip Twop stood on the gangplank that led from the pontoon to a sleek black boat. He was in direct contrast to the boat as he gleamed white in the bright sun; his starched sailor's uniform merging with his skin to make him look like a bright white dummy motionless in a shop window. He twitched nervously as the children approached, so they noticed that in his right hand was a scanner, a metal detector like at airports. As each child walked on board, he checked them over silently. Roger was his only victim as the scanner beeped furiously when located next to Roger's right trouser pocket.

Twip Twop admired the mobile that had triggered the alarm. 'Nice phone mister, an iPhone6, but there are no mobiles allowed where you are going so you won't be having a girly chit chat with your mumsy.'

'I can't live without my iPhone,' protested Roger as he stared with fascination into Twip Twop's pink eyes. He realised this was the first albino he had ever met but then Roger dropped his gaze after a few seconds. The stare he had received from Twip Twop was too scary.

‘At least you have a mobile to be confiscated,’ murmured Kate. Grandma didn’t believe in mobiles, she had even resisted broadband for a year before caving in to her grand-daughter. The rest of the children settled on board the boat and listened attentively to a weird thin man with a mop of unkempt red hair who stood at the bow.

‘My name is Techno. The man in white is Twip Twop and we will be looking after you on the first stage of your adventure to meet Madame Musseine.’ He was surprised as no one seemed to be very excited. He built her up. ‘The MM, the greatest gamemaster in the whole wide world.’

‘Alright,’ came a couple of dull replies from the children. Techno gave up and turned away to start the engines. He waved at Twip Twop to cast off the warps they attached them to the wooden pontoon and then he slowly edged the boat away. After a few moments, it gathered speed in the outward flow of a slowly moving neap tide that was heading towards the sea at Southend.

Timmo was excited by the superb speedboat. As they sped down the river and under the arch of Tower Bridge he asked Roger a question. ‘It looks like a Sunseeker, what do you think splodger? About 25 metres?’

Roger was more interested in the bridge looming above them. ‘Did you know it was opened in 1894? The roadway opens upwards into two halves as it is a bascule and suspension bridge combined.’ Timmo looked back dimly. ‘Bascule of course means see saw in French.’

‘Whatever,’ came from Jack who was sat behind them.

Roger droned on. ‘To open the two 1000 ton bridges requires exceptional hydraulics you know.’ Timmo queried whether the drawbridge was powered by compressed air. ‘No dimmo, it’s water, that is what hydraulics means. Pneumatic is the word describing air powered machine, surely everyone knows that?’ No one did know it, which is why they all kept quiet.

In fact, no one was interested except Roger himself, he was the intelligentsia of the gang and had the answer to most questions if they were ever stuck.

Then Jack asked Techno a question. He chose Techno as Twip Twop appeared distracted, even slightly demented. He was sat on the stern waving at the tourists on the bridge and shouting ‘God save The Queen, long may her corgis reign over us.’

‘Mr, Techno?’ He waited politely until Techno had glanced back at him. ‘Are we collecting anymore gamers sir?’

‘No more gamers George. The game was a global edition and you are the top five kids from the UK.’

Kate spoke up. ‘We are certainly not kids Mr Techno, we are children, not baby goats.

‘Nearly adults,’ added Jack.

Techno looked back at them in distaste and narrowly missed a Thames barge moored on the port side of the river. The boat had accelerated to nearly 80 kilometres per hour. ‘Nearly is a good word. Adults wouldn’t be able to comprehend the magnificence of “world domination”, the game that is so real, you would think it is real.’ Twip Twop was listening and burst into maniacal laughter at his fellow henchman’s joke.

As they followed the curve of The River Thames around Canary Wharf’s twin towers, it was Roger’s turn to pose a question to Techno. ‘I say old chap, isn’t it an 15 kph speed limit?’

Techno answered by thrusting the throttle forward and increasing their speed to 130 kilometres per hour as they forged past the giant O2 stadium. ‘So what PS?’ Splodger immediately realised they were his initials but the others sat confused waiting for some additional information as surely PS meant postscript?

Roger asked again. ‘So what about The Police, they’ll send a launch to stop you, won’t they?’

Techno didn't bother to address PS directly. Instead he shouted into the wind, 'let them try,' and then he shoved the throttle lever forward a centimetre at a time with the palm of his scrawny hand. They noticed the missing little finger on the hand grasping the steering wheel as they were pushed back in their black vinyl seats by the force of the acceleration, with Twip Twop screaming uncontrollably with joy.

Timmo was wetting himself with excitement. As the engineering nut who loved Top Gear, this was fabtastic. He tugged at Techno's arm, as the wind noise was now horrific and howled above their heads like a banshee.

'Is this a Sunseeker with twin 200 horsepower petrol engines? I read it can do 80 kilometres per hour?'

Techno laughed. 'Not this baby and not that slow. It has two hydrogen engines and can do 1200 kilometres per hour!'

'That's impossible, no boat can do that speed, we would break the speed of sound.' Timmo was quietly confident in his statement but as the boat turned to starboard to head down The English Channel, Techno's hand whizzed across the computer touch screen in front of him to adjust the engine settings. Underneath the boat, the high tech hydrofoils extended in a matter of seconds and lifted the hull out of the water.

He shouted to Timmo. 'That reduces the hull's drag coefficient by 95 per cent.' Techno touched the screen again and from the sides of the boat leading up to the bow a carbon fibre cover extended across the whole hull shaping it like a torpedo. As the sky disappeared above them, the low level lighting automatically switched on beneath their feet. 'And that little George reduces the drag coefficient of the decking by another 95 per cent. So did you say it

was impossible?’ Techno rammed the throttle forward and sat back to watch his computer screen as the autopilot guided the boat towards its destination.

Above them and at the stern, two aerodynamic wings deployed as the computer tweaked the optimal settings and ensured it sent them skimming across the water. A sonic boom was heard by the crew on the 700,000 tonne oil tanker, off the Isle of Wight. The captain immediately radioed the Coastguard station at Southampton Water using channel 16, the emergency frequency as they thought they had seen a plane hit the water. It was all over in a flash and they couldn’t be sure, but The Coastguard assured them it must be nothing as there was nothing on their radar. They told the crew to keep a close watch on the situation and let them know if they heard or saw anything else but by then the super speedboat and Jack’s gang were 20 kilometres away and tucking into Doritos handed out by Twip Twop.

Timmo was still arguing with Techno. ‘It’s impossible to keep this speed up. You must run out of fuel soon!’

‘Untrue my little friend. MM has some of the best engineers and scientists in the world working for her at her base. We get our hydrogen from the seawater using micro fusion technology.’

‘But no one has managed to control fusion as a nuclear power, it is inherently unstable, like having a mini sun here on earth!’

‘Untrue again! Well the bit about the sun. The Japanese cracked the problem nearly six years ago but have been slower to understand that particle deceleration is easy under water rather than in a torus underground.’ Timmo sat quietly. The technology was bewildering. Jack motioned at him by making a hand gesture that sliced across the front of his own neck. It was telling Timmo to stop his questioning. Tim felt dim at that point and gulped in admiration of his new geek ‘friend’. He sat with the rest of the children and watched the large TV screen to

the left of the steering wheel. This alternately showed views in front, to the sides and the rear. It flicked over to a different view every thirty seconds and so they could watch the day pass by at speed. Techno told them that the journey was nearly 8000 kilometres and it was easy for most of them to work out that an average speed of 1000 kilometres per hour, that would see them at MM's headquarters for a late evening meal.

* * *

The trip down The Channel was nearly completed before the accident. Roger insisted on calling The Channel, "La Manche" as he had learned it in his French lessons at school but Kate told the others that it also meant sleeve in French, which was very apt because of the shape of the busiest sea lane in the world. They saw very few ships on their TV screen as they were moving at a colossal speed and deliberately navigating away from the two shipping lanes that are defined for use by ships travelling to the west or to the east. This was a simple way of separating traffic like on a motorway. As they headed south-westward on the fringes of the Bay of Biscay they were told to fasten their lap belts as even the smartest of the computers controlling the speedboat's attitude could sometimes malfunction. Each time this happened they felt an almighty bump that shook their teeth. However, the bumps were few and far between and so the children remained relaxed and played on the Nintendo DS's handed out by Techno. The DS's were linked by bluetooth which allowed the gang to play an exciting speedboat racing game, specially designed by their pilot. Therefore, nobody noticed Timmo as he unslipped his belt and moved to the stern of the boat so that he could examine the engines beneath the perspex hatch. There was an almighty shout as the speedboat hit another bump and Timmo flew 4 metres backwards across the cabin and then lay still. He had

been knocked unconscious and lay with his lower left leg bent at an angle 20 degrees to normal. Techno immediately slowed the boat and pressed the computer screen to activate the emergency stabilising thrusters that spurted from four small holes in the hull.

Jack was the first to reach Timmo followed by Kit Kat.

She gently stroked his head. 'Timmo, wake up Timmo, it's Kate.' She shook his shoulders and called him again but there was no reaction.

'He's out cold Kit Kat,' said Jack, 'but don't move him anymore in case he has a head injury.'

'That would be the worse thing but look at his leg,' added Roger, 'I'm so sorry but that is definitely broken.'

Techno bent alongside Timmo and quickly opened the first aid kit. Inside were smelling salts that he held in a tube underneath Timmo's nose. Within a few seconds his eyes flickered open and unsteadily focussed on his friends.

'What happened?' He winced as he tried to move.

'Don't move bro,' said Jack, 'you got knocked off your feet mate.' He kept his brother still whilst Techno examined the leg.

'Can you feel any pain in your left leg?' Techno was holding either side of the break.

'Well no, not really. I just feel really woozy.' It was lucky he had been knocked unconscious as the natural endorphins that killed pain had already kicked in before Timmo had woken up.

'Well that makes it easier then,' said Techno as he jerked the broken bone back into its correct position with a horrible grinding sound. Timmo screamed so loud, the others thought their eardrums would burst.

'Why the hell did you do that weirdo?' Timmo shouted. 'Jesus wept, flipping hell.' He was as white as a sheet with a cold sweat on his forehead. 'My god but it hurts now you flipping mop head.'

'I did it, because it needed setting as soon as possible,' replied Techno, 'and you said you were feeling no pain.'

'Well it's getting worse, for goodness sake.' At that point Techno dug the hypodermic needle into Timmo's thigh, just above the break. He held the leg still so all Timmo could do was weakly pummel the back of Techno's shoulders. 'What the...' he swore badly.

'Timmo, please.' Kit Kat told him off. 'Can you please stick with my god when you swear?' But the anaesthetic was working quickly and within a minute Timmo had lost all feeling down his broken leg.

Roger marvelled at the result. 'Did you know Timmo, that the term anaesthesia is derived from the Greek (an-aesthesia) meaning "without feeling"?' Timmo inverted his fingers, he wasn't in the mood for intelligent analysis. 'I expect the injection contained an opiate like morphine, which is a form of heroin.'

'Shut up Roger!' Timmo was smiling now but no one understood why except Roger.

'You see, opiates to kill the pain, dopamine makes you happy,' he sighed, 'isn't science wonderful?' Roger enjoyed being right about everything. Kit Kat took the opportunity to hurry over to her kitbag and dragged out two tennis rackets.

Marshall was shocked. 'Tennis rackets? Why have you brought tennis rackets Kate?'

'Because I thought we might all need a little recreation, some exercise when not playing on computers.' Marshall sighed in despair, he decided that she was a typical girl who was already trying to emulate her mum, over compensating because of her death.

But Techno was pleased and pulled a semi-elasticated bandage from the first aid kit. 'That is an excellent idea Kate, well done.' He proceeded to take the rackets from her and positioning the handles either side of the break, he started to wrap the bandage tightly around them to

make a temporary splint. ‘That will keep the bones in place and reduce any movement that would cause pain.’

‘Brilliant Kate, I always knew you would come up with an idea.’ Jack smiled at her and she smiled back before turning away to hide her bright red face. Techno and Jack lifted Timmo onto a bench seat at the rear of the boat and carefully packed the children’s kitbags and the boat’s cushions around him. After a drink of orange juice laced with the drug Tramadol, to ensure he experienced absolutely no pain, they felt they could continue. Techno adjusted the controls and gently accelerated back up to 300 kilometres per hour. Once clear of the rough seas in The Bay of Biscay, he accelerated back up to 1000 and they all settled into a reverie as they watched the coast of Portugal zoom past on the TV screen.

It was Roger who spotted Gibraltar, “The Rock” as it was known. They were off The Spanish coast as they headed into The Mediterranean and making excellent time.

‘Did you know...’ he started off.

‘No’ said Marshall.

‘Definitely not’ said Jack.

But Roger continued anyway, not the least bit upset that they weren’t bothered about hearing any history. He spouted on about it being a British territory but Spain kept asking for its return to them as it was unfairly obtained by war. He also told them about the apes, The Barbary Macaques that were the main tourist attraction and its strategic importance for the British in World War II. At this point, there were a few questions from the others about the apes as they were getting bored now, whereas the sleeping Twip Twop had woken up and proceeded to career around the cabin like an ape, scratching under his arms and behind his

bum. No one was impressed by the lunatic albino but it passed a few more minutes of the journey.

Then Roger spotted Sicily at the very tip of Italy. Unfortunately for the others, his mother and father had taken Roger there on holiday and steeped him in its history. It was also the home of the mafia and some of Twip Twop's best friends.

'Did you know?' Asked splodger, 'that Typhon was trapped under the volcano you can see called Mount Etna?'

'No' came a chorus of replies, 'not interested.'

He continued unabashed. 'Zeus, who is the god of the sky in Greek Mythology, trapped Typhon who was the largest and most fearsome of all creatures about 4000 years ago. His human upper half reached as high as the stars and his hands reached from east to west.'

'Whatever,' said Jack.

'Impossible' said Marshall.

'How fascinating' said Kit Kat.

Roger clasped his hands on his chest and leaned backwards like a schoolteacher lecturing his form. 'Instead of a human head, he had 100 dragon heads; some however, depict him as having a human head, with the dragon heads attached to his hands instead of fingers.'

'That is fascinating' said Kit Kat.

Roger lowered his tone. 'He was feared even by the mighty gods. His bottom half consisted of gigantic viper coils that could reach the top of his head when stretched out and made a hissing noise. His whole body was covered in wings, and fire flashed from his eyes...'

Techno and Twip Twop threw back their heads and laughed loudly.

Twip Twop's only comment was about the mountain. 'Mount Etna is a paltry 3300 metres high, half the size of our volcano and our monster isn't a myth like yours.' He cackled loudly, as insane as they come, until Techno asked him to serve ham sandwiches to their guests. They were all starving but as Twip Twop came close to each one of them, they grimaced at his stinking breath and dared't look him directly into his maniacal pink eyes.

* * *

As the children sped across the bright blue of the Mediterranean sea, Wolf was back at Somerset house and happy to sit behind a computer screen once again. The time with the children at Brecon had been a welcome relief to his usual daily grind in MI6. He had enjoyed their company and was pleased with their attitude towards the training and the future dangers. But one person had always been slightly outside the group, even when they had played the game each evening. It was Jack on the evening prior to departure who had mentioned Marshall's lack of gaming skills and now Wolf had more time and access to his specialist programs. So the nagging doubt about Marshall and his background grew in Wolf's mind and prompted him to use SPAM to investigate further.

First of all he double-checked Matthews's review of the Hines family. Marshall's father had been traced to a bar in Singapore where a local MI6 agent had watched him for a week and confirmed he was a hopeless down and out drunk with few contacts apart from his cronies in the bar. Secondly he audited Mrs Hines. She seemed a nice lady with a normal background following the departure of Marshall's father. She had always worked hard and the references with her employers had been physically verified by agents. All the interviews confirmed she was driven by her need to look after her son, whom she dearly loved. The neighbours in the

council flats in Haringey were followed and then casually interviewed by a friendly agent on the bus or underground. A chat about life, mutual friends and Haringey. It was very clever and built up a picture of a loving mum but then the investigation stopped. Matthews had drawn a line and reported to the team and J that everything was normal.

However, one of the parameters that Wolf had entered into SPAM was a new tweak to his program. It was called the location coordinator and simultaneously logged phone calls and contacts with all government agencies including councils and the police against the subject's name and age. Mrs J. Hines of Haringey was triangulated on the police records, the housing team's in Haringey and a care home in Peckham. Wolf sat back in his chair and ran his hands through his dreadlocks. He swore to himself. Marshall's mum was recorded by SPAM as missing. More worrying, was the fact that Matthews would have known this and had chosen not to follow it up. Why? He pushed the question to one side and went back to considering Marshall and his lack of gaming skills.

Wolf had limited access to "world domination" but couldn't see how well the other players had done. He could only see scores and assets in real time but he needed their histories. After a quick call to the MI6 database team he went for a walk on the roof of the building as they loaded the relevant data. It was a typical autumn afternoon in London. He leaned over the parapet and looked at the people rushing home from work. The tops of the plane trees were already brown and a few leaves were falling into the noisy traffic. Wolf thought about the children. No one knew where they were since they had left the Thames estuary. The satellites and radar had lost the speedboat and the trace team had concluded that it had been cloaked in some way. He stretched his arms above his head and then looked at the sun which was low in the west over Buckingham Palace. If Matthews had stopped the investigation at the most critical point, then Matthews had something to hide. He considered the facts. Matthews's

child was terminally ill, his pay was poor. Therefore, there was some emotional leverage against him. He decided it was not a matter to be investigated by anyone in MI6 as there was a risk that Matthews would find out and abort whatever he was doing. No, he needed Brett's help, let the CIA check up on Matthews and report back directly to Wolf and J alone.

Settled back in his chair, Wolf accessed the new database which showed all "world domination" players over the last 18 months, their scores and their assets on a daily basis. The database team had made it easy for him to assemble the five children's names and create a table of results solely for the gang on the mission. The results were in a series of columns and rows allowing him to filter and then graph the top three assets by player over time.

'Oh god no.' He stared at the five coloured lines. Kate, Jack, Timmo and Roger had nice smooth curves, they were consistently good. The red line depicting Marshall was jagged. His performance always fell before midnight and the next morning it had shot up into the highest band again. Wolf muttered at the screen. 'You were right Jack, someone has been helping Marshall.' He sighed heavily. It meant one thing. There must be a link between Mrs Hines, Marshall and The Black Hand Gang. Morro's deliberate inactions must also be linked - a way to cover up the link and for a reason. Wolf entered two new queries into SPAM and hit the return key. The first was "other Hines family members", the second was "location now". He turned on his iPod and selected his Bob Marley collection on random play. The answers were delivered to the screen within twenty minutes. An end of term photograph of a young Hines, brother to Marshall, taken at Haringey Comprehensive was on the left of his screen. Wolf cut it from the 400 other faces and enlarged it. He then took the CCTV coverage taken at The Houses of Parliament of the speedboat and crew before deciding to select the image of the pilot. He zoomed in and cut and pasted the face alongside the school photo. They were the same person. Robert Hines, older brother of Marshall Hines and missing since his teens was

on the boat. Wolf's heart was beating too fast, he breathed in deeply and tried to steady his panic. He had sent five children into mortal danger and it was all his idea. Five innocent children had been betrayed from within MI6 and Marshall was now being sucked into his past.

* * *

Wolf left his desk and went for a walk in Regent's Park. After finding an isolated bench he sat and waited. His watch said five minutes to midday. At exactly midday a little old lady walked slowly by with her Corgi.

'Can I sit here my dear?' Her voice was high pitched and weak with age.

'Sure.' Wolf opened a newspaper, The Sun, bought at a kiosk near the office. He started to read it.

The old lady spoke to the corgi which refused to sit next to the strange man. 'Now now Brett, do behave.'

It was the correct signal for Wolf to talk. He lifted the newspaper in front of his mouth in case they were watched. The latest lip synching software couldn't analyse his words if there were no lips visible to any watching agents with cameras. 'Dogs are such a pain especially named Brett' She had turned away from him and pretended not to hear. He continued with the message. 'Matthews hid Mrs Hines disappearance. Robert Hines was on the speedboat. Marshall's "world domination" scores were fixed each night.' He folded the newspaper and stood. 'Bye, have a nice day y'all,' and then he was gone.

Ten minutes later, the old lady slowly rose and walked the dog home. Once she closed the front door to her house, she tied the dog to a banister and continued down the corridor to the

garden and straight out of the rear entrance. After five changes alternating between bus and tube rides she arrived at the back door of a small nondescript house in the mews next to Grosvenor square. She walked through the door and entered the lift immediately at the end of the corridor. Within five minutes she was briefing the rest of the CIA's operation conman team. Three hours later they had established that Matthews was a traitor and called J and Wolf to a private meeting in the US Embassy.

* * *

The last dramatic part of the children's mammoth sea journey, in the fastest boat on earth, started near Port Said, on the northern entrance to The Suez canal. At 200 kilometres long having been gouged out of the desert at sea level so there was no need for locks, it is one of the greatest achievements of mankind. Completed in 1869 it was dubbed "the highway to India" in the east, as it linked The Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean. In 150 years it had saved countless sailors lives as they avoided the treacherous rounding of the Cape of Good Hope at the foot of Africa.

Today the focus was on speed, as the speedboat shot through the narrow channel and turned to starboard to cruise down the eastern coast of Africa. Passing Somalia it was only Roger who remained awake out of the five children. Timmo was highly drugged and the rest were emotionally exhausted and dozing.

Therefore, Roger the intelligent, could only mutter to himself. 'At this speed, at least we won't have a problem with the modern day Somali pirates.'

Techno went towards the stern to check on Timmo. His eyes opened as Techno leaned close to his face to listen to his breathing.

‘Are you okay Timmo?’ His voice had softened as no one else could overhear, especially Twip Twop.

‘I’m quite comfortable thanks, and thank you for your help. I know you did the right thing by resetting my leg, it was just a shock.’

‘It was nothing really. I guess you remind me of my little brother when he was very young and I really didn’t want to see you in anymore pain.’

Timmo grimaced slightly as he eased his body on the bench seat. ‘How do I remind you of him?’

‘He was bright and alert like you but was younger, maybe five years old, and he loved cars too.’ Techno was thoughtful before adding. ‘If I remember rightly, it was so long ago and so much has happened in my life since. No doubt the same applies for him.’

Timmo touched Techno’s arm. ‘Maybe I will get to meet him?’

‘Not where you are going’

‘Because?’

‘Because I don’t know where my brother is and I don’t even know his name. I tried to find my mum and Michael but she had changed their names.’

‘Never mind,’ said Timmo, he was genuinely sorry for Techno as family was everything.

‘I do know he’s not inside Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.’ Techno stood up and went back to the front of the cabin to fiddle with the LCD screen. It predicted their arrival in Dar Es Salaam on the east coast of Africa in under an hour. Timmo was sensitive enough to stay quiet. He could tell Techno missed his brother.

* * *

The super boat pulled gently against a concrete jetty with its wall of old perished tyres to prevent damage to the hulls of visiting ships. The streamlining cover and hydrofoils had been withdrawn inside the hull from about 10 kilometres out and therefore the speedboat drew little attention on entering the vast natural port.

The children climbed unsteadily onto the jetty in the cool evening and smelt Africa. It had a unique stench of wild animals and spices as the offshore breeze freshened and swept the scent seawards. Everyone was stretching as they heard the trucks with gunning engines as they came down the jetty towards the group. There were five Tanzanian army vehicles that had ten or more soldiers inside. At 100 metres the trucks pulled up and disgorged the soldiers who immediately fanned out across the jetty but strangely they faced towards the nearby city. They were there to guard their honoured guests.

‘Dar es Salaam, the haven of peace, that’s the translation you know’ said Roger. ‘Unlikely based on the number of soldiers protecting us!’

Twip Twop replied with a giggle. ‘Unlikely because it’s a sprawling commercial city Mr Intelligent. Welcome to a world of corruption and strife.’

‘Do you know much about it?’ Asked Roger innocently.

Twip Twop was serious for a moment. ‘It is where we enter Africa and so it is important to us for resupply. There are more than two million people scratching a living here, a port with trading links since The Sultan of Zanzibar conquered it and then the Germans and English of course. And now us.’ The seriousness passed as he leapt back down into the boat, resting three metres below the jetty. He was cat-like in his crazy movements. ‘Come on one leg, hoppity hop!’

‘Know all!’ Said Roger under his breath.

‘No’ said Jack, ‘that’s your job but sometimes you just need to shut up and not encourage them. ‘It’s not pretty and actually, it’s not the capital. That’s Dodoma which is inland but the government is split between here and there.’

Roger stared at Jack, it was unusual for him to have such a grasp of affairs. Jack winked at him. Of course, Wolf must have briefed him.

A large red and white Augusta helicopter came swooping across the harbour waters at 50 metres above the small waves and landed immediately behind the army trucks. There was very little light left as the sun was going down inland of them.

Techno spoke. ‘Your last hour’s travelling lady and gentlemen. Please follow us.’ He motioned to two waiting soldiers who climbed into the boat to carry Timmo out on a stretcher and he then started walking towards the helicopter.

Jack needed confirmation. ‘So where exactly are we going Techno?’

‘To meet Madame Musseine. A mere 650 kilometres or one hour by helicopter to Mount Kilimanjaro.’ The children took a deep breath and carrying their kitbags, they followed him at speed. It was only Jack who realised why the journey had been undertaken by boat. A stealth boat at an unbelievable speed could never be traced by radar. A far more secure method of bringing in recruits from around the globe to play “world domination” for real. What he didn’t know was that there were 12 such boats and they had been very busy for more than three weeks.

Chapter 9

Too hard a mission

The Augusta engines revved to a scream making the rotor thump the air above them and then they were flying over the outskirts of Dar Es Salaam. As the light failed, they could only make out dim silhouettes of a shantytown with rusting corrugated iron roofs and strings of multi-coloured washing and then it was gone. The blackness of the windows was only alleviated by the brightness of the first stars as they stared out, hoping for a glimpse of the magical Mount Kilimanjaro. In fact their first glimpse, was the fresh white snow on the inside of the crater called Kibo as the helicopter plummeted into it. The plunge made their stomachs turn and then they could see the rocks and steaming lake as the crater was bathed in bright white LED light. At the last moment before crashing into the base of the crater, the false floor opened to let the machine access the landing pad on level two. The rotors slowed to a halt and then the door was slid open to reveal a gigantic hanger bathed in an eerie yellow colour by the sodium lights. As they stepped onto the landing apron, they noticed the faint stench of rotting eggs, residue of the sulphurous fumes in the lake high above them. Although there was no one to greet them apart from two golf buggies with drivers, the children noticed the odd Japanese man dressed in grey, who casually manned the doors and the grand gallery that ran around the upper echelons of the hanger. Each man had a minimi machine gun hung on a strap around their neck and a set of katana combat blades strapped to their backs. Jack remembered Wolf's private briefing. He had been right, MM had been recruiting ninjas. Timmo was loaded onto the first buggy and was immediately taken to the sick bay for an x-ray and a plaster cast. He was accompanied by Techno, his new "friend". Everyone else piled into the second buggy including Twip Twop as their minder and then headed towards a metal

blast door that opened automatically as they came within 2 metres of it. The ninja guards watched them carefully, studying their faces for future recognition. The buggy quickly ran down a long spiralling ramp towards level three and the accommodation block. No one spoke in their group, the sight of the second immense cavern was as overwhelming as the first.

Then Kate expressed her shock as she stared beyond the lights to the darkness beyond. 'There is so much emptiness,' she had her hands to her face, 'I never thought I would see so much of nothing!'

'In fact you're wrong Kit Kat.' Rogers poked his glasses onto his face with his index finger.

'Scientifically speaking, there are 60 billion neutrinos in each square centimetre around us.'

She was annoyed, it had been a tedious journey with the boffin. 'If you can't see it, then it doesn't exist.'

Marshall was more interested. 'What's a neutrino Roger?'

'One of the twelve particles that make up our universe, although there may be more of course.' The children stared at the vastness and contemplated the trillions of invisible particles around them.

Twip Twop pointed a flailing white hand as they passed a brightly lit area. 'On the left is sector one for the technical boffins. That's where we let the brains play at being god, designing all manner of clever things but not as clever as hands that can strangle.' The children shuddered with fear, he was truly mad. 'On the right is sector four for relaxation, a place I hate. Idiots can go there and play on idiotic games in the vast arcade. Stupid children who should be fighting each other rather than fighting computer images.' Jack shook his head at Roger to keep him quiet. 'Leaving sector number two at the far end of the cavern. That is where we are heading. It has the engineering block and also alongside is your comfy accommodation, a mini palace for esteemed visitors like yourselves. The buggy pulled up

outside a partition wall constructed from grey plasterboard. The wall was unpainted but the door set within it was blue. 'Blue sector, blue doors for your quarters. Do you get it?' They nodded their assent to the albino who was pushing the door open to lead the way in. 'These five beds are yours, make yourself comfortable.' Twip Twop turned on his heel and retraced his steps. They stood in amazement.

'There's no flippin roof!' Jack was staring at the rocks 100 metres above his head. The lights above the five beds were suspended on a metal girder, 3 metres above them. The unpainted girder stretched beyond their sight but must have had uprights somewhere. Roger tried the light switch on the wall and the fluorescent tubes went dark. He flicked them back on to help them explore.

'Great we have a hair dryer' exclaimed Kit Kat who had pushed open an adjoining door and found the bathroom. The three boys rolled their eyes.

'It's horrible isn't it. Worse than my care home in Peckham.' Marshall threw himself onto a bed and heel flicked his lace less trainers onto the floor with a clatter.

Jack sat on the adjacent bed. 'Don't worry mate, it's been a long emotional day. You just need some food and sleep to make things look brighter.'

Marshall's pinched face turned to Jack. 'It's easy for you to say that, you never lost your mum and brother forever, your loss is only temporary "init".' His eyes brimmed with tears.

'I know Marshall' Jack clasped him firmly on his shoulder, 'I'm truly sorry for your loss, but now you have us to look after you. You know, like the four Musketeers, "One for all and all for one!"'

'So why are they called Musketeers when they always fight with swords and not muskets?' It was Timmo, banging his wheelchair through the outer door by using his new plaster cast as a battering ram. They all gathered around him to fuss. Timmo reassured them he was okay. 'It's

great now, really I have no pain guys. I've got some crutches too and the doctor said I must use them a bit each day to help the healing process.'

Jack ruffled Timmo's hair. 'Are you really okay bro? I was so worried about you.'

Timmo smiled at his brother, he loved Jack and always wanted to impress him and so although his leg ached terribly he smiled and answered positively. 'I'm fabtastic thanks and also I am starving. So if you push me, Techno's waiting outside to show us to the KFC!' They all went outside and followed Techno with Jack pushing Timmo in his wheelchair and went to eat before a long and much needed sleep.

* * *

The next morning they were rudely awoken by a loud klaxon fastened above their room on the girder holding the lights. As soon as it finished the loudspeaker blurted out a well known tune. "*God Save The Queen*", which was meant to encourage them to leave their beds. Instead five out of five of the English children buried their heads under their pillows.

Then came an announcement. 'The welcome party is at 10 am in the main restaurant. Please be prompt.' It was repeated three times and then they heard the echoes of other national anthems and the same message in many other languages as other cells of children were woken up. None of the five washed or brushed their teeth except Kate, who kept complaining to the boys about their poor oral hygiene and "BO" but the boys were eager to sample the breakfast before the party and positively ran to the restaurant buffet to jostle with a hundred other excited children. It was a scrum around the favourites such as coco pops and croissants that appealed to most of the western nationalities but MM had catered for all the different countries around the world. The Japanese could choose from many styles of fresh raw fish

and rice, the yanks ate pancakes with maple syrup and the large crowd of Indians tucked into a steaming bowl of chicken curry with a separate helping of Pilau rice.

As the children milled around, they found the common language was English but not everyone spoke it and so there were a few dozen young men dressed in red overalls who they soon learned were interpreters attached to a particular group, a particular nationality. The excitement was intense, the English were the last players to arrive at the volcano and now they would all meet her, Madame Musseine, the greatest gamer in the world.

Suddenly the lights dimmed and the chatter immediately quietened down. At the end of the dining room was a small stage with Techno, Twip Twop and a large ugly brute of a man standing with his arms crossed. Music boomed out of the speakers above them, it was “We are the Champions” by Queen. The children started to bang their plates and dishes on the tables in time to the emotional beat. It was their song, the best gamers in “world domination”. The excitement built to a crescendo and then there was a gigantic explosion as fireworks fizzed across the front of the stage. As the blue smoke cleared, there she was, MM, the favoured one.

Timmo sniggered ‘God she’s ugly!’

Roger answered ‘And fat.’

But it was Jack who summed her up. ‘And the most evil person in the world.’

Madame Musseine opened her arms wide to embrace the loud cheers. Her long black sleeves and flowing trousers partially hid the “globulous” fat as it wobbled on her giant frame. Lifting a microphone to her lips she spoke. ‘You are the chosen few,’ the crowd screamed in delight. ‘You are the best gamers in my world.’ Another scream rent the air and as it died

away she continued in a deep voice, emphasising each word as they reverberated around the cavern. 'Only you have been invited into my volcano as the elite players brought from the four corners of the earth. I welcome you, I salute you; you are the chosen ones. Be thrilled,' she let their loud cheers subside, 'be prepared to play a new game, a more exciting game, a more interesting game.' Her voice had risen to a roar, 'world domination two ooooo.' The enchanted crowd of children screamed with hysterical delight apart from the five English who were "in the know". She continued, her powerful voice was mesmerising. 'It will feel just like the real thing!' Another even louder scream reverberated around them all.

Suddenly, flashes of green lasers zipped across the walls of the volcano in a myriad of patterns representing dozens of four-fingered hands. The lasers penetrated the gloom and danced their lance-like shapes across the roof. Spotlights merged their colours high above the thron. Red and yellow mixed to form a splat of orange on the rock. Blue and red to leave a purple spot.

'It will be the real thing,' said Jack, 'that's why she has brought us here. The best gamers in the world will play for real assets in the real world and she will end up controlling the world's financial markets.'

Roger nudged him. 'Careful there may be snitches in the crowd and anyway I think you are wrong.'

'What?' Jack was never polite.

'It is not about control. She wants the economies of the world in freefall, a financial meltdown.'

'Why would she create that splodger?'

'Remember what Wolf told us. "When the Nazis took over Germany before World War II, they built from nothing. The country was in a mess, destitute and broke. That's her plan, rip it

all apart and then she will rebuild it and therefore control it all. World domination for real and as you say – certainly not a game.’

Marshall added his opinion. ‘That means she must have allies on the outside. Friendly countries who want and demand a greater say in the world.’

Jack was staring intently at the mad, bad figure on the stage. ‘True, but we may never find out who they are. We just have to stop her. After all, we are not just kids, we are SAS agents.’

Kate remonstrated. ‘Children please, we are not baby goats!’ They all laughed, it never failed to rile her even as they stared at Madame Musseine who disappeared in a puff of black smoke to more loud cheers.

* * *

The restaurant was buzzing with excitement. Dozens of conversations in dozens of languages raised the volume level and as the children couldn’t hear each other properly, they started to shout and scream louder at their friends as most of them opted for second breakfasts. That was when the Germans started to throw their hard black bread at the French. Unfortunately, they had accidentally sat alongside each other and as with their nations when revamping the European Treaty, they always wanted to express a difference in opinion. It was rumoured later that a German boy had insulted a French one by implying he should only eat snails for breakfast. Jean-Claude had retaliated by suggesting the German boy called Wolfgang should be eating frankfurters washed down with beer. Maybe the stereotyping would have been alright if each had seen it as a light-hearted joke but the Swiss contingent joined in by suggesting muesli would be better for them both as it was healthier. So the black lumps of

bread were thrown, croissants were thrown back and mini bars of chocolate and “babybels” were interspersed in the crossfire.

Life in the volcano was already in chaos, 100 children and no parents was a recipe for disaster until Biceps and twenty ninjas stepped into the middle of the throng. Well actually, the ninjas cart-wheeled across the tables between the groups and performed double somersaults before assuming the wide-legged fighting stance. Biceps leaped onto a central table and bellowed at the top of his voice.

‘Stop you morons!’ Whether it was the awe of the ninjas or Biceps crash of a voice, no one will know, but all the messing about stopped immediately. The hulk looked around, cowing the children in fear. ‘Follow your interpreters it is time to play the new game.’

The red boiler suited men rounded up their groups and led them to the AICs. The English sat in silence waiting to see what would happen, and then Techno walked towards them and asked them to follow him. ‘You have special privileges as the world’s top players.’

He led them to the very back of sector one and stood next to his personal AIC. The shell glowed green to mark it out as special from the dull white fibreglass of the others. Groups of children were being trained in the use of the controls, they stood to the side of the pods and listened to the interpreters who now acted as instructors.

Timmo spoke up. ‘Why are the instructors bald?’

Techno replied. ‘Because it helps them connect to the computers using my unique design. The encephalitic input/output device. It is 100 times faster than using a keyboard.’

‘Oh no,’ said Jack ‘You’re not suggesting shaving all my hair off are you?’

‘No way. I won’t do it. Anything but my hair.’ It was Kate. She was positively swooning at the thought.

‘No my English friends. You don’t need to use the brain hugger like the technicians. Only they will have skin with hideous and protruding scabs.’

He looked over at Marshall as he asked him a further question. ‘So the interpreters are technicians, that’s why they can train us?’

‘Yes Marshall but for the game, I repeat, the use of the keyboard is sufficiently fast.’ All the children sighed with relief. ‘However, I have a special surprise for you five. You will form a neural network with me to enable you to learn the new game more quickly. You have to consider me as the enemy and try to beat me as best you can. Five against one. Are you willing to take my challenge?’

‘You bet,’ said Roger and Timmo in unison and they all climbed into the AICs that surrounded Techno’s. They started to play the game, “world domination two”. Each giant screen was divided into four sections and were labelled as the top stock market names in the world. The FTSE from England, The Dax from Germany, The Dow Jones from America and The Nikkei from Japan. On this version of the game, they were restricted to playing with a single commodity in one session. Firstly they battled over gold and watched the graphs mark their progress in the world markets. Then they tried silver and finally four hours after starting their battle with Techno, they were trading in platinum. Suddenly their screens went blank and Techno called them out of the AICs.

‘That was excellent play, gamers. You tried hard but failed to beat me. Does anyone know why?’

They were shaking their heads until Marshall piped up. ‘Because you designed the game and therefore you can anticipate all of our moves.’

‘Exactly Marshall. I counteracted your moves before you even made them. That is the key to the new version. Think three moves ahead. But that is enough for a while, go for lunch and I will see you later.’

The children trundled away and over lunch they compared their performances.

Only Roger remained thoughtful. ‘You know what happened this morning?’

Timmo replied. ‘Yes of course, we tried the new game and he tested us to see if we were better than him.’

‘No, I have a theory. I think we played on the real stock markets and he controlled our output so that he could see what impact we really had, on real commodity prices. It was a live test.’

Jack intervened. ‘If that’s right Splodger we need to move fast. If all 100 children are trained over the next few days and are neutrally networked the world markets will fall apart within a few hours of the terrorist’s cyber attack.’

Techno walked into MM’s private office on level one. She was sat watching the red figures dancing across the twelve TV screens in front of her. Each screen was tuned in to the three commodities of gold, silver and platinum on the four main stock markets. She turned to him.

‘The results are brilliant Techno.’ She didn’t compliment him, only the results. ‘The children with your guidance and programs have made the commodities plunge 20 per cent after a morning’s work. Imagine what will happen on MD day.’ She cackled and rubbed her hands together.

‘Can I see my mother MM?’ He knew she was being held hostage on level two but didn’t know where. ‘Now I’m back, I’d like to see her...please?’ He was whining and knew it but couldn’t stop himself.

She considered the appeal. In three days time his job would be terminated. Her geek in America could take over her enterprise systems from the new control centre in Japan and Techno could be dispensed with – that was a job for Biceps. It wouldn't hurt to see his mother, psychologically it might keep him under her control. After all she had his brother, not that he realised.

'Of course my dear, of course.' She buzzed Biceps using her iPhone6. 'Meet Techno at the west side of level two, where our special guest is enjoying our hospitality.' She turned away from him and started to watch the screens again and dream of controlling the world.

* * *

Biceps was waiting by two ninja who were guarding door 44. Few people knew what lay behind the grey steel doors on the west side of level two but he was one of them. It was his area, a place of torture and imprisonment, somewhere you never came out of...but Techno was oblivious to the danger. He just wanted to see his mum. He watched as Biceps input the code to unlock the door, immediately it swung against the cave wall with an almighty clang which made Techno jump in fear. Biceps laughed at him and made sure he slammed it shut after they had entered to scare Techno a second time. Techno was on edge, he had never been so worried about his future, his life, and although he had told no one, he didn't want all these innocent children corrupted by his evil mistress. He had lost his mum and dad and couldn't remember his brother and therefore his emotions were stirred by the sight of all the child prisoners.

Biceps pushed rudely past him and led the way down a series of stairs. Eventually they ended up at a door numbered 444. Biceps placed his thumb on the mini ID screen by the lock and it hissed sideways on its pneumatic hinges.

He bowed mockingly to Techno. 'Your wish is my command Techno.'

'Thank you.'

'No don't thank me. Thank Madame Musseine and by the way, be quick.' Biceps stood to one side and closed the door using the thumbprint reader after Techno had passed through it. Inside wasn't a cell, not even a single room. It was a suite of four rooms. A lounge, a bathroom, a kitchen and a bedroom. Not grand, but nice. Very clean and also warm. As he looked into the bathroom he noticed the fire detectors on the ceiling and guessed the quarters would have secret cameras and microphones. He realised he needed to be careful what he said as he glanced inside the kitchen and then the bathroom. Mrs Hines was sat on a green leather sofa watching Sky news in the lounge. The Sky finance team were discussing the meltdown of the commodities market and explaining that no one could explain why it had occurred. Techno looked at her, she had aged badly in the ten years since he had left. She was worn out, her hair was grey, her face thin and her eyes were red and tired. Why had he made her suffer so?

'Mum.' His voice trailed off into a sob as she looked up.

'Robert? Is that really you Robert?' They met halfway between sitting and standing and hugged, tears were pouring down their cheeks. It took five minutes before they could talk sensibly, as they sat holding hands on the sofa.

'Why are you here Robert?'

'I work for the owner of the volcano. I have done since I left East London.'

'Work? What sort of work?'

‘Technical stuff, computers and things.’

She had found an inner courage since her imprisonment. ‘They say I can leave if their mission is successful. Soon they say.’

He thought about it. ‘No one ever left here alive mum.’ Stroking her hair, he made her a promise. ‘But you will be back in London soon mum, no more than a week I hope.’

She smiled at him but was still sad. ‘The big hulk.’

‘Biceps is his name.’

‘Yes the big ugly one told me to behave or’ she shuddered, ‘or Marshmallow would be hurt.’

It was her pet name for his brother.

‘Who is Marshmallow?’

‘Your brother Marshall. He’s also here!’ She tapped the side of her head with her fingers. ‘Of course you don’t know we changed our names. Your brother is Marshall Hines.’ Techno went completely white and sat back against the arm of the sofa. His heart had stopped for a moment with the shock. It took a minute before he could breathe. He gasped several times. How could he be so stupid. A four year old would be 14 by now, it was obvious. A little boy nicknamed Marshmallow had become Marshall. Techno was white with fury. He kept his head down, looking away from the secret cameras.

‘Don’t worry about Marshall mum. He’ll be fine. Trust me, I’ve seen him.’

She grabbed his shoulders. ‘Is he okay? Where is he.’

‘Don’t worry mum I’ve spoken with him. He is happy and well. But this time, trust me, because nothing is more important than my family.’ He hugged her close again and promised to return and then her grown-up boy was gone. She sat and listened to the news. The stock markets had gone mad and plunged for no apparent reason in four different countries over the 12 hours it took for the sun to pass over them.

* * *

Jack, Kit Kat, Marshall and Splodger had spent the afternoon and early evening in sector four and had been playing on the 4-dimensional reality games. The best was “combat 6”, where all four stood on a 10 metre square matrix, wearing specialist helmets to feed in the real images with sound and the 4th dimension – reality. There was nowhere else in the world that such a system existed, although Microsoft had been rumoured to be developing something similar. The reality was from Techno’s mind and most of the software had been stolen from the huge US corporation. Into each battle scene, he had fed a random set of parameters taken from actual events in the last Iraq war. This included suffering from foot rot to blood sucking spiders piercing their trousers and sucking their veins dry. So as they moved around on the mat, they fought through the 3D scenes presented in their helmets as if in real life and then with a reality twist. All of them thought it was fabtastic but had to be careful to tone down their fighting moves or questions would be asked. A child leaping two metres into the air would have certainly been unusual. Caging their natural instincts was tough but essential as Wolf had advised them to keep the power suits on at all times. The underwear might save their lives.

Timmo had been bored. He played a few games in the arcade in between watching the others on the “combat 6” mat. He watched them scale the indoor climbing wall with ease, when everyone else failed around them was failing and when they had resolved to explore the volcano he had reluctantly agreed to stay behind.

Techno approached him with a smile. He had spent an hour calming down after visiting his mum and had come to enquire about his little friend’s health. They sat either side of a table

and set out a chess set made in the shape of African animals that prowled outside. A lion and lioness were the king and queen, a hippo was a rook. Eventually they started to play. Chess was Timmo's speciality because of the way his mind worked and he found it easy to assess the game three moves ahead. However, it was all new to Techno, who was pleased to learn the game off Timmo. Therefore, Timmo immediately had the upper hand and won the first three games.

'Where are your gang?' Techno's head was lowered as he considered whether to move his hyena.'

'Exploring, you know, here and there.' Of course Techno knew they were mini spies, MM had told him. But he wasn't worried about them spying anymore, he just wanted to see Marshall. How MM had found out, he had no idea, but he knew they were being watched even as they played.

'You need to tell your friends from me, that they need to stop their exploring.' Timmo heard the guarded warning behind the words. Techno looked up at him. 'You are a good boy with nice friends. Why did you come here?'

'Because of the game of course.' But Timmo was a bad liar, his mum and dad always knew when he lied and so he tried not to. Lack of practice, made him an even worse liar.

'Seriously Timmo, this is a dangerous place and you and your gang shouldn't make it any more dangerous. Okay?'

'Okay' he replied.

'Please watch out, I know everything and I am seriously worried about you.' He stood up quickly. 'Come on then, let's go and find the others.' He grabbed the wheelchair's handles and whirled it through 360 degrees as a bit of fun to make Timmo laugh. Then he pushed the chair towards a lift to take them to level two. Where else would mini spies be lurking?

* * *

Twip Twop was hiding behind a large outcrop of rock staring at the friends as they peered through a door on level two. They watched the ninjas assembling nearby whilst above their heads was an almost silent gyroscope circling at slow speed in the enormous space. It came into land and then took off again. It was safer for pilots to practise inside the volcano and away from prying satellites or drones. He crept up behind the spies as they watched the ninja practising their karate skills. At least two of the fighters had already been carried off the rubber matting to the sick bay for attention to their injuries.

Twip Twop was now right behind them. 'Boo!' They all jumped and their hearts beat faster when they turned and saw it was the mad albino. 'If you see a few of our helpers around, you should be happy little ones as they are here to protect you. But please don't talk to them as they only speak Japanese.'

'Sorry' said Jack, 'we were just exploring and saw the wonderful exhibition put on by the helpers, so erm... we stopped to admire them.'

'Silly little children. Prying into places best avoided. Mark my words, prying can hurt you.' He had been told by MM to watch them closely and keep her informed of their activities. She had decided that they couldn't harm her or her plans but since the information had dried up from Matthews she was now running blind. Mad Twip Twop pulled a small dagger from the back of his trouser waistband and moved closer to Kate. 'You see, I don't like children and I especially don't like nosy children.' He lifted the knife to rest under her nose, a thin red line of blood oozed from the fine cut it inflicted but he held it steady, just for fun.

Jack moved to her side. 'I don't think that's very pleasant Twit.' He flexed his arms to loosen up, to be ready for action. Twip Twop levelled his knife at Jack's heart. The corruption of his name was very upsetting.

Sneering and with saliva dripping down his chin he challenged the leader. 'Mr George, the king of the pack. Thinks he's a big man now.' The knife pricked at Jack's chest lifting a few fibres off his sweatshirt.

'Hoy, you! Put the knife down.' Techno and Timmo came closer but the albino barely moved after Techno's shout. 'I said, MM wouldn't be happy with treating our young visitors to a piece of thuggery.' Techno left Timmo a few metres away and came close to Twip Twop. He put his mouth to his ear. 'Got it?' His voice was stronger than the children remembered. The albino moved the blade upwards and sliced open the front of Jack's sweatshirt.

'I was just playing Techno.' He turned and walked away from the group.

'Are you all okay?' Techno looked around. He stared at his brother for a few seconds. 'Get going you lot and stay away from trouble.' He stepped past them and walked into the training area, allowing them to gracefully turn their backs and return to their accommodation.

As they walked away, it was Roger who informed the group about what they had seen. 'They aren't helpers, they are ninjas. The most deadly fighters in the world of terrorism.'

'But not as good as the SAS splodger.' Kate was trying to boost her confidence.

'Not as good as...better in fact. Consider this. We are inside their volcano. They must have loads of defence systems and we have no idea what their plans are. So that makes us weak.'

'I disagree,' said Jack, 'we are well trained and as innocent as can be. Who would suspect five innocent children are spies?'

‘Techno knows.’ It was Timmo from his wheelchair. They stopped walking and he told them about the conversation over the game of chess. ‘But it seemed like he wanted to help somehow. I dunno, it was really strange bro.’

Jack was thoughtful. ‘Maybe he could be an ally for us but remember we can also pull a surprise or two. All we need to do is find the key to the real game. If I insert the memory stick into Techno’s AIC, we could download their plan of action and software.’ They were all quiet considering their options. ‘Thing is, in any good game there is a always software key. Without that key we won’t be able to stop them.’

‘That has to be in the one place that no one goes into.’ Kate astounded everyone once again.

‘That’s brilliant Kit Kat. How do you know these things?’ As her embarrassment grew, Jack continued. ‘So the one place no one goes is level four. Right?’

‘Sounds like we need to visit’ said Timmo.

Jack shook his head. ‘We, is the wrong word bro. You can’t do much with that broken leg.’

Timmo was disappointed but at least he could literally “sit guard”.

Jack made them form a circle and rest their arms on each other’s shoulders like a group of rugby or football players before a big game. ‘Remember guys, we have two objectives here.

One is to upload the master data onto my memory stick and get it back to Brett in Kenya. Two,’ he paused, ‘Do you know what? I’ve forgotten point number two...’ he said lamely.

‘And two,’ said Kate, ‘is to stay safe and survive until we are rescued.’

‘No it’s not’ replied Timmo in a whisper. He sat in his wheelchair at the centre of the foursome. ‘Two, is to beat the baddies and save the world no matter what.’

Marshall scowled. ‘Hang on you three, the number two objective is to escape and not hang around here. The yanks could nuke the volcano if they really wanted to save the world.’

'No, no, no' said an exasperated Roger. 'Two is to save the world, beat the baddies and get home safe and sound as soon as we possibly can. Is that agreed?' They all nodded their assent before they headed towards McDonalds for their third burger of the afternoon. It was Jack's turn to push his brother which was unfortunate for Timmo as Jack kept letting go of the wheelchair handles on each incline so that it careered away as if out of control. Then Jack would run after it and catch it at the moment just before it crashed. That's what brothers do.

* * *

The next day 100 screens set within 100 AICs were logged onto "world domination two". Techno had been instructed by MM to network all the players to information downloaded from the world's financial markets the day before. Every worldwide transaction for commodities and stocks and shares had been recorded to a massive database and 500 of the biggest companies were being used as assets by the oblivious children. However, there was a devious twist unbeknown to Techno. It was still using the program which had been taken from Techno's secure files by her geek in LA. However, the yank had inserted her unique viruses into Techno's software, which would be triggered by the software key safely located on level four. Twenty minutes before the meltdown of the world's markets on MD day, she would insert the key, which was an SD card, into Techno's AIC and double the trouble created by the 100 children. It was a stroke of genius, a stroke of pure evil. The currently friendly countries would be friends for a few months, maybe for a year and then she would take over their markets too with her secret teams in the States and Japan. She would rule the world using her secret software lying in the depths of the world's computer servers.

* * *

The children were free to watch anything that happened on level three. Although they couldn't get close to the engineering section, they could sit on a gallery and watch and so they took it in turns in bands of two to roam throughout the level and fully explore it. They couldn't find an obvious way to access level four but they did manage to watch a host of gyroscopes leaving the mountain via a large steel door on the northern side of the volcano. Ten of the machines sped across the concrete and into the open air with barely a whisper as the exhaust designs were so effective. They resembled a flock of giant crows as they sped away on a trial mission to help the Somali warlords running the modern pirates for Madame Musseine. The warlords fed back any captured arms from the ships intercepted off the African coast. The new use of gyroscopes would help counter the threat from the Navies of the West, principally France, Britain and the USA. MM had instructed the warlords that they could keep anyone they captured for ransom and that all she wanted were the arms. She was watching the trial mission from her bedroom using a TV link via her two lead gyroscopes. MM shouted with glee as the machines gracefully landed on six large container ships as the pirates' RIBs came alongside. None of the ship's crews were prepared for a simultaneous attack from the air and sea as the ninjas helped the pirates take each ship. She turned the TV off so she could sleep, after all it would take a day for the pirates to reach friendly waters off the small ports of Somalia. Then they would unload the arms to larger boats and send them to Dar Es Salaam for MM's men to transport by helicopter to Mount Kilimanjaro. She snored happily, dreaming of world domination. She was sat on a throne in Windsor Castle receiving the heads of state from the most powerful countries in the world.

Chapter 10

Who dares wins

Many of MM's child guests had been in the volcano for up to two weeks and the natives were getting restless. It was against this background that MM, with a certain amount of resentment, decided a safari might be good for them all to maintain their interest and divert their attention from the increasing homesickness. She had caved in to Techno's suggestion, after all, another two days and it would all be over. So a little diversion might help ease the tension.

Jack's gang first heard the dissent at breakfast that morning. The Irish contingent were sat at the next table.

A small boy about Timmo's age was complaining. 'I miss my mum, she always cuddled me before I went to sleep.'

A larger more loutish lad rudely replied. 'Shut up you wimp, you're such a mummy's boy. Get a life and have some fun. There are no parents to order us around, we eat McDonalds every day and play constantly with no school. What more could you ask for?'

The little boy thought about it for a minute. 'I would ask for some proper food, a homemade steak and kidney pie with spotted dick and custard for pudding and I want a grown-up to tell me what to do and when to do it.'

The lout pushed him, 'see, you're a great wimp.'

'No I'm not, I'm not scared or anything. I thought it would be fun without parents, gaming all day and stuff. But really, it's boring. I'd rather be at school with my real friends passing messages in the classroom or playing Gaelic football.'

'You wimp, you're just crazy, no one even likes Gaelic football, real soccer's far better.'

'It's in our culture you Protestant.'

‘Idiot.’ The bigger boy stood and pushed the smaller one off the bench seat. ‘Shut up you Catholic wimp or next time I’ll thump you so hard you won’t get up.’ The smaller boy cowered on the floor, closely watched by Jack. He left his friends and walked across to help the small boy to his feet and then turned to face the bully.

‘Next time you want to pick on someone, pick on me.’

The bully stood eye to eye with Jack but after a few moments he sat down murmuring. ‘We are all entitled to our opinions.’

‘Sure,’ said Jack, ‘just like people in Libya and the other countries in The Arab Spring in 2011. They wanted freedom of speech but dictators no different to you had stopped them.’

‘I dunno mate, don’t get het up about it, it was just a lark.’

Jack eased up on him. ‘Remember those people had to fight for their rights. We are here having an easy time for two weeks and so you should try and show respect for other’s opinions. Right?’ He leaned over the bigger boy until he heard a murmured okay in reply. Jack nonchalantly rejoined the others, who were impressed by how he handled the situation.

‘It’s not all about money and power is it Jack?’ Kate looked for support. MM’s master plan was scaring her as they drew closer to action. ‘This stuff, what we’re doing. You see, I don’t understand how it will benefit us kids.’

‘No Kit Kat. There are more important things in life than money and power, all the subjective things like love and family. The trouble is, most of these children have forgotten the truth about modern life. How easy we have it, in places like the UK and Europe. They don’t think about children near here with no food or water. No Kit Kat, money isn’t everything but the safe and stable structure of our society lulls us into a false sense of security. Everything comes easy in our lives and we all exist in a privileged way.’

She turned away from him, sometimes she found it painful talking with Jack. She imagined she loved Jack, just like The Prince and Princess stories from her Disney books. She was beginning to have teenage urges. She had even imagined him kissing her gently on her lips and then instantly dismissed it from her mind. Shaking her head, she grimaced at the thought but felt hotter, with a strange little tingle down her back.

* * *

The children were due to go on safari in two batches. Jack's gang were in the first batch and ready to go at 10 am.

As they stood next to their assigned Landrover, Madame Musseine started to address them from the gallery above their heads. 'It is with the greatest pleasure, that I give you a final present.' All the gamers roared in appreciation apart from the English. In the next two hours, you will see leaping lions, huge hippopotamuses and riotous rhinos.'

Roger was muttering as they watched her. 'Lions lie about and rarely leap, hippos are quite small and rhinos only riot if you get too close.'

MM continued. 'Enjoy your safari my little ones, soon we will win, we will conquer. You are all part of my gang now. The Black Hand Gang.' The children dutifully held up their left hands, all died with permanent black ink since their arrival. A klaxon sounded high above the vehicles and they all climbed into the cabs. Slowly, in line astern, 20 Landrovers left the safety of the volcano.

As soon as they appeared outside, Wolf was alerted by the SAS surveillance team hidden on the foothills, 6 kilometres away. Two men were in the team and had parachuted into position a week before. This ensured they could avoid detection by the Maasai informers. The soldiers

had spotted the metal snake appear from the door in the volcano and sent a coded signal to London via the “comms” satellite silently crossing Africa in the outer stratosphere above. Wolf quickly pulled up the satellite video link to watch the Landrovers’s progress and dialled Brett on his cell phone. ‘Morning, have you got this?’

Brett was aghast. ‘My god, why is she letting the kids outside?’

‘I suppose it is a way of warning us to back off. The message is simple – Look, they’re alive but don’t mess with me or else.’

Brett considered MM’s motives. ‘I think your right Wolf. I’m making for the Hummer now. Send me the convoy’s coordinates every five minutes and I will get as close as I can. You never know, they may be in it and get a chance to give us the memory stick.’ Brett ran for the huge metal beast and gunned it into life and then raced down the dirt track leading to the Tanzanian border.

The Landrovers had spread out over a 30 square kilometre area. It was Kate who decided to hang her pink jacket out of the window as a signal to any watching friendly eyes. Everyone except the driver noticed and silently applauded her cleverness. That was until the rhino saw it through blinking and unfriendly eyes. Their vehicle was closing on a small pool that the driver knew contained hippos and so he didn’t notice the mother rhino and the two-week-old calf standing under a chunky baobab tree. As he revved the engine to scare the hippos into some action to entertain the kids, the rhino charged.

‘Look out,’ it was Kit Kat who screamed first, closely followed by the rest including the driver. The two tonne animal slammed into the side of the Landrover and rolled it onto its side. Everyone fell on top of each other and the driver’s head was smashed on the windscreen, which knocked him unconscious. The vehicle had stopped moving and lay dead. Once the rhino had circled around the cabin, she decided to retreat back to her calf under the

tree. But she watched the opposition for any sudden movement and was quite prepared to charge again.

‘Quiet, everyone stay quiet.’ Jack took command. ‘What can you see?’ Kit Kat slowly raised her head out of the open side window, which was now facing a perfect blue sky. She glanced around quickly and pulled her head down as the rhino snorted from 50 metres distance.

‘The rhino’s really close Jack, we can’t get out.’

‘Perhaps someone will rescue us if we try the radio?’ Timmo’s idea was great until they tried it and found it had been broken in the crash.

‘We could get out and push the Landrover back onto its wheels, then we could drive back to Kilimanjaro?’ They all looked at Roger, who was intelligent but not very practical.

Marshall replied. ‘Great thinking mate. What about the rhino and who the hell can drive?’

‘Ah! Point taken.’ Roger started to rethink his bright idea before continuing. ‘The problem is, I can smell diesel leaking out of the tank...’ They all realised they were between a rock and a hard place. Get charged by a rhino or die in a vehicle fire. ‘Maybe we should try running for it?’

Marshall pointed out the practical issue. ‘It would kill Timmo first as he’d be so slow.’ That was when they heard an engine. Jack clambered up the bench seat and pushed himself against Kate to get his head out of the side window. She blushed bright red as he leaned his hard body against her soft one. On his right he could see a camouflaged Hummer. Its window was wound down as Brett levelled his dart gun at the rhino. Jack heard the blast of air as the dart hit the rhino. Within five minutes the beast had sunk to its knees and finally lay on its side, fast asleep.

The yank walked up to the Landrover and pulled open the door. ‘Need any help Limeys?’ Boy were they glad to see Brett. ‘I’m going to rig a steel cable around your axle and pull you

upright with my Hummer, so hold on tight.’ They braced themselves as they crashed back onto their tyres. He walked back and undid the cable before standing alongside. ‘All OK then?’

‘How did you know?’ It was Roger who asked.

‘Satellites and the SAS. Remember we are here to help if anything goes wrong. So...’ He looked at the children and the still unconscious driver. ‘I need to make myself scarce, do you have a package for us yet?’

‘Sorry Brett,’ Jack apologised, ‘we’ll try harder, we are really sorry.’

‘Don’t apologise, just do your best and most importantly, stay safe. Now then, who can drive the Landie?’

‘I can.’ They looked at Marshall in amazement. ‘I nicked a car with a mate once,’ he too wanted to apologise, ‘everyone was doing it in my neighbourhood!’

Brett was abrupt, ‘don’t bother with all that Marshall, just do it, and go slowly.’ And then he was gone before the Maasai or another Landrover had time to appear.

* * *

Back in the volcano, the children sat on Jack’s bed in their quarters. The safari hadn’t distracted them at all, unlike the rest of the gamers, who were now more relaxed with each other. The team were leaning their heads close to Jack’s as he spoke softly. It was a wise precaution against hidden microphones or lip synching CCTV.

‘Look we know something is going to happen soon and so we need to make a move.’

‘I’m scared Jack. Is that honest enough?’ It was Kit Kat who had spoken. ‘This is the scariest thing I can imagine.’

Timmo's wheelchair had been shunted next to the bed. 'What? Scarier than having teeth out at the dentist in Chester?'

'One hundred times worse,' she replied.

'Really?' said Timmo, 'How many teeth have you had out at one time, cos I had four big ones out in the spring, and they used gas!'

'Listen you two, just focus on the mission please.' It was Marshall who had intervened.

'Listen to Jack.'

Jack continued more forcibly. 'One step at a time okay? First I need to take the memory stick and find a place where we can upload their plans.'

Roger pointed out the obvious. 'That may be easy but how do you propose to get it to Brett?'

There was no answer at first. 'Somehow okay? First the upload, second we have to find the key. Has anyone got any ideas?'

'The easiest place to access their IS network has to be Techno's AIC.'

'That's a great idea splodger. What about the key?'

Splodger had an idea. 'I suggest Timmo and I try to get closer to Techno as he seems to like us. You know, follow him around, just like real spies would.'

'Great, then it's settled. I'll wake you at 3 am and we can head to Techno's AIC. Timmo, you have to stay here tonight with Marshall and then tomorrow you will both be fresh and alert to work on Techno.' They all moved to their separate beds and Jack walked to the light switch. 'Night everyone, see you at breakfast.' He turned the light off and climbed into his bed. It was a cold evening and he snuggled under the covers as much for a sense of security as warmth.

At 3 am, Jack's Casio watch alarm beeped three times. He was wide-awake as soon as it beeped after a fitful sleep. Quietly he slid out of bed and woke the others, leaving Timmo

and Marshall asleep. Within five minutes they were assembled by the door of their accommodation. He used the silent sign language learned on their training patrols at Brecon and motioned them forward. As they went down the dark corridor towards the AICs his team adopted standard SAS patrol procedures. One would dart forward on tiptoe and check the next junction. A second would move forward on the all clear signal. It was as if they had done it all their lives.

They crouched behind Techno's AIC. Only a handful of other AICs were in use that night as most of the technicians had acted as drivers on the safari. Therefore, the night shift had an official night off. Only the nerds were burning the midnight oil.

Jack sat cross-legged and twisted the heel of his trainer clockwise through 720 degrees. He then turned it backwards another 360 degrees. Immediately it popped off and the red memory stick fell into his hands. He whispered to the others. 'Roger, take my Swiss army knife and pick the door lock, then come back immediately. Kate, hide yourself nearby and watch for anyone coming. Come over and tap the walls of an AIC if you see anyone approaching.' The three children went about their tasks.

Roger arrived back and put his head close to Jack's. 'All done. By the way, when you put the memory stick in Techno's PC, Wolf said you needed to follow the instructions by inputting any commands as it uploads their data.

'Yep, so what?' Jack wasn't thinking.

'So use the brain hugger to save time.'

'I can't mate, I need a bald head.' Roger was silent for a few seconds.

'I know what you can do. The spinal cord is linked through the back of the neck to the cortex of the brain, so if you attached the four headsets side by side as close to the nape of your neck as possible, well then you dramatically reduce the time to siphon off their plans.'

‘You are so clever mate, that’s fabtastic. Then we have the same effect on data speed but no one will see the bite marks beneath the collar of my sweatshirt, especially if I leave it turned up.’

‘Exactly’ said Roger, ‘Just like that love bite you got off Kit Kat.’ Jack punched his friend hard on the arm.

‘I never!’

‘Did too!’

Kate had returned and was listening aghast. ‘For goodness sake you two. Stop arguing, we need three minutes to download their plans so get on with it.’ She looked anxiously up and down the lines of AICs. The giant snails sat stationary but in her mind’s eye, they were closing together to devour her.

Roger handed Jack, Timmo’s 3D glasses. Jack gestured why? By shrugging his shoulders. ‘Just take them, it was Timmo’s idea.’ Jack left the two of them and entered the AIC, silently closing the door behind him.

He punched the power button and waited. ‘What would Techno have done to protect his secrets? The door was too easy to open.’ He was thinking hard. Before he reached for the brain hugger the screen brightened, it looked hazy and he couldn’t make out any of the start up messages. He slid the memory stick into the USB socket alongside the screen. Colours flickered across the screen but still he couldn’t make anything out. He put his hands on his head in exasperation and then he felt the 3D glasses perched on top of his forehead. Pulling them over his eyes he was amazed to see the messages on the screen centralise and become totally visible. ‘Good boy bro.’ He reached for the brain huggers and gasped as they dug their brain-seeking claws into his neck. He felt the warm blood as it trickled down his back but immediately he was in command and started to think his way through the program. The

commands came through on the screen every ten seconds. It was a simple tick list which fronted the antivirus detection software. As no barriers were encountered he just kept hitting the enter button. Within a minute it was all over and he had the data on the stick which he secreted back into the heel of his trainer. Pressing the off button on the PC, he glanced around before leaving the AIC and joining his friends. He did a joyous thumbs up to them all and motioned everyone to move back towards their beds.

The four friends were gasping for breath, it wasn't the silent run from the scene of their espionage, it was constant fear of discovery. And then they arrived at a relatively safe area. The gang were hiding in a darkened corner of sector one, on level three. They were crouched and leaning against the cold rock of the cavern. No one spoke, it wasn't safe. The AICs were 200 metres to their left, the fun zone was to their right and a safe and secure bed was behind them.

Jack had his hands on his knees as he quietly spoke to Roger who leaned next to him. 'All we need to do now, is get it to Brett.' He stood up and placed his hands on the rock wall behind him. It was slightly damp as the warm air of the volcano had condensed on the colder rock face. Jack took a few more deep breaths. He was thinking fast. 'Have we got any spare time left this morning splodger?'

Roger gave the answer. 'Well it's about 3.30 am now. The AICs are still partly manned but everywhere else is relatively dead apart from a few weirdos in the fun zone. Why do you ask?'

'Remember the gyroscopes in sector two?'

'You are joking Jack.' Roger was appalled. 'You can't fly one for a start and if someone sees you.'

‘They have SAM missiles!’ Kate was scared of losing Jack.

Jack smiled and pulled his friends closer to him, he could smell Kate’s perfume. What a girly girl, wearing perfume on a mission. ‘Look, we are talking about the fate of the civilised world here. It’s not a computer game anymore. Kate, leave this to us and go back to bed.’ She didn’t want to leave her Jack but he gave her no choice. Kate turned away to follow the rock wall back towards their accommodation, staying in the shadows to avoid detection by CCTV.

She hadn’t argued with Jack, which made the mission run smoothly. A strong leader was essential.

As Jack led Roger towards the gyroscope hanger, he whispered to his pal, ‘they must fly like a plane, and anyway, I’m only going to borrow one.’ Roger stayed quiet. He thought his friend had gone barking mad. Within five minutes Jack was sat in the small cockpit of a gyroscope close to the hangar door. He was looking down at the controls as Roger pointed out the obvious similarities with the plane they had flown. They were both whispering and occasionally glancing around but there were no guards. Jack started to play with the satnav which was just like in his dad’s car. Quickly Jack input the latitude and longitude given to him by Brett in the carpark. He looked around at the controls for a last time. Turning on the cloaking would be easy, there was a large red button and underneath it was written the word “cloak”.

‘Give us your watch Roger, I can’t see my Casio in the dark, it’s an old LCD.’ His friend handed his watch over. ‘Use the clock on the wall mate and stick exactly with the timing I’m going to give you. Is that okay?’

‘You are stark staring bonkers Jack.’

‘Yep.’

Roger decided to do the calculations, maths wasn't Jack's strongest subject at school. 'Okay then, assuming 15 minutes to Outspan based on the satnav, 7 minutes on the ground and 15 back, I will reopen the hangar door in exactly 37 minutes, okay?'

'Okay splodge, just make sure you don't get caught here.'

'Never mind me, I can find a good hiding place nearby.' He was quite emotional, 'good luck Jack and break a leg.'

'What?'

'It's an expression they use in the theatre, "break a leg", it means good luck.'

'Whatever mate, see you in half an hour.'

'40 minutes!'

'Yep that too, bye mate.'

Roger ran towards the door controls and Jack started the engine on the gyroscope. It was almost soundless. He pressed the red button of the cloaking device and kicked on both foot pedals to release the brakes – just like in the Cessna. The force of the propeller immediately drove the machine across the floor at high speed and towards the door as it gaped open. Gaining speed the machine went over the precipice beyond the door as Roger pressed the close button and settled down to wait behind some barrels of diesel.

'Flippin heck.' Jack never usually swore but as the gyroscope skated out of the door, it fell off the edge of the ledge, leaving him plunging at 45 degrees down the side of the volcano. For a moment, fear made him panic. He knew the engine was running, turning the large propeller and he was valiantly pulling backwards on the joystick. But, the gyroscope continued its plunge, even in the dark night he could make out the rocks 500 metres below and getting closer every second.

Then it dawned on him. There was a lever by his right that had five different positions. It must alter the position of the top rotor. He jerked it to the opposite setting and immediately the gyroscope started to lift out of its dive. Five degrees at a time, it slowly veered away from the cliff face and just as he was about to crash and die it reached level flight. He missed the ground by 10 metres and manipulating the flight lever he climbed a little higher and set off towards Outspan at an altitude of 100 metres, high enough to miss any trees but low enough to make sure MM's guards on the outside of the volcano didn't see him silhouetted against the sky. Jack felt his heart beating hard against his chest and dragged in large gulps of air to calm himself down. After a few minutes he had regained his self control and steered more to the west to bring up the correct course on the satnav and then he relaxed.

'This is so cool, if only Kit Kat could see me now' and then he dismissed the thought and concentrated on the horizon. It took only 10 minutes to reach the hotel, which he circled above at about 50 metres altitude hoping to draw Brett's attention. He could barely see the outline of the building but there was definitely a ribbon of water, maybe a stream alongside. Then he spotted the flares. Brett had heard the whispering motor in the dead of night and guessed it was important. He had taken a gamble on it being a friend and not a foe. He was running below Jack on the flat bank of the stream lighting flares every few metres to make a short runway.

Jack put her down as soon as he could see ten smouldering white flares lying in the grass. He used a combination of the throttle and the lever, which changed the angle of the rotor to slow his descent and after a few bumps he was stationary. A dark figure loomed alongside him.

'I knew you could do it Jack.' Brett hugged him tightly and could feel the boy shudder as he sobbed, the fear coming out in a gush of emotion. 'Come on agent, you're safe now. You don't need to go back in there.'

Jack stopped crying and handed over the memory stick. 'I am going back Brett. Roger is opening the door in exactly 15 minutes time.'

'No Jack, enough is enough. Come on, let me get this transmitted to London so they can decipher it and then you can go to bed here.'

'No Brett, I'm going back for my friends and you can't persuade me otherwise.' Brett heard the emotion in his voice but he couldn't see his determined face.

'The game's over Jack. Matthews has betrayed you all to MM and Marshall's brother works for her.'

'Who's the brother?' It was terse and clipped.

'The driver of the speedboat. Not the albino, the thin gawky one. His name is Robert Jones, his mum changed the family name to Hines after he had run away from home.'

'Oh god, it's Techno. He's one of MM's three most trusted henchmen and acts as her geek.'

Brett breathed out heavily. 'Marshall and Robert's mother disappeared in the summer so we think she may be held hostage in the volcano. It's the only logical conclusion, she is held there to make Techno complete the job but we don't know for sure. By using Techno's brother and mother, MM has total control over the man who designed and initiated the software. As I said, the game's over mate.'

'Brett, you don't know me very well do you? The game's not over until I stop playing.' Brett heard the determination this time. The nearest flare was starting to flicker before it went out.

'In that case, you need to go immediately before the flares completely fade. Good luck Jack.'

Jack spun the gyroscope through 180 degrees by gunning the engine in three short bursts and stamping his left pedal. Then he slammed the throttle forward, moved the rotor lever and set off at speed. Pulling on the joystick he lifted her off the ground and narrowly missed an acacia tree. As he swung the gyroscope back towards Mount Kilimanjaro he could see that it

was appearing in front of him as the early dawn breached the horizon. He needed to be quick or the external guards would see him. It seemed to Jack, that the flight took hours instead of a few minutes. As he closed on the mountain he could make out a tiny rectangle of light on the northern slope and headed directly for it. He glanced at Roger's Rolex watch, the fluorescent face and hands helped him calculate that he had been gone 41 minutes. One minute too long. As he came closer to the hangar door and its landing ledge, he could see the shutter starting to drop. Roger must have thought that he wasn't returning. He watched in horror as it fell slowly and immediately gunned the engine so that he hit the rock ledge too hard. The gyroscope bounced on its rubber tyres and rose a metre off the ground. It was level with the closing door but as it settled onto the rock for a second time, it crept under the half-closed door and into the hangar. Jack cut the engine and hit the brakes making the machine shudder as it slowed. In front of him were six other gyroscopes and he would hit them in a few seconds. He kicked the right pedal and locked a brake and to Roger's amazement Jack's machine spun into the exact parking spot he had left 42 minutes earlier.

'Flip, flip and flip again.' He was pouring sweat and totally exhausted from all the adrenaline.

Roger ran up. 'I can't believe you did that. It was better than James Bond!'

He helped his hero to climb out of the seat and they both ran for the door and hid behind the barrels.

Jack clasped Roger's arm. 'We did it Roger, we flipping did it.'

'No Jack, you did it, that was better than fantastic, it was out of this world.'

The smiling boys quickly made their way back to the sleeping quarters.

Nothing more was said between them as they collapsed into their cots and closed their eyes in exhaustion.

It was all a dream, or more like a nasty nightmare.

Chapter 11

No mission is too hard

It was one day before the end of the world we know. A safe and stable place, organised, predictable, and utterly dependent on people's confidence in the world's financial systems. Whether it is the banks or pension funds, the companies and the currencies, people need to be reassured that their assets are safe. Without money in some form, the modern world cannot exist. Without computers to move that money there could be no possible "world domination". The combination of the two, made life unreal. This had made a lethal cocktail and the world was about to drink it. The Euro crash in 2011 had shaken the world and the political changes had resolved the problems but greed made people forget its lessons. The reality of "world domination" would set nation against nation, people against people as they accused one another of shattering their safe and secure existence.

After the antics of the night before, Jack seemed remarkably fresh and energetic. All five friends were standing at the foot of the climbing wall. Timmo was on his crutches, which he was finding hard to cope with and so Roger was standing close alongside to support him. Jack was upside down hanging from a rope and feeling dizzy as the blood rushed to his head. Marshall was horizontal at 2 metres above floor level as he clung to the artificial handholds and Kit Kat was sat on the floor examining her nails as she had broken one on an earlier climb.

'We have a mole' said Jack to them all.

'That's because we are underground Bro,' said Timmo.

'You dimmo, a mole, i.e. an informer within our ranks and that can only be one person.'

'Who?' asked Kate distractedly.

‘Remember who seems to play the game badly but was in the UK’s top five players?’

Roger summed it up. ‘It’s got to be Hines hasn’t it?’

They all stared upwards apart from Timmo who queried, ‘57 varieties?’

Jack was exasperated. ‘Hines not Heinz dimmo. Flip me you can be so thick sometimes.’

‘Oh! Marshall’s a spy!’ Finally, Timmo had caught on as he dumped his crutches in favour of the wheelchair.

‘Yes’ came a loud shout from the three friends.

‘No I’m not! I’m a friend not a foe.’ Marshall slowly let himself down and Jack twisted in a somersault to simultaneously land beside him.

Jack added. ‘When I saw Brett at Outspan last night he confirmed it. It’s obvious what has happened. Someone here has been manipulating Marshall’s scores on the game.’

‘I always knew I was rubbish at it.’ Marshall looked crestfallen.

Roger was quicker than the others. ‘Why would they do that?’

‘Brett told me that Techno is Marshall’s brother. Techno’s real name is Robert. Having his brother here makes Techno totally loyal as the gamemaster for Madame Musseine.’ Marshall was too upset to speak. His brother? Here!

Kate had lost her mum years before but she remembered the pain. It still hurt. ‘It’s not either of their faults Jack. We should feel sorry for both Robert and Marshall Hines.’

‘That’s it!’ Interjected Roger. ‘You are so clever Kate!’

‘Am I? Why?’

‘Because Techno... or Robert can’t know that Marshall is his brother or we would have noticed a difference in his behaviour.’

Kate followed the logic. ‘So MM can’t have used the info yet to bribe him, or we would have noticed how their relationship changed.’

‘And your point is?’ asked Jack.

‘My point is simple. If we reunite the brothers...well then Techno might join our side.’

A chorus of ‘fabtastic,’ ‘cool,’ and ‘maybes,’ came from the others.

Jack realised it was a watershed for his gang. ‘Are we going to crack this ourselves or call in the adults?’

Roger quoted Steve Job the deceased founder of Apple, who was his hero. ‘Death is the ultimate shared destination and so we should have courage to follow our hearts and intuition.’ The others laughed. They couldn’t understand why Roger worshipped the entrepreneur who had changed the modern world but none of them ever criticised as none of them were exactly normal children. Jack loved an obscure San Francisco band called “The Ebb and Flow” and believed he could conquer the world. Timmo at 9 years old already knew more about cars, tanks and planes than Jeremy Clarkson. Marshall was a hostage and in theory, a double agent and Kit Kat had conversations with her cat between flashes of psychic insights.

‘Roger you are wrong about death,’ said Kate, ‘there are many places to visit before the final destination. We are going to win through and we are not going to die Mr Morbid!’

‘How do you know Karmic Kate?’ The others laughed at her new nickname.

‘Because grandma predicted it and grandma’s are always right.’ It was an easy way out for her. Pretending grandma had all the visions of the future rather than her but she was still unsure about the things she sensed more often. She grabbed Timmo’s wheelchair handles and wedged the crutches behind his back before she started to move away. ‘Come on you lot, it’s time to eat some real food for a change and to celebrate our futures.’

‘Real food?’ Asked Timmo turning in his chair, ‘you don’t mean normal stuff?’

'Yes absolutely. Imagine I am your mum! You lot are going to the restaurant to eat a roast dinner with extra veg and Yorkshire puddings.' They were all smiling in in anticipation as they marched out of the fun zone and headed towards some normality.

* * *

Deep inside, each one of the children was scared, totally out of their depth. It was only the SAS training that kept them stable and on course with their impossible mission.

After their meal, Timmo and Marshall went in search of Techno. Jack felt it was the best combination to tackle him. Time was obviously short and they needed to find the software key but Marshall was also desperate to see his brother now he knew he was there. He pushed the wheelchair at speed as they cruised around level three.

Timmo turned in his chair. 'Perhaps he's with the boss or on level two checking up on security?'

'I need to see him now Timmo. Do you get it?'

'I do get it Marshall, but remember he doesn't know you, so don't just blurt it out okay?'

'"Kay", no worries.' They were wending their way through the fun zone for the third time when they saw him on the world series baseball game, which featured all the top countries playing across the world. Namely. America, Japan and...America. Techno swung his bat at the imaginary ball and watched it shoot into the "pixellated" crowd.'

'Robert?' Marshall grabbed his brother's shirt sleeve. Timmo sighed under his breath, there's nothing like a direct approach.

'No my name is Techno.' He looked away quickly. Timmo looked daggers at Marshall but to no avail.

‘No it aint. You’re my brother aint you?’ Techno looked into Marshall’s eyes. It was undeniable, he was his brother, flesh and blood and he loved him.

Techno’s voice was barely a whisper, ‘mum’s here too.’

‘You what?’ Marshall was shocked for the second time in two hours. It was his worst nightmare.

‘Our mum is held on level two in room 444. She’s here as a hostage to make me obey MM.’

Marshall’s voice cracked. ‘Is that why they manipulated my scores to get me here? Just to add a second hostage.’

‘Yes and I’m sorry. It’s all my fault for falling in with The Black Hand Gang years ago.’

Techno held up his left hand. ‘I thought it was bad losing a finger but now I realise that family are more important than expendable pieces of body.’ There was a long silence. ‘Come on, I want to show you my quarters, we can talk there, I know there’s no surveillance. They followed Techno at a distance of 50 metres as there was no sense in drawing attention to themselves. At the door to his accommodation, he beckoned them in and after checking the corridor to make sure no one had seen them, he quickly closed it behind him.

None of them had noticed Twip Twop stalking them.

* * *

Based on the assumption that MD day was going to happen within 24 hours, it was Techno’s idea to pull the whole group together and decide on what action to take. When he held Marshall close for the first time, he had cried. They were tears of torment after years living on the edge of reason. Genius runs parallel to madness and the new reality of his family being so close had saved him from insanity. He told everyone to meet in the fun zone and to

monopolise the replicas of the Formula one racing cars at 7 pm. He knew that there were no hidden microphones or cameras in that area and the group would not be noticed with him as they raced against each other.

The F1 cars howled like the real thing and jerked left and right as Kate, Marshall, Timmo and Roger threw them around the Suzuka circuit in Japan. Timmo was a lap ahead of the others by the time that Jack started a quiet conversation with Techno sandwiched between the replica cars. Jack knew Techno was their last chance to defeat MM, as now they were out of time. The CIA and MI6 boffins would take weeks to decipher the masses of data on the memory stick and devise some anti-virus software. Whereas the solution was here, inside the volcano.

‘Come on Robert, you have got to help us mate.’

‘Why? What can you do? They will kill my mum if I deviate one iota from MM’s plan.’

Jack thought quickly. ‘Look we need the key and then no one, even the other geek in LA won’t be able to start the reality program. They might have 100 minds linked into the world’s financial markets but without the key, the authorities might withstand the attack. For example, they could stop all trading for 24 hours like when we had the 9-11 Al Qaeda attack.’

‘Okay, you’re right about the key. It’s a simple SD card. I know, as I created it. Dust proof, waterproof and nearly bomb proof, it’s that important. Her virus that makes the markets plummet, can’t be spread without it going live first but you are wrong about the 100 minds.’

‘Huh?’

‘There are only 95 now!’ He smiled at Jack for the first time. ‘The key is on level four. I know where the passageway starts, that’s on level one near MM’s bedroom and then it spirals down to a cave way below us.’

‘Well at last we know how to get there.’

‘Yes, but I don’t know where the key is hidden.’

‘So we can try to get the key then. Yes?’

‘I don’t know Jack. Only MM, Biceps and Twip Twop ever go down there. Biceps or Twip Twop always have wet hair afterwards, so I guess the key is hidden in water somewhere? That could be tricky if it is very acidic or hot. There may even be guards waiting to shoot you.’

Jack glanced around to make sure no one was listening in. ‘What’s on the key?’

‘The SD card has a series of encryption codes. They set off programs within the “world domination” game, which we have integrated into the real financial markets over the last few months as part of the tests. MM will upload a separate virus within a few minutes of go live.’ He paused and held Jack’s arm. ‘If I help you guys, you have to promise to help save my mum.’

‘It’s a deal.’ Jack shook his hand and they arranged to meet at 4 am near the lift that gave access to both levels one and two.

* * *

Timmo had been left behind again but this time Marshall had decided to stay with him. It was safer that way.

As Kate, Roger and Jack stood in the lift heading up to level one, Techno scared them. ‘No one really knows what’s on level four but there have been many rumours. So beware.’ He shuddered, ‘one of her ex-henchmen said she had captured something in a subterranean passage in the bowels of the volcano. It was when she and Biceps first came to Mount Kilimanjaro ten years ago.’

‘Something?’ Kat gulped as she questioned him.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Techno. ‘The henchman was a wind up merchant, until he disappeared that is.’

‘So you have no idea what my boys are facing then?’ She was nervous as well as scared.

‘The unknown Kate. The greatest threat to sanity that a man can face.’

‘But Jack and Roger aren’t men!’

‘No and that may help them in their quest.’ The lift door opened silently and all conversation stopped. Techno led them to a small black door 50 metres away. There were no signs on it and it looked innocuous enough. He signalled them to crouch. They heard footsteps coming closer and as they remained motionless, they saw two ninjas cross the junction of the corridor about 100 metres away.

Techno opened the door and led them through. He quietly closed it behind. ‘Ninjas. Two patrols on this side of her quarters and brainless Biceps sleeps in a small room nearby. The woman is paranoid about her security.’ He turned and started to lead the way down the narrow steps. The staircase was poorly lit and extremely steep and narrow. Two people would have had difficulty passing each other. After fifteen minutes steady descent, the stairs opened out onto the floor of a small cave, no more than 30 metres square with a low ceiling. A third of the area was a steaming pool and near the water’s edge, there were three scuba outfits resting against the wall. Each contained a wetsuit, a mask, and a large yellow tank of compressed air.

The two boys moved away from Kate and Techno to discuss their approach.

Roger spoke first. ‘Well old chap, tally ho and off we go hey.’ His eyes were watery and his voice quavered. ‘It’s been nice knowing you... you are my “bestest” friend Jack.’

Jack took a deep breath and let it sigh out calmly and slowly before he replied. 'Ditto mate. But we are coming back to Kate and Robert, I will not be beaten. I know we will return.'

'How can you be so positive?'

'Remember in boot camp, Sergeant Sargent said we should remember The Reason?'

'Surely you don't believe in mumbo jumbo like that Jack?'

'Billions of caring loving people around the world believe and so I am going to take all that goodness into that evil pond of blackness and let The Reason help us win through. Are you up for this or do I go alone?' Roger rubbed his eyes with his fingers and wiped the moisture on his dirty trousers.

'Let's do it Jack. JFDI – Just Flipping Do It!' He said it with conviction and vigorously shook Jack's hand before they turned towards the piles of scuba gear to get ready. They started to pull the wetsuits on over their power suits.

After they had dressed, Kit Kat came over. 'Good luck both of you,' she held them both in a tight hug, 'I need you here to help us out of this hell hole.'

Without turning back, the boys stood on the edge of the pool. They had fastened a loose piece of polypropylene rope between their weight belts to keep them together in the blackness. Claspng their hands across their facemasks, they stepped into the pool with a large splash that echoed ominously around the chamber.

* * *

Kate and Techno were pacing by the side of the black waters. The air bubbles from the boy's tanks had disappeared after a few minutes and so they presumed they must be exploring a tunnel rather than carrying on straight down. Kate was standing by the remaining scuba set,

contemplating whether she would have the courage to use one if they didn't return. She had a lump in her throat when she heard Techno's scream. The huge tentacle of a giant octopus had snaked across the cave floor and wrapped itself lovingly around Techno's leg.

He screamed again. It was demented and full of fear. 'Help me Kate! Please help me!' She stood rooted to the spot and watched in horror as the tentacle dragged Techno closer to the pool. Glancing around her she could see no no obvious weapon to hand. 'Help me for God's sake!' She thought of boot camp and The Reason, it helped her remain calm. 'For God's sake', the words repeated in her head. Techno was no longer an enemy, he was their friend and Marshall's brother. If he were dead, they would find it harder to escape. But that was a selfish thought which was quickly replaced by another selfish one. No Techno, no financial meltdown? Would the loss of his expertise force Madame Musseine to stop her attempted domination of the world? Again, she fought the thought. He was their friend. She was rooted to the spot, what took seconds to think about felt like hours. At that moment, she thought she could hear her grandma's voice echoing through the cave.

The words kept repeating in her mind but were far away and unreal. 'Be yourself, be yourself Kate.' Would did she mean? Girlie? Skippy? Then it struck her - kind, giving, loving. The very essence of Kate Shore. Techno was holding onto the rock by the side of the pool with his fingernails, she could hear them scratch across the rock as he was pulled closer to the beak of the giant octopus that had broken the surface and was snapping loudly in anticipation of eating its prey. 'Be yourself...' the words were louder as she leaped to her right and grasped the fire extinguisher near the door. Turning quickly, she ran to the edge of the pool and gasped in horror as Techno's legs slid slowly into the open beak.

'Oh my God, my God, do something!' She slammed the heavy extinguisher into the yellow eye of the beast, which stopped Techno's instant demise but also drew the octopus's attention.

A second tentacle slithered out of the black whirlpool, which had been whipped to a frenzy as the beast took its revenge for years of captivity. The tentacle slimed its way around her leg before the suckers clasped hard and made her cry with the pain. The beast commenced pulling her towards the beak to make a double snack. Man and woman, like ham and cheese, a tasty meal apart but better together. There was no noise all of a sudden, a deathly quiet. The swirl of the water and the heavy breathing from the two potential victims ominously echoed around the cave, a death knell. Kate looked at Techno and could see he had fainted. The bottom half of his legs were only loosely held in the beak. As it opened wider to take them both in a single gulp, she stared down at the extinguisher that was growing too heavy to hold for much longer. CO₂, carbon dioxide and then all her school chemistry flooded back. CO₂, of course.

She smiled at the blinking yellow eye as she was dragged closer. 'Fancy a bellyful of wind Mr Octopus? Well take that.' She yanked the pin from the black handle of the extinguisher and pressed to set it off. A spume of white powder rushed from the nozzle as she thrust the cylinder deep between the sharp curves of the beak. As the octopus tried to fully close its jaws, she heard the grinding noise of the extinguisher as it was crushed. Then the screeching began in multiple echoes that resounded around the cave but the extinguisher was still spurting the CO₂ into the beast's gullet. The tentacles suddenly retracted allowing her to grab Techno under his arms and pull him to safety as the octopus thrashed around the pool, poisoned by the CO₂, which was now expanding violently inside its guts. She lay gasping, covered in wet green slime but still wary of the octopus that beat itself around the pool. Cradling Techno's head in her arms, she willed him to revive. The beast reared into the air, half out of the water, a giant balloon with trailing tentacles that flapped helplessly and then suddenly it exploded. Puss and guts showered everywhere, the stench of decomposed fish

was mixed with the rotten eggs of the volcano, making it a smell from hell. She vomited until her stomach was empty and then lay retching for a minute or two without bringing anything up.

Techno stirred and looked up into her eyes. 'You saved me Kate. Why?'

'Because my mum told me to be myself. Kind, giving and loving. You should try it, it makes you happy.' They both struggled to their feet, sliding on the copious amount of octopus guts and black ink that was spread across the cold smooth rock.

Kate pulled her hair back into a wet bun and stared into the waters, wishing the boys back.

What had the octopus done to them? 'Where are you boys?'

'They are dead Kate, come on let's go. MM will send Biceps down after all this rumpus and then we'll be dead too.'

'No, I'm not leaving without them. They took The Reason down there and therefore they will come back.' He stepped away and sat on a rock ledge by the metal door.

He thought she must be deranged. 'The Reason? What was that?'

Kate continued to stare into the pool. She thought she could see a few bubbles. 'Do you have a torch Techno?'

'No, I have better than that.' He rummaged in his rucksack and pulled out what looked like a firework, a roman candle. 'This is my own design of flare, it works underwater too.' She grabbed it off him and holding it at arm's length, she pulled the red cord to set it off. The bright magnesium light was so intense, it temporarily blinded them both. Quickly she threw it into the centre of the pool and watched the whiteness disappear downwards.

'Come on, give me all the flares you brought with you.' Three times she sent the flare towards the depths but there was still no sign of Roger and Jack. Her bravery was spent and she slumped to the floor and started to cry.

Techno came close and put a comforting arm around her. 'Come on Kate. We have to save ourselves.' As he hauled her to her feet, they both jumped in alarm as there was a giant hiss of escaping air. They turned back to the waters, expecting another octopus but it was only the two divers surfacing in the centre of the pool.

A smiling face emerged from beneath a mask. 'Hoy you! What are you crying for Kit Kat? Have you messed up your dress?' Jack threw his mask away into the water and pulled himself ashore, quickly followed by Roger who was shaking and white with fear. 'I said, are you alright Kate?' He stared hard at Techno, who still had a comforting arm around her. Techno saw the look and released his grip before backing away. They were nominally enemies after all. His brother and mum were Techno's only concern now.

'I'm fine Jack, just fine.'

'Thanks for the flares, they are the only way we could have found our way to the surface. There must be miles of cave down there.'

'They were Techno's flares.' Jack looked at Techno.

'Thank you both then.' He paused and held out a steady hand. 'I mean it, thank you. You saved our lives, we were low on air.' They shook hands firmly and then Jack turned his attention to Roger. Helping him to remove his scuba gear, he talked constantly to his friend. He had read in an adventure book that it would help reduce the shock. 'Come on splodger, we didn't get splodged by Mr Slime, the power suits helped us...by the way, where is the octopus Kate?'

She pointed to the ceiling and walls. 'Splattered everywhere, can't you smell it?'

'No my lovely, I can only smell your gorgeous perfume!' He smiled widely. 'Nice one Kit Kat. Very skippy that, splattering an octopus rather than barbecuing it like in Spain. A bit of batter, a squeeze of lemon and it would have been really tasty.'

‘Jack for god’s sake, please stop joking. Anyway, even you couldn’t have eaten that much octopus.’ She giggled at him, his comment had done the trick, it had helped lessen the shock that was overwhelming all of them. They all stared at Roger who never used a nasty word.

‘Well I’m glad that gruesome bugger copped it.’

Jack was happy, his friend was alive and kicking again. ‘We were lucky down there. It came at us as we entered a narrow section.’

Kate hugged Jack close. ‘What happened?’

‘The power suits gave us the extra speed to swim away from the groping tentacles.’

‘Thank The Reason Jack.’

He glanced at her before helping Roger to stand up and thought how pretty her hair looked.

‘In our case,’ he said ‘you have to believe don’t you?’ He moved away from her and Roger.

‘Come on, let’s get out of here guys.’

‘And the key? Did you find it?’ Techno was now in their power.

‘The SD card was hidden in a plastic float about a kilometre away. It was attached to the wall of the flooded passageway and immediately behind it was a metal grille.’

Roger completed Jack’s description. ‘The grill had been left open to deter visitors, inside was was the beast.’ He patted the zip pocket on the chest of his power suit. ‘The card is safe with me now.’

Jack let Techno lead them through the door and back onto the spiral staircase. The four of them crept quietly upwards, not knowing what to expect. Nerves were on edge as they mounted and then Roger screamed and screamed again.

‘Rats, two rats went up my leg.’ He turned to see Kit Kat behind him. She was in hysterics.

‘Told you I would get you back splodger!’ As she carried on laughing, with tears coming down her face, he turned away imperiously.

‘I think a little decorum at such a serious time would be a better idea Ms. Shore.’ But it did relax them all after their terrible scare. It was Jack who reminded them of the task ahead. They were close to the door leading out into level one and MM’s and Bicep’s living quarters. He glanced at Roger’s watch that he had forgotten to return. It was a Rolex, an expensive present from mother and father when Roger had left home for his first term at Eton. It was now 7 am on MD day. Techno had told them that 10 am was go live. That meant the world markets would have melted down by noon.

It was a dangerous moment as they were about to leave the staircase. Jack turned and spoke quietly. ‘Just remember the SAS motto “who dares wins” and we dare don’t we?’

‘Yes’ came the emphatic reply from Kate and Roger.

Roger made a joke. ‘Who’s scared swims, don’t you mean mate?’ They all laughed, it had been a close call. ‘So we have the SD card and now all we have to do is pull the plug on 95 brains, free Mrs Hines and escape the volcano. Right?’

‘Right.’ But all their replies were doubtful behind the bravado. Just one of the tasks would have been hard on its own.

Jack saw the hesitation. ‘Well let’s make it happen then. The world is relying on us.’

Chapter 12

Battle for the volcano

Techno slowly opened the black door at the top of the staircase. He wasn't too worried about himself, both Biceps and MM usually slept until 8 am and he could make an excuse for being on level one. However, Jack's gang needed to make it down the lift unseen by the ninja guards or the mission would fail.

Techno signalled the others to follow him out with a quick wave of the hand and tip toed towards the lift in the dim light. After a few tense moments, they heaved a sigh of relief as they all stood safely facing the lift door, its stainless steel polished to a mirror. Another ten minutes and they would be back in their accommodation.

Grey shadows flashed across the mirrored surface and merged into the darkness of the reflected rocks. They all saw them and hoped it was in their imagination, but when each child turned, their stomachs lurched with fear as they faced the four ninjas who stood motionless just 20 metres away. Techno and the gang fanned out in a small crescent shape, shoulder to shoulder and then the lift door softly sighed open behind them, giving them a chance to escape. They all flicked a quick glance over their shoulders and saw the ugly smiling faces of Twip Twop and Biceps who stood with their arms crossed within the recess.

It was Twip Twop who spoke as he watched the group edge away from both the ninjas and him to form a wider defensive formation. 'Treachery teaches us many lessons doesn't it children? How loyalty is just a fleeting emotion. How colleagues can become adversaries. How friends can become enemies.'

‘You were never my friend Twip Twop.’ Techno’s voice was low and menacing. Biceps grunted loudly, he was ready to tear them all apart if given the order by the albino. Kit Kat grasped Jack’s hand, he could feel her shaking with fear.

He spoke to her as they all stepped further backwards. ‘Be yourself, was grandma’s advice. Forget anything else Kate and remember your training.’ She gripped his hand more tightly and then let it go as she raised her hands in a jujutsu defence position. ‘Get behind us all Roger, keep “it” safe and make a run for it if you think you can make a clean escape alone.’

‘Will do Jack.’

‘Ninjas first, I like to be polite.’ Twip Twop ordered the attack. The four ninjas advanced, they stepped slowly and deliberately, always with their feet apart and their hands raised in a classic karate attack style. They knew they wouldn’t need to use their weapons to beat this rabble of kids.

Roger whispered from behind his friends. ‘Sergeant Sargent said attack was the best form of defence. Remember they don’t know about our training nor the power suits.’

‘One each then but not until I shout scones.’ Jack was smiling at the enemy who spoke no English.

‘What?’ Kate remonstrated, ‘scones? Why not cupcakes, they’re so much tastier.’

Roger added, ‘yes Jack, I like cupcakes better.’

‘Look you two, never mind arguing about cakes, so long as they’re Japanese, they won’t understand and neither will Twip Twop and Biceps.’

‘I beg your pardon Jack, but if they understand “ninjas advance” maybe they do speak English.’ Roger was always brighter than the others in the gang.

The ninjas were now within a few metres and saw their quarry had dropped their arms by their sides as a gesture of submission. The ninjas relaxed as they closed, it was to be a fatal mistake.

‘Just grab them and stop messing.’ Biceps deep voice boomed out. The ninjas stepped forward on his ill-judged command.

‘Cupcakes!’ Jack screamed loudly as his foot smashed into the leading ninja’s face, immediately knocking him unconscious. He turned to his right to see that Techno was lying on the floor face down with a ninja pinning him down. Jack attacked swiftly with a two-handed chop to the ninja’s neck making him roll off his friend and giving Jack a second to whirl around and look for the next opponent. Kate had thrown her attacker over her shoulder, leaving Roger to finish him off with a deadly kick to the windpipe. She was now sparring with the last ninja. He dropped and spun on one hand whilst stretching his right leg out to cut her legs from beneath her. By the time she hit the floor he was crouched above her and ready to deliver a killer chop to the windpipe.

‘Excuse me old chap!’ The ninja raised his eyes to see Jack’s foot slam into his nose. He fell back and lay still. The friends regrouped as Biceps roared and ran at them from the lift.

‘Victoria sponge!’ Jack and Roger understood Kit Kat immediately. Sponges are made of two parts with a filling. The brute had grabbed Jack by the neck and started to choke him with his massive bare hands. As Jack’s eyes bulged, Kate rolled forward and grabbed Biceps left leg and Roger did the same and grabbed the right, and then they twisted so their legs were parallel to the floor but with their feet pushed firmly together. They had made a human brace between Biceps legs, a human ram without any strain as their knees were bent.

‘The splits!’ Roger shouted as he anticipated the next move and started to straighten his knees. The power suits had never been used like this before but Kate and Roger knew the

strength of their leg muscles was ginormous. Add on the basic mechanics of distance multiplying the force and the result was excruciating for their enemy and perfect mechanics judged by Roger. Biceps screamed with his mouth wide open as the pain seared through his groin. He instantly dropped Jack who was suspended a metre off the floor and now blue in the face through lack of oxygen. Biceps's legs split wider apart as the children applied more pressure and his screams echoed off the roof of the cave as they became even louder as the pain increased. Suddenly his groin and hips separated into two unequal parts with a squelchy tearing noise coming from beneath his trousers. His screaming stopped as he lost consciousness but Kit Kat and Roger kept pressing until the giant had collapsed on his face with a thud and splat as his nose broke. Biceps, the terror of the volcano, overpowered by mere kids who had split his difference.

'Doughnuts,' choked Jack as he tried to make a dubious joke, 'how appropriate, but now's the time to run for it.' Jack stood and rubbed his neck as he watched Twip Twop disappearing towards MM's bedroom. 'The lift, quick.' They all raced to the lift and jammed at the button to close the door. As it sped downwards, the children and Techno collapsed against the walls, dragging deep breaths into their bodies and trying to steady their nerves.

* * *

J sat in the PM's private office in Downing Street. It was a pleasant office, with a tall window that faced onto the garden and the second flush of roses. Many of the perennial plants like poppies already sported dried seed heads as autumn was fast approaching. The PM stood looking out, he had his back to J and Wolf who were sat in the worn leather chairs by his desk.

The PM spoke tersely. 'We're going in with conventional forces first.'

It was Wolf who was the first to object. 'What about the children? There must a hundred or more lives at risk.'

The PM turned to face him. 'The analysts believe that overwhelming force is the only way to guarantee entry into the volcano. A low key, quiet SAS attack in the middle of the night is doomed to failure. The volcano is too well protected, the reconnaissance teams have seen that over the last two weeks.'

Wolf continued to argue. 'And what about what they can't see? This woman is completely insane and has had ten long years to perfect her defences.' J let the young whipper-snapper do the talking. He agreed with Wolf, but couldn't speak to the Prime Minister in that challenging way. J's long experience with the bad decisions of elected politicians always rankled with him but he had to toe the diplomatic line or lose his job.

'It's a risk we have to take. The President and I have sanctioned the attack for today at 10.30 am. The memory stick gave us the day and time for the terrorist attack and therefore that is the latest we can leave it. Overwhelming force is our only answer, just like in Iraq. We have two aircraft carriers, six cruisers and two subs in position close to the Kenyan coast at Mombasa. The subs will launch cruise missiles and their autopilots will guide them down the main passageways and into the heart of the volcano within five minutes. The auxiliary ships landed 10000 troops and their vehicles and tanks at first light and the men are now surrounding the volcano. There will be fifty harrier jump jets above them for simultaneous air attacks using sidewinder missiles or cannon. Therefore, it will be impossible for Madame Musseine to resist.'

'But that's madness!' Wolf slammed his hands on the desk in front of him.

‘Quiet Wolf and that is an order.’ J turned to the PM. ‘Nick, please reconsider. Or at least wait a few hours longer in case Jack and his gang are successful.’

The PM turned a bleary eye towards J. He hadn’t slept the night before as the decision weighed heavily on his conscience. He felt defensive as he replied. ‘Johnson, I have always trusted you since we were at prep school together but your blind faith in five children is quite frankly astonishing.’

‘It’s not faith. It’s trust.’ J was too sharp with the reprimand to his old friend Nick Clegg.

‘There is no choice. There is no turning back. The attack is imminent.’ The PM turned away from the MI6 men and stared at the garden again. His mind was made up and they could change nothing in his and The President’s plan. ‘You did your best, now let it go.’

‘But that’s madness sir.’ Wolf stuck to his guns. ‘We all know the chances of success must be 50/50, like spinning a coin for heads or tails. Heads we save the world and tails...’

J completed his sentence. ‘And tails, a hundred children and a few thousand soldiers die.’

The PM couldn’t face them but he stood his ground. ‘Forget the betting game. The decision is made. Now go home and sleep, your jobs are complete. I want you bright and alert in the office tomorrow and working on another task. Forget project conman and that is an order.’

Wolf and J were heavy hearted as they went out of the door. Both were looking sullen and shaking their heads in rebellious silence, but a decision had been made by the Commanders in Chief of The Free World.

However, J and Wolf were special individuals; that’s why they had risen so high within the ranks of MI6. There was no way they would leave the children in the lurch and so they headed straight back to Somerset House to contemplate the problem and decide on a course of action. But Wolf was way ahead of J on this one. He didn’t have the constraints of loyalty and deference to the politicians. He immediately went to the rooftop for some privacy and

animatedly talked to Brett using his satellite phone. Wolf had decided they needed Brett as close to the action as possible and after listening to the MI6 agent's update, Brett jumped in his Hummer and headed south from the hotel. After crossing the Kenyan border he turned eastwards and accelerated into the wilds of Tanzania.

* * *

The mountain of Kibo, one of three volcanoes that made up Kilimanjaro, was riddled with ancient passageways. Many had been explored by the Maasai who were now in Madame Musseine's debt and therefore they had given her information that had been handed down through generations of Maasai chiefs. Extinct fumaroles provided a perfect and secret passageway to those in the know and Twip Twop was one of those in the know.

Techno, Kit Kat, Roger and Jack were physically and emotionally exhausted as they exited the lift onto level three. Jack encouraged them all to "look normal" and they split into two groups to walk "normally" back to the accommodation sector where Timmo and Marshall were waiting for them. But they were anything but "normal" now as they were the arch enemies of Madame Musseine who would have been informed of their treachery by Twip Twop. As they passed other children on their way to breakfast or technicians on their way to the AICs, they glanced nervously at every individual. On two occasions the technicians were Japanese which made them pause and turn away until the technician's had safely passed, as a ninja could easily borrow a white technician's coat. Therefore, by the time Kate and Jack walked into their bedroom they were glad to have returned to a dubious safety. Jack pushed open the door and stepped inside. He was closely followed by Kate.

Twip Twop was stood at the far end of the room with his back towards the rear door that had always been locked. Now they realised why. It enabled MM's henchmen access at all times and by sprinting through the secret passage ways leading from level one it had helped Twip Twop to surprise Timmo and Marshall before the others had returned. He held two boxes in his hands. They didn't contain bullets but were just as lethal. The ominous black box chargers of the XREP's were close to Timmo and Marshall's heads as they sat on a bed facing the main door.

Roger and Techno bundled in behind Jack and Kit Kat. Immediately Techno fanned to the left of Jack and Kit Kat followed his example but fanned to the right.

Roger stood close to Jack and whispered encouragement.

'It's okay, there are four of us. If Twip Twop managed to get here so quickly, then he won't have had time to inform MM about our treachery.'

'What are those black boxes Roger?' Jack needed to know what they were up against as they circled around Twip Twop.

'They look like sources for eXtended Range Electro-Muscular Projectiles. Range – well unfortunately we are too close to avoid them. Kill rating is 100 per cent on a head shot at zero range. Evasive action...unknown.' Roger was too precise for Jack. The information hurt him badly. This was his brother.

Techno shouted at Twip Twop. 'If you harm my brother I promise I will kill you.'

Twip Twop's head jerked to the left a few times. A nervous twitch from the deranged brain.

'So what. Your time is up anyway. MM has no need of you anymore.'

'So everything you little albino idiot. We have the SD card and therefore she can't upload her virus without it.' Techno played his negotiating card. He was prepared to give the SD card to Twip Twop to save his brother.

The white hair flailed left then right as Twip Twop twitched. He was thinking hard. He could buy his freedom from MM if he had the card and start his own business, his dream, Assassination Limited.

He gurgled at Techno, 'give it here then.'

'I haven't got it. Roger do you have it?'

'No sorry Techno.'

'Jack?'

'No mate.'

Techno turned to Kit Kat. 'So you kept it Kate?'

'Sorry Techno, it seems that none of us have the SD card.' She moved another metre to her left, encouraging Roger to leave Jack's side and further surround the albino.

Timmo spoke. 'Don't give this monstosity anything. I'd rather die than betray our cause.'

Marshall took his cue. 'Yeah, don't mind us. Just get him and put him down a steam filled fumarole. That would give him his first ever suntan.' The gang laughed making Twip Twop unsure about his tactical advantage, these kids were acting too cool for his liking.

He spoke. 'Just throw the SD card to me and I'll leave you in peace with this lot whilst they're alive.' He pushed Timmo and Marshall's heads onto the bed with the XREP's pressed hard against them.

Jack's heart lurched but his reply was ice cold. 'No mate, if we gave you the card then we have no bargaining position with MM ourselves. It's a tough choice for you. Fail with us or fail with MM. A lose, lose situation but fail with us and you will live. That's your choice mate.' Twip Twop was licking his lips. He stood more upright with the XREP's hanging loosely in his hands. Jack watched him carefully. Sergeant Sargent had talked about distraction and surprise. Twip Twop was watching the others edge closer and thinking about

MM killing him for failing. Jack thought quickly, he had heard of the prototype weapons in the police case in Northumbria a few years before. He remembered they were powered by high voltage electricity. He suddenly had an idea. To his left was a fire hose. The red tap was a simple 90 degree turn from off to full on. He sidled next to it. It was Kit Kat who cottoned on to his next move. She moved a metre closer to Twip Twop. It was a sudden step to distract him thus giving Jack a moment to pull out a metre of hose and flip the tap to on. A powerful stream of water flew across the room and knocked Twip Twop backwards and against the rear door. There was a bright blue flash that sparked outwards from both of his hands towards the floor as the XREP's short-circuited. Two surges of electricity jumped up his arms and the high voltage started to burn the palms of his lily-white hands. Twip Twop's hair stood on end and a faint blue aura surrounded his head as he threw his arms in the air and immediately dropped the XREP's. Jack stepped closer pulling the hose off the reel as he moved. The water was powerful enough to knock Twip Twop out of the door. They watched him crawl away from the stream and lurch uncertainly to his feet. He was quick to run away but was lurching from side to side, drunk on electricity and defeated for the second time.

Jack's gang gathered by the bed and hugged each other hard.

Techno grabbed Marshall from the ruckus and pulled him close. 'Thank god Marshall. I thought you were a goner that time!'

'Not yet Robert, I've only just found my brother and I am in no hurry to leave him.'

'In that case let's go and find our mum hey?' Techno turned to the others. 'Are you helping or not?' It was an easy decision as they bundled Timmo into his wheel chair and headed for the door.

* * *

MM' voice came over the tannoy as they walked toward the lift to take them to level two, the security zone. Jack glanced at his Rolex watch, it was nearly 10.30 am. He liked the design and decided he needed to one but then he remembered Roger's dad had forked out £3500 for it. He realised it was a strange thought in the circumstances. 'Ah well, maybe a new Swatch watch would do, after all it just tells the time.'

She was speaking again, this time with more urgency. 'Come my little players. Come and play the extraordinary extravaganza against me. A personal fight to the death on "world domination". The very latest in 3D computer graphics and always and only me as your main opponent for today only.' It was enough to send the children scampering to the AICs. They bumped and ran past the gang, eager to play a game against someone they still trusted. Someone who was the ultimate opponent.

Marshall commented as he walked past the AICs and glanced into the flashing interiors. 'Look at the innocence of it all.'

Techno clasped a hand on his brother's shoulder. 'If only they realised what a few key strokes on a computer keyboard could achieve. That was my mistake originally.'

As they walked, they were all wondering where MM was at the moment; they didn't want to bump into her on their way to Mrs Hines's cell. However, it had become clear during their short stay inside the terrorist's den that Madame Musseine kept herself to herself. Wherever she was broadcasting from, she would be playing the game and would be surrounded by her bodyguards.

Roger interrupted the brothers. 'It's not about playing computer games is it? Surely the chaos theory takes precedence. You know, one tiny event like a butterfly crossing the Atlantic Ocean can have a massive impact on god knows what and where.'

Timmo shook his head negatively. 'No way splodger. Everything is planned, technical and scientific in our world now.'

However, Roger had read copious amounts about the chaos theory. 'Really, there are whole universities devoting time to study it. It's a mixture of mathematics, with applications in other disciplines like physics, economics, and even philosophy. It would probably explain "The Reason" according to Sergeant Sargent. The deterministic nature of these systems doesn't make them predictable e.g. we have weather forecasts and they can be wrong.' For the first time ever, the friends stared at Roger and wondered what planet he came from. They were gob-smacked by his speech.

Techno was leading the group and urged them to hurry. 'We can't stop the children playing but we can save our mum.'

Kit Kat was feeling incredibly tense. 'It's okay taking on the ninja army and Madame Musseine but then what's the plan? Like, how do we get out of here?' Before anyone could reply the mountain rumbled, a cacophony of blasts reverberated around the cavern and temporarily deafened the group who flung themselves instinctively to the hard rock floor. Their training had instantly taken over and made them lie still and wait.

Timmo shouted at the top of his voice from his wheelchair above them. 'It must be an eruption! Kibo is set to blow again.'

Jack shouted back over the noise of further explosions as they edged nearer to the lift to gain access to level two. 'You dimmo, Timmo. It can't be an eruption, the volcano is extinct not

dormant.’ The earth shook again and a blast door 100 metres away was thrown across the floor.

It was Roger who had the right answer. ‘They have lost confidence in us, it must be the Yanks and Brits attacking MM with everything they’ve got.’

‘That’s madness’ said Jack, ‘there’s no way they can penetrate inside this place. He stood up slowly from his crouch and looked at screaming children leaving the AICs and starting to run amok. ‘Look we have to help the other kids. If they go outside they’ll get killed for sure.’

‘What about our mum?’ Marshall asked.

Jack pointed to Roger and Kate. ‘Go with Marshall and Techno and see what you can do but be careful yeah?’

‘What about you and Timmo, Jack?’ Kate didn’t want to leave him.

‘We are going to get this lot into a safe area. Go! Go now and remember to squeeze your ear lobes to turn on your minrads and stay in touch.’ They had all forgotten the minrads, the tiniest radios available in the world. Whilst at the SAS camp they were surgically implanted under the skin below the right ear. This gave a direct link to the ear drum and their vocal chords allowing communication without interference but without carrying a large radio. The 5 kilometre range would be shortened because they were inside the mountain but with no battery worries, the equipment could be a life saver. The energy cell inside each minrad used the body’s heat to generate electricity and as they were all sweating on their fast walk, so power was at the maximum. Smoke started to billow across the cavern, low clouds that stank of cordite from the explosives in the cruise missiles. Jack turned away from the others and started to push Timmo towards the stage where MM had greeted them a few days before.

Timmo observed one advantage. ‘At least the attack has stopped the children working!’ A piece of rock crashed from the ceiling above them and hit a small Chinese girl who was

passing. She didn't stand a chance and must have been killed instantly. Gritting his teeth, Jack pushed Timmo faster and headed towards the audio visual equipment on the gallery above level three. Innocent children weren't supposed to be seeing such adult realities; it was instantly making the boys into men.

* * *

J and Wolf sat together watching the video uplinks from the main battle groups. Wolf had patched a direct link with the crème de la crème SAS team, which was led by Sergeant Sargent. In training, they had told the children his nickname. Wolf only knew him as Mike and on this attack, he was one of the senior commanders of this elite group. J had also invited the rest of the project conman team to join them. Matthews was absent, currently held at Her Majesty's prison in Wormwood Scrubs. Sybil sat beautiful and alluring, she was wearing a black silk evening gown, which she had worn at the opera the night before. Like most of the team, she had worked through the night in preparation for the attack and hadn't managed to go home and change. Morrison sat picking his nose, an odd habit whenever he was stressed and the finance man, Claypole was also absent, he preferred excel spreadsheets to the blood and guts of reality.

At 10.30 am precisely, the screens exploded into action. The US and British armed forces were unleashing the forces of hell against Madame Musseine. It was Armageddon for more than an hour, cruise missiles left the subs offshore and skated inland just above the surface of the Savannah. Each one was specifically targeted to a known entrance on the volcano and smashed into the blast doors, which shuddered in the explosion but with little noticeable effect. Then a second and a third tranche followed to exactly the same targets. Some passed

through the odd smashed door and went deep into the mountain but only to explode into a second set of doors. This lack of penetration to the heart of the place saved many children's lives.

Mike spoke to the assembled MI6 team. 'We're going in, in exactly five minutes. There are four teams of ten men taking four different passageways on both sides of the mountain.'

'Good luck Mike.' Wolf replaced the microphone on the desk in front of the screens. The noise was squelched and they saw the CCTV pictures from four drones as the SAS teams entered the tunnels and then there were just black gaping holes remaining. The views were switched. Each soldier on point duty had a CCTV camera attached to the side of his helmet but the TV screens in Somerset House showed nothing except a cloud of swirling dust. However, they could hear the quiet orders between the soldiers. Mike ordered his team forward, after 100 metres they regrouped.

Mike spoke to Wolf. 'Anything happening outside?'

'No Mike, it's all quiet now.'

Mike grunted. 'Too quiet mate. I've got a bad feeling here; we are like rats going down a ferret's hole rather than the other way around.' He told his men to move forward another 50 metres and then stop in a defensive position. Before they arrived at the next stop point, there were bright flashes that grew so intense and continuous that the TV screen showed nothing but white. It occurred simultaneously on all of the four TV screens following the SAS's assault.

'Oh my god. It's a trap.' Wolf picked up the microphone and shouted to Mike. 'Get out now.' It was too late. The ninjas had emerged from behind the teams and thrown the magnesium flares. They had used the hidden passageways to ambush the soldiers and now they opened up their heavy machine guns on automatic. The heavy thud of the guns merged with the

ricochet of bullets that spun past the helpless SAS men. Those that made it to the ground without taking a bullet had three seconds to react as the ninjas tossed their grenades. More than thirty grenades decimated each of the SAS teams. A single TV screen gradually cleared as the whiteness of the flares died away. Mike's face was opposite the dead soldier with the headcam, which was on its side. His eyes were wide and staring, one above the other, which made the whole MI6 team turn their heads 90 degrees.

He coughed up a little blood; he was struggling to breathe with three bullets lodged in his chest. 'Whatever you do Wolf,' he coughed again, 'get even with these bastards and save the kids yeah?' Wolf didn't need to reply. They watched Mike – Sergeant Sargent's eyes slowly close as he died. The MI6 team sat in stunned silence.

J was the first to talk. 'Now for phase two of the crazy plan.' They watched the shots from the drones of the giant Chinook helicopters arriving. They were carrying more than a thousand troops as the machines landed halfway up the volcano and deposited their loads. High above they could see the Harrier Jump jets waiting to pounce on any emerging enemy vehicles. But they couldn't make out the Landrovers as they left the secret tunnel at the foot of Kilimanjaro, cloaked by the RNT – Radar Networking Technology. Something no one in the US or British forces could have foreseen.

MM was in her lead vehicle in the middle of the array created by the Landrovers. It only took ten minutes to assemble everyone outside the volcano and then she sat and watched the oncoming forces.

She keyed her radio and spoke to the children remaining inside the mountain. 'Come and play my game. Ignore the crashing sounds, it is only the quarrying work to create a larger gaming space.' It was disinformation on the grandest scale. A bit of extra fun as she waited like a giant spider in the middle of her lethal web. The screen in front of her told exactly

where each attacking platoon were located. Their locations were automatically input into the Landrovers's defence systems and bazookas, rockets and RPG targeted every last man. Openings appeared on the side of the mountainside as small automated cannons poked out of the rocks to double MM's firepower.

When the soldiers were in position and ready to advance on her stronghold she spoke quietly to her ninjas. 'Now is the time of my discontent. Fire!' She laughed loudly as the first ferocious salvo killed 300 soldiers. She laughed like a devil when the second barrage took another few hundred men's lives. But she was the devil herself as she turned the RNT onto offensive aerial mode. There was no special noise to indicate it was activated. The lethal and invisible rays hit the circling planes within seconds and within a few seconds more, the electric wiring of the planes was fried, dripping into the fuselages and eliminating every control available to the brave pilots. Out of the 50 Harriers, only ten escaped to turn tail and head towards the aircraft carriers. The other 40 plummeted towards the ground, the very aluminium making up the wings and fuselages were turning into molten metal as the pilots fell to their deaths. But even the 10 Harriers couldn't escape her. Although out of range for the RNT, they were flying at a lower altitude than the height of the eastern rim of the mountain. The pilot's evasive actions meant staying low and hugging the ground. That gave them no room to manoeuvre away from the SAM missiles that appeared out of the hidden bunkers and instantly locked on to the planes. Most of the Harriers were lost within two minutes, eventually only one managed to escape and no parachutes were seen. MM was screaming with laughter as a third and fourth barrage decimated the attacking soldiers, and all the MI6 team could do was to sit and watch the slaughter. They were appalled by the loss of life. Ninety per cent of the US and British soldiers and planes were wiped out and retreated within an hour, a further 5 per cent were lost to the landmines strategically placed by MM's

teams the day before. This left MM plenty of time to head back inside the mountain to deal with the pesky children. She was annoyed that Twip Twop and Biceps had seemed incapable of dealing with five little kids and her ex geek.

Wolf looked across at his boss. J had aged ten years in the last hour. 'There is only one way in, you know that boss. One way to save all those children.'

J smoothed his grey hair with both hands and sighed. 'I know what you're suggesting Wolf. A lone man in a fast vehicle trying the impossible. If we had sent someone into the kill zone late last night, that man might have had a 10 per cent chance of at least getting to the volcano. After that? Who knows what he could achieve, but now we have lost the element of surprise and lost the cover of darkness. Quite frankly, it's all in the hands of God.'

Wolf touched his arm, he was concerned about J who had the ultimate responsibility weighing heavily on his shoulders. 'No, not God, The Reason. That's what we were all taught by Mike, that's what he told the children at Brecon. J, he died trying to save them, we owe him.'

The satellite telephone on the desk in front of them all had been left on loudspeaker since the failed SAS attack.

'I'll do it.' A tinny voice came out of the speaker and made them all jump. It was Brett who had spoken.

Wolf leaned forward. 'No Brett, let me go after the children, I can be there within two hours if I use the latest X15 scram jet.' He drew a deep breath. 'It was all my idea to send them in there and I feel I owe it to their parents.'

Brett's voice was crackling. 'Wolf, you are a brave man and my respect for you has grown over the last few months but you can't do it. Screaming down to Tanzania at mach seven and

at a height of 20000 kilometres takes you away from the heart of our planning and intelligence setup. So you need to be in Somerset house to maintain that. ’

J joined in the conversation. ‘He’s right Wolf. I need your computer wizardry and your brains here in London.’

‘There is another reason sir.’ Brett told the two men. ‘The CIA have a stealth Hummer that I am sat in right now i.e. in Tanzania watching this carnage unfold and totally invisible to anyone...’

‘Another little secret kept from MI6 by the CIA Brett!’ It was J who gently remonstrated with the agent.

‘Yes sir and also a very useful one at the moment. I think now’s the time to move in. I am close to the foot of Kilimanjaro and whilst everyone takes stock of this atrocity, well, I think I can use the delay to get inside.’

J was worried. ‘That will be directly against the orders of our PM and your President son.’

‘And I have never followed orders when it comes to doing the right thing sir.’

J paused a few seconds. ‘Just do it. Report back it one hour.’

The die was cast. It was now up to Brett to save the children. The two Englishmen had grown to respect the American and now they silently wished him well. In the end they were working together to save the world economy, to save civilised people’s way of life, to save a hundred innocent children.

This was the last chance for the world and the last chance for Roger, Kate, Marshall, Timmo and Jack.

* * *

There was a second good thing to come out of the failed attack. By the time that Techno, Kate, Marshall and Roger reached level two and the entrance to the prison, there were no guards around. In the midst of the bombardment and counter-attack, it was deemed safe to leave the sole prisoner locked behind the outer and the inner doors.

Marshall looked enquiringly at his brother. 'Do you know the code?' Techno pictured Biceps pressing the keys the day before and stepped forward to repeat the sequence. The door opened slowly and Techno leaned in to make sure there were no guards about. Everything was quite in the white corridor beyond.

He turned back to Kate and Roger. 'Stay here and stand guard whilst we fetch mum okay?' They nodded back and he set off with Marshall. Within two minutes they had returned safely. Mrs Hines was white with emotion, her eyes were staring with fear. Kate ushered the whole group away from the prison and made them take cover behind a stack of green drums containing diesel for the Landrovers.

Roger leaned his back against a drum and squeezed his earlobe to activate the minrad. 'Jack where are you? Over.'

The reply was crystal clear despite Roger's earwax. 'Closing on the stage gallery in level three. Over.'

'We have Mrs Hines now and we're hiding on level two. Where do we meet? Over.'

Jack was thinking ahead. 'I'm going to lead the kids to the stairs that take them down to Octopus city. Meet near the entrance on level one. Over.'

Roger knew it was a good idea immediately. No one went into level four and it was so deep the kids couldn't be harmed by stray bombs or rockets.

'Great idea Jack. All understood. Over and out.' He turned to the others and told them the plan. 'Let's move now, whilst it's quiet. We can hide on level one.' Roger immediately took

point and headed upwards with the rest in single file behind. There was only one drawback to the plan. Where was Madame Musseine and the vicious Twip Twop?

* * *

Jack stood next to Timmo on the gallery above level three and looked down. The children were milling like ants around the AICs. None of them knew what to do. Above them was a heavy pall of smoke that made Jack and Timmo's eyes water as they were the closest to it. The assault may have failed but there must have been a few fires raging in the volcano but it also stank of sulphur. Below them, they could see lumps of rock dislodged from the roof during the pounding. The damage was heaviest around the engineering section where they had the most doors and corridors that led to the outer shell of the volcano. Some of the children were hysterical, but some were already dead.

Jack explained his plan to Timmo. 'I need to persuade them to shelter in level four as it is probably the safest place to be. There's no giant octopus to worry about. It's deep and away from MM's fighters and the best thing is it has no blast doors or access to the exterior in case another bombardment kicks off.'

Timmo added to his brother's idea. 'If we go to level four via the staircase on level one we still need some weapons bro.'

'Okay, you and I can stop at level two on the way and steal some of the ninja's weapons. If I pile them on top of you and the wheelchair we can carry loads.' Jack turned to the microphone on the stage that jutted out from the gallery. He waved his arms to draw the children's attention as he spoke.

‘Listen to me you lot. Here! Up here!’ He repeated the call three times until he saw many had stopped moving and were staring up at him in deep shock. ‘The US and British armed forces have attacked the volcano because Madame Musseine is a wanted and dangerous terrorist.’ Many of the heads below were shaking in disbelief. He paused. What could he say? I’m a secret agent working for MI6 and we are in the midst of the world’s greatest terrorist plot. No way, they wouldn’t believe him. It needed to be a simple message that satisfied their immediate needs.

Timmo prompted him. ‘They’re scared and hungry bro. Use that.’

Jack turned up the speaker volume on the console by the microphone. He dropped the pitch of his voice and slowed it to give a powerful statement of fact. ‘You are in grave danger. You can see the dead lying around you. Head for the yellow door marked 777 and follow the stairs. We will meet you there and show you where to shelter until you can be sent home to your mums and dads.’ A few started to walk to door 777. He added. ‘There will be McDonalds and KFC served in the safe haven in one hour.’ The trickle became a stampede as they followed each other like sheep.

‘Nice one bro! But where’s the food coming from?’

‘I dunno but we can select a few helpers when we get up to level one.’ He grabbed the handles on Timmo’s wheelchair and spun him around. They needed to move fast before the children hesitated or worse still, a new bombardment began.

Timmo sat with bazookas and machine guns across his lap as the gamers filed past and headed down to level four and safety. He had tried to count them in but as the queue died away he could only estimate about 80 had passed him.

‘Hey, Irish!’ Jack had spotted the boys who wanted to fight in the restaurant earlier in the week. The biggest of the bunch came closer, he respected Jack since their little incident. ‘They say you Irish boys are as tough as they come. Is that right?’ The lilting tones of all four Irish boys swore they were tough. ‘In that case you are now in charge. Take these bazookas and machine guns.’ The Irish boys grabbed the weapons in excitement. ‘Listen, this isn’t a game right?’ They nodded their assent and so he showed them how to arm the guns, to flick off the safety catches. ‘Only use them if all else fails.’ He shouldered the bazooka and showed them how to fire it and not to blow their own heads off. ‘Whatever you do, stay in there and wait to be rescued. Meanwhile, two of you need to go and get this lot some grub.’

‘How long do we stay down there English?’

‘Give it 48 hours. If the combined armed forces of the American and British can’t get in and release you by then...well, do what you can to escape.’

‘Good luck English.’

Jack turned and smiled at the boys. ‘It’s not about luck.’ They looked doubtfully at him. He looked them individually in the eye. ‘It’s about you doing your best.’ They all ducked as bullets whistled around their heads and ricocheted off the rocks above them. Three ninjas were 200 metres away and closing fast. ‘Get through the door and lock it now, forget the food yeah!’ He pushed them through and heaved the steel door closed with his shoulder before making his way back to Timmo. ‘We need to leave now. There’s also a fire fight happening over the other side of the chamber so it must be Roger and Kate under attack.’

‘Okay bro, let’s go and help them out.’ Jack crouched in front of Timmo. He could see his younger brother was terrified. ‘We’re going to get through this Timmo. Do you trust me?’

‘I trust you Jack, come on, let’s go and kick some arse.’

Jack wagged a finger at him, ‘you naughty boy, wait until I tell your mother.’

Timmo laughed, he loved the way his brother took the tension out of situations. ‘Let’s go bro!’ He pointed his thumb in the direction of the fire fight and they quickly edged their way around the inner walls of the cavern towards the deafening noise that came from the centre of MM’s bed chamber.

* * *

Techno had joined Roger as he poised at the edge of MM’s personal quarters on level one. ‘The stairs to the octopus cavern are about 400 metres away, exactly opposite us. Apart from the odd visit up here, I have no idea of the layout.’

Roger was terse. They had just avoided a second group of ninjas, more by luck than judgement. ‘That doesn’t help when Kate and your family are relying on us. Come on, think! Is there anywhere to hide over there and how the hell do we avoid these ninjas?’ Techno didn’t want to tell him the answer. ‘Make a decision Techno!’

‘It’s not a decision Roger as decisions are about choice.’

‘You are joking?’ Roger instantly knew what Techno had in mind. ‘We have to go through her personal quarters?’

‘There is no choice.’ Techno went to tell the rest to be on guard as they commenced weaving their way through the labyrinth of rooms with Roger in the lead. Techno knew the accommodation was perched around a central hole which was 100 metres across and 200 down but he had only seen it once. As they entered the labyrinth, he pulled Roger back and took over the lead. Quickly they moved forward. Mrs Hines was at the rear with Kit Kat beside her, both for protection and to give Mrs Hines some confidence. Kit Kat had already exchanged recipes for cup cakes with her and they were now debating the quality of M and S

sausages versus Morrison's. They had to be shushed by Marshall, a quick reminder of the danger they were all in.

Madame Musseine had allowed her imagination to flow for her design of accommodation. It was opulent and vulgar when compared to the basic partitioning of the technician's and the captive children. Each corridor followed the natural rocks and so most of them were trench-like as they curved backwards and forwards across the floor of the cavern. They were lit by electric lights shaped as ancient torches and the explanation for this came as they entered the first giant room. By using the ancient rock formations, she had created an Egyptian temple, complete with stone columns that were as grand as the Temple of Luxor by the River Nile. The friends paused by the stone altar at the centre of the room and stared upwards. The roof was so far above them that they couldn't make it out in the gloom. There was no noise and no people, a sinister place to worship herself.

What the friends didn't know was the Landrovers had returned through the secret tunnel at the foot of the mountain and were now parking in level two where Twip Twop was waiting to report to MM.

'Let's go!' Roger pushed Techno ahead of him and they headed down a dark corridor with a gentle breeze in their face. 'Why this wind Techno?'

'Don't worry, there's a central crater that leads to god knows where. It must be coming from that.' Roger thought about it. If there was air coming in from the outside, maybe it was an easy way to escape. They continued to move quickly and were walking around the edge of the crater when his thoughts were shattered by the first bullets splattering against the wall slightly to his left. 130 metres away a group of Ninjas had emerged from a tunnel with MM with Twip Twop standing menacingly behind.

‘Over there, behind the outcrop of rock!’ Roger’s command was lost in the noise of the ninja’s second burst. Again they missed their targets, luckily the friends were just out of the accurate range of the minimi machine guns. Mrs Hines was crying and sat with her head on her knees in the shadow of the giant boulders.

Kate had left Marshall to comfort his mum and so she drew close to Roger and Techno. ‘We are dead without any weapons. I suggest we surrender.’

Techno looked contemptuously at her. ‘You don’t surrender to Madame Musseine you silly girl. She takes no prisoners, do you get it? Get fled or get dead!’ She did get it and sat back in shock. They were going to die. ‘Don’t move!’ Techno sprinted from behind the rock and back to the corridor they had emerged from. It was a brave action as a dozen rounds were sprayed around him. Any one of them could have killed him but all fell short. He disappeared into the gloom; they thought he had fled. But after thirty seconds they saw his face grinning from the corridor exit. In his arms were four machine guns. He took a deep breath and ran around the crater to get back to them but there was no cover and the ninjas were much closer now. He took a bullet in his left leg and jolted with the pain but after staggering he managed to keep running and was within a few metres of them. Mrs Hines was crying with her hands clutched around her mouth as she helplessly watched her boy. Then another bullet caught him in his right shoulder and this time he fell to the floor. As he landed, he thrust all four guns their way so that they slid and bounced to the outcrop for them to pick up.

Roger shouted. ‘Come on Techno, crawl this way.’ But Techno was in a bad way and teetering on the edge of a ledge with a 200 metre drop. He struggled onto his knees and started to move towards them. That was when Kit Kat saw Jack emerge from a tunnel behind MM and her henchmen but way above the attackers. He and Timmo were separated by a long slope of smooth rock that ended in the midst of the ninjas.

Madame Musseine prodded the men forward with her gun and screamed at them. 'Get them! Move you cowards.' But it was she who was a coward as Roger and Kit Kat emerged from behind their cover and started to shoot on automatic. Three ninjas were hit and fell to the ground as their training paid off. They took careful aim again and another two ninjas were hit. The remaining attackers grabbed the bodies of their fallen comrades and sheltered behind them whilst lying on their stomachs and shooting over the top. MM sat out of range against the closest wall and urged them forward, calling them weak and cowardly in Japanese. One ninja hung back, he had lost his bottle and so Twip Twop raised his gun and shot him in the back of the head for his cowardice. It was a sufficient incentive for the others to race forward from behind their fallen comrades. Their machine guns were at waist level and firing continuously, forcing Roger and Kit Kat to duck back behind their rock. MM watched in delight, now for their revenge on the nasty little English kids. She noticed Techno crawling close to the precipice and took aim with her own gun. Techno was straining his neck up off the floor to focus on his brother's eyes as Marshall urged him forward with waves of his arms.

'Come on Robert, you can do it. Come on another few metres and we can help you.'

MM took aim carefully and pressed the trigger. Techno felt the bullets rip into his right hip making him twist to the right and lurch backwards over the ledge of the giant black hole. As he was falling, he heard Marshall's strangled 'no' as he watched his brother's hands slide off the edge of the rock. It was enough to make Techno reach out with his left hand and grab a small protrusion of rock and then he felt the void beneath him as he hung over the darkness. Marshall reacted quickly, he grabbed a minimi and ran to his brother whilst letting off a hail of bullets at MM and the attackers. As he moved Roger and Kit Kat took advantage of his

surprise attack and reappeared around the side of their rock and took out another five ninja with deadly fire. Sergeant Sargent had trained them well.

Marshall reached Robert and grabbed his wrist just as his hand slipped off the rock. Techno's eyes were cloudy as he looked up at Marshall in the gloom above him.

'Thank you for trying Marshall. Remember I love you. Tell mum too.' Marshall saw his eyes closing and started to cry as his hand slid across the bloody wrist of his broken brother. When it reached the fingers, the speed of separation increased and Techno plummeted to a certain death in the dark abyss below. Marshall stared down into the dark and then he rose to his full height and turned his machine gun towards MM and Twip Twop. He started walking towards them shooting off round after round as he cried.

The ninjas were preoccupied with Roger and Kit Kat and MM and Twip Twop with an enraged Marshall. They were pinned down but knew the children couldn't have much ammunition left.

Jack was standing above the fight and made an instant decision. The most danger lay in the attacking ninjas and so he raised the bazooka and pointed it.

Timmo watched in horror and thought of Sergeant Sargent's words. "Some call it God. Allah, Buddha, take your choice kids. I'm an atheist but I believe in a higher being, hence The Reason". Timmo also made an instant decision like his brave brother. He pushed on the wheels as hard as possible and tilted forwards sharply as he surged onto the glassy rock slope and raced towards MM and Twip Twop. The wheelchair gathered speed and he bit his lip in order to stop shouting "Geronimo" at the top of his voice. Jack caught the movement in the corner of his eye but was too late to stop his little brother. Time stopped and he watched everything in slow motion. Timmo was careering down the slope towards an oblivious Twip Twop and MM. Roger and Kit Kat were ducking back behind their cover as their ammo ran

out. Marshall's shots kept the attention of MM and Twip Twop and the ninjas were advancing to kill his friends. He aimed at the ninjas and pressed the trigger.

The rocket from the bazooka exploded in a deafening roar in the middle of the remaining attackers. MM and Twip Twop stood up to fire back at Marshall who had dropped on to his tummy and was squirming his way back towards his mum who was screaming with fright as she saw her second son about to die.

That was the moment that Timmo crashed into the rear of the gruesome twosome and knocked them flying over the ledge in front of them. They screamed in fright as they hit and bounced on the smooth rocks that continued the slide. But Timmo heard nothing as his wheelchair tipped onto its side and he smacked his head on the floor as he spun to a halt. His left leg was stretched out in front of him in its plaster cast and his right leg was bent double beneath him at an impossible angle.

Jack ripped the lighting cable away from the wall beside him and using it as a rope he swung out from the gallery and into the void. 10 metres out, he wrapped the cable around his right leg and slid downwards at speed. His minimi machine gun was blasting at MM and Twip Twop as they slid and bounced into the darkness of the crater and then he lost sight of them. He was the first to get to Timmo and stroked his hair. 'I'm so proud of you. My courageous little brother.'

Timmo was in too much pain to reply, he was barely conscious. He loved Jack and Jack loved him but then he passed out again, overcome by the horrific pain from his second broken leg. Roger ran up to them. 'Where have they gone?' He searched over the edge of the rock. All he could see below was a long ramp of smooth rock and a smashed wheelchair more than 50 metres below. 'I can't see them Jack. They must have slid all the way down there.'

Jack stood next to him and peered down into the gloom. 'I'm glad they may not be dead in some ways. Killing people is wrong, no matter what the circumstances.' He turned to look at the heap of dead ninjas and crossed himself. Marshall, Kit Kat and Mrs Hines slowly walked up to the boys. They were in all total shock, numb and quiet.

'Roger we haven't finished yet.' Jack waited for his pal's reply.

'I know. The SD card. But the children logged on before the attack. The world domination syntax is spreading through the world's financial markets.'

'In that case we need to stop it immediately and the only place we have any computer access is back on level three.' They all thought Jack was mad. It would be crawling with ninjas. He looked around. 'Come on, we've got a mum to look after us now.' He always made them laugh at the most dangerous times.

Mrs Hines spoke in a strong and steady voice. 'Sometimes mum's have to allow their children to grow up by making their own decisions. It's hard for a mum but now's your time children.'

Kit Kat fed on the emotion. She knew her mum's spirit was beside her. She would have wanted her to complete and finish the mission no matter what. And it would be a fitting tribute to Techno if they succeeded.

She spoke quietly and held her hand out. The others placed their hands on top of hers as they stood in a small circle. 'Who dares wins, yes?'

'Yes' came the chorus as they pushed their hands hard down before thrusting their fists high in the air. They set off immediately with Mrs Hines gently carrying a very pale Timmo in her arms.

Chapter 13

Endings or beginnings?

The heroes headed for the AICs. They were careful when they saw groups of ninja, however, they had lost the will to fight. They were no longer preoccupied with killing children in blind vengeance since all communication with Twip Twop and MM had been lost. Leaderless, some were now concerned for their own welfare, the money sent back to support their own families in Japan, their children. A ninja's bushido or honour is still intact if their master had suddenly deserted the cause. This was a temporary severing of a lifelong contract, thus leaving the warriors unsure about what to do next.

As the children approached the gallery around the roof of level three they could see part of the walkway had collapsed and was effectively blocking their way down to floor level. They stopped and looked over the railings set into the gallery. Everything below them was in absolute chaos. They could see a few ninjas herding wandering children back to the snails to continue playing "world domination" two. Several AICs were smouldering wrecks, hit by falling rocks or parts of flying doors from the assault that had now stopped completely. Smoke hung across the cavern but was swirling into mini tornados as huge draughts of air penetrated the interior through gaps created by the mass of bombs and missiles.

A dozen ninja emerged from a door leading up to the gallery. They stood blocking the children's only way to Techno's AIC. As the Japanese advanced, the children could see the tears in their grey uniforms and the blood stained and bruised heads. They were the same warriors who had been summarily beaten after the octopus attack and now they were out for revenge. Jack looked around and saw there was no way forward and no way back. Finally,

they were really in trouble as the Japanese warriors approached with daggers drawn and shuriken held loosely by their waists. There would be no mistake this time, the children were going to die to satisfy the ninja's bushido. Jack searched about again for a less obvious escape route but there were no handy cables drooping off the walls, nor fire hoses coiled on reels that they could use to abseil to the floor below. The ninjas were 30 metres away when they commenced their attack. They ran at full speed towards the friends and were screaming battle cries in Japanese at the top of their voices.

None of the children spoke. Fear gripped each of them and they knew the impossibilities of the odds this time. As the first wave of ninjas closed to 10 metres, they raised their flashing knives high in the air, a first move in the crisscross motion that would slit all the children's throats. The children had crouched low and were hoping to minimise the target. Mrs Hines stood behind them, cradling an unconscious Timmo. The power suits couldn't help them this time, there was little space to move and they had no weapons. They were dead meat.

The chatter of a machine pistol cracked loudly from above them and a hail of bullets cut the first wave of attackers down whilst they were in mid-leap. As the second wave stopped to search the darkness above, a second hail of bullets killed five more ninja making the remainder turn and run. A rope coiled onto the floor in front of the children and a man landed on his feet holding a lightweight American machine pistol.

'Have a nice day y'all!' Brett turned towards them, his white teeth set in a giant grin across his blackened face. The children immediately crowded around him gasping in their relief. Then the emotion kicked in and they grabbed and hugged him, after all, the yank had saved their lives. Roger and Kate wiped the tears from their eyes whilst Jack introduced Mrs Hines and updated Brett on Timmo's condition.

‘I’m sorry I was so late guys, you know, had a little trouble outside and all that.’ Mrs Hines couldn’t understand what was going on and so she asked Brett to clarify how he got in. ‘In the confusion I made it to the secret Landrover outlet. It was easy to follow them back in after they had massacred everyone.’

She clasped her hands to her mouth. ‘Massacred? Dear god in heaven forgive their souls. How many died?’

‘More than a 1000 m’am,’ Brett held her eyes with his own, ‘it was a terrible thing to witness.’

Mrs Hines patted him on the shoulder. ‘Never mind my boy, you can only do your best.’

Brett continued. ‘Once inside, I followed a tiny passageway upwards and after about an hour I was directly above you with nowhere to go. Then I saw you here on the walkway and prepared to abseil down but as I descended I could see you were in the deepest “do do” and the rest is history.’

‘But the speed of the bullets and number of enemies you took out? It’s downright impossible.’ Roger was staring at Brett’s gun that hung loosely in the Yank’s strong hand.

Brett unclipped the rope from his harness and holstered his gun as if he were a cowboy.

‘Not impossible, just technology. It’s the latest US special forces gun, used extensively by the SBS. A bullet-less gun, very light and very effective. It creates a bullet consisting of hydrogen atoms, well technically oxygen free water. It’s fired as a capsule and shaped into any requirement by the advanced computer chip. That allows it to be used to disable, kill - splatter we call it, or to breakthrough walls and doors etcetera. Anyway, I think the science lesson is over for now ladies and gentlemen.’ Jack told Brett about the route back to level one and they decided the internal crater in the centre of MM’s palace might be the safest route out. Firstly, because MM and Twip Twop would be dead at the bottom or long gone as they

high-tailed it to a safe haven. Secondly, because they could collect Techno's body and take him home as a mark of respect.

But the mission wasn't over yet. Although they were all in a bad way they had to finish and complete the job.

Brett took point, after all he was the one with the high tech gun. They worked their way back along the gallery and went down the alternative route to level three and the AICs.

* * *

Roger went into Techno's AIC and motioned Jack inside. The rest stood guard crouched around the neighbouring snails that contained a few odd children, very odd really, as they were still playing "world domination" two. In their minds they had decided that if in doubt, don't think, just do what you are told.

Brett urged them on. 'Little George is in a bad way guys. We need to get him medevaced "A S A P".'

The two boys stared at the "world domination" screen that flashed in front of them.

'Have you got the SD card Roger?' Jack clasped Roger's shoulder as he sat in Techno's seat. Roger pulled the card out of his shirt pocket and placed it on his knee. He had an idea but wanted to cure the illness before treating the symptom.

Roger sighed. 'You see all the Facebook feeds? We have to stop 95 brains from working together somehow. They are still on line and the program is creating havoc across the world despite them being safe on level four.'

Jack immediately agreed with him. 'The syntax has already started; having so many children still logged on is helping it to build into a crescendo of electronic destruction.'

Splodger pointed at the statistics on the screen. 'But there are a few less kids online, doesn't that help?'

Jack shook his head. 'No mate. I think Techno devised the program too well. Because the players hiding in level four didn't log out, they are still effectively playing. They are automatically encompassed into the game and so the power of MM's virus will be as potent when she unleashes it.'

Roger looked up at him. 'You think she's still alive then?'

'Sure, she could be in another command centre and uploading the virus as we speak.'

Roger had an idea. 'Why don't we block all the friend requests? That's what I do when I'm at school and weirdoes come on line. You know, people I don't know, health clubs, gyms and on-line shopping retailers.'

Jack turned away from the screen. Techno's two brain huggers were hanging on the wall of the AIC. 'That's brilliant! Why didn't I think of that!' Quickly he handed the huggers to Roger who stared at the sharp points that protruded from the plastic shells. 'Go on mate, you can do it. No pain no game and all that baloney.' Roger pressed the spikes deep into his skin, deeper than normal as he didn't have a shaven head. His lips writhed in agony as he bravely fought the pain. Once they were securely set into his scalp, he grasped the arms of the seat and started to think his instructions. Roger and Jack watched the images as they flashed at lightning speed across the screen. Roger was assembling a mosaic of the gamers' faces, who were still online and already trading assets.

He murmured as he worked. 'I'm searching for a common link between them all, something in their profiles that has nothing to do with The Black Hand Gang but the data about all the players is tightly controlled and totally secure.'

Jack pointed at the screen in three places. He was laughing. 'Look Splodge, many of them have a perfect taste in music!'

Roger laughed too. A large number had adopted Jack's San Fran band as a favourite.

'You mean an imperfect taste in music, I for one hate the band! But for my purposes, it's truly perfect. If we can reduce the game capacity by 60 per cent or more it will screw up its capacity for destruction and stop the world markets from plummeting.'

He concentrated harder. The band's website was on his screen and he was hacking into the base HTML code that formed the content. New code was being inserted at 300 words a minute, the twin brain huggers were warming up due to the insane levels of activity in the brain beneath them. Suddenly, the screen flicked back to show the 100 gamers' Facebook pages. 'It's done old chap, now give it a minute or two. My virus is now on the band's website and it will contact all of their friends and block them out. As I've linked the band and the "world domination" two app, it will automatically block the gamers from gaming.' He pulled the huggers from his head and small drips of bright red blood trickled down his face and onto his neck. Finally he slumped forward, exhausted by the mental challenge.

It was Jack who noticed first. 'Oh my god, you've done it Splodger!' The game app's were disappearing from the kid's Facebook pages, one every second. That was when they heard the groans of disappointment from the adjoining AICs. It was music to their ears. 'Come on we need to go.'

'No wait I have a little twist of my own to play in this pathetic little game.' Roger inserted the SD card into the server. He quickly found the code that accepted MM's virus and replaced this "acceptance" with a worm. A piece of software that would burrow itself into her viral code and eat it away, thus making it malfunction and then totally fail. 'Now she can't win, no matter what.'

Jack helped Roger to his feet and supported him as they stepped outside. The spaces between the AICs were full of children remonstrating with each other. They were the idiot children who hadn't listened to Jack's impassioned plea earlier. They preferred gaming to safety and disbelieved Jack's speech as a fairy tale. Now there was frustration and anger in the air as they shouted and complained at the failure of their game. A chant started, a commonality between nations. 'MM, MM, MM.' It was raw and grew louder. They had been promised the greatest day of gaming on earth and now their Facebook pages had gone on the blink. What a swindle. They wanted to go home, they wanted McDonalds and chocolate, coke and icecream but looking around them they started to notice for the first time that everything had gone. The cavern was a place of destruction and death. Gradually the chanting stopped and was replaced with a tense silence, which was full of fear.

Jack nudged Roger. 'Can you access the tannoy from Techno's AIC mate?' He didn't answer Jack, instead he went inside and then handed a microphone out to him.

Jack's voice boomed out above their heads. 'Stay still and stay here in the AICs. Listen to me please. MM is not defeated yet, the US and British armed forces that were attacking her have been repelled. This is a dangerous area, so stay inside the AICs and wait for rescue.' The mass of children had gone quiet and listened intently. Jack's voice was very persuasive. 'All you can do now is turn off all the computers and stay in your AICs. We will get someone in here to save you as soon as possible. Believe me now, because last time you didn't! Remember, I have proven you wrong before.'

He watched as the children turned and headed for the snails. He knew their patience would be short and so he gathered his friends behind Brett again and they headed towards level one and escape. The smell of the sulphur fumes had increased. It was hard to breathe in the acrid smoke but it wasn't because of the bombs and missiles. The volcano had hidden away its true

nature. It wasn't extinct as all the scientists thought, it had been dormant and now seams of activity had been activated by the force of the explosions. As they climbed the stairs they could see two brand new magma flows. Fast moving, red molten rock with a hard crust like apple crumble.

Now they knew they were in trouble.

* * *

A rumble rent the air as they stood next to the ramp leading into the crater in MM's palace. They could feel the rocks heating up around them and started to sweat. Timmo was passed from Mrs Hines to Jack who quickly tied them together as he cradled his brother in his arms. Then he steadily walked backwards down the ramp into the bowels of the earth, trailing a safety rope behind him. Brett held the rope taut and Jack used his abseil skills to maintain a steady descent.

Jack touched his earlobe and Roger heard him clearly on the minrad. 'Hold it there, we're on a flat bit.' Jack unleashed Timmo and carefully laid him out of the way of the others who were starting down. There was no sign of MM nor Twip Twop but on the floor to his right he could see the crumpled body of Techno. Carefully Jack unfolded a blanket taken from MM's bedroom whilst on route and laid it over the twisted and bloody body. He didn't want Marshall and Mrs Hines to see the mess. Brett and Mrs Hines were the last to land at the foot of the long ramp. He had doubled up on the abseil to help her down. She immediately went over to Marshall and hugged him close as he poured tears. The volcano shuddered under their feet, the heat was intensifying and fumes seeped from numerous cracks in the walls around. Jack looked around. 'Where's Kate?'

The minrad sounded in his ear. 'I'm not coming down Jack. over'

'What? Why ever not?' He forget to say over.

'Because I have a feeling and I need to follow it through, over.'

He was exasperated as the others heard half a conversation. 'I know you and your psychic rubbish but you need to come down so we can all escape.'

'No, you're wrong. I'm going to take a gyroscope. Sorry Jack, I just have a feeling ok?'

'No it's not flipping okay. Wait one, over.' He turned to Brett. 'She wants to take a gyroscope flight so I'm going with her.'

Brett looked at the remarkable young man. 'Just do it. See you outside.' As Jack started to climb the rope with his feet scrabbling up the rock wall, Brett turned to the others to lead them down the dark passageway yawning in front of them. 'Come on you lot and don't ask, just do.' After a fifty metres, Brett spoke quietly. 'Listen up everyone, we need to beat it real fast okay?' They all nodded or mumbled yes. 'I'm sorry Marshall, Mrs Hines, we have to leave Techno here and let someone else come and collect him.' They understood. Time was of the essence.

It took Brett and the rest an hour to reach the Savannah and they immediately collapsed in the fresh air whilst Brett jogged away to fetch the Hummer. Behind them the mountain rumbled and a bright red patch appeared to their right. They could see very little as the sun dropped below the horizon and left a red-yellow streak of sky that silhouetted the dark trees.

* * *

Jack was exhausted by the time he reached Kate. She helped him over the ledge and he lay gasping on the floor.

'I'm sorry Jack, I have to follow my feelings. You know that don't you?'

His voice was weaker now they were alone together. 'I trust you implicitly Kit Kat. Help me up.' She pulled him to his feet and they set off at a jog towards sector two, level three and the gyroscopes.

* * *

The Hummer's lights came closer and Brett arrived back at the group. All of them were so exhausted that they could barely climb in. Timmo was now in a coma, the pain was too much for his tiny body to cope with.

Brett spoke quietly. 'Steady down guys, your bodies are full of adrenaline. Inside the packs on the rear shelf, you'll find some emergency rations and water. If you eat and drink it will help you settle your bodies down.'

'How far to Outspan Brett?' It was Marshall, he had been in a stupor for nearly two hours since his brother's death. Now the chance of some reality had brought him around.

'Not far, maybe an hour at the most.' Brett lurched forward and turned on the stealth devices. The W12, 10 litre engine was super quiet and super efficient thanks to the hydrogen stored under their armour plated seats.

Roger was sat next to the yank and watched the gauges. 'I think I'm dreaming. I'm sat in a stealth Hummer doing 100 kilometres per hour across a dark savannah and just know that we are safe. How is that?'

Brett let the auto-drive do most of the work as they careered along. 'It's so easy boy. Expansion and cooling is the clever bit, not the fuel itself and that needs computer power, which we have in abundance.'

‘But hydrogen powered...how on earth does that happen?’ Roger was totally gob-smacked. The yank continued, ‘we do have hydrogen gas stations to serve BMW’s in California now. Have you not read about it Ponsonby-Smythe?’ They all knew he was joking, taking the Mick. When Roger couldn’t reply he assumed not. ‘In that case, that’s a first!’ They all laughed and that was when the heavy machine gun opened up from the hillock to the south of them. Bullets bounced across the armour plating and cracked the windscreen but the Hummer kept moving. Brett flicked the auto-drive to manual and turned hard left and away from the ambush.

They hadn’t banked on MM and Twip Twop reaching their Maasai friends and they didn’t know about the sonic radar on top of the volcano that had pinpointed their position. Madame Musseine sat in the Maasai chief’s hut. It was full of electronic gear that was being fine-tuned by Twip Twop. He radioed to the tribesmen and gave them a new bearing for their fire. The heavy machine gun ripped out again and two small rockets headed through the night sky.

Marshall saw the tell-tale glow first. ‘Hit the brakes!’ Brett slammed his foot onto the brake pedal and lifted off the accelerator. The computer took over and stopped the heavyweight truck in less than 20 metres and that saved their lives as the rockets hurtled across the bonnet.

‘Do you need a little help yank?’ Wolf’s voice came over as warm and friendly from 10000 kilometres away. The signal was pure, as if he was sat in the Hummer with them.

‘Hey Limey! “Bout” time you showed up. I guess you could join in now having missed the party!’ Brett could always rely on Wolf.

‘In that case I suggest you hit it and head direct for Outspan as the attackers have about five seconds to live.’ The Predator drone high above them had sent a sidewinder earthwards a minute before. The explosion lit the night sky and the RPG and bazooka fell silent. A second explosion took out half a village nearby.

‘What the hell was the second hit?’ Brett glanced at the horizon where the huts were ablaze.

‘The control centre. We traced the radio waves from the hit team to the control centre. If we are lucky, some big wigs are now barbecued.’ No one answered, they hoped she was gone but one never knew with such a cunning enemy.

The Hummer had slowed to 30 kilometres per hour, its run flat tyres weren’t designed to go faster and three out of four tyres had been hit by bullets. However, the auto repair rubber compound had got them out of trouble and they were heading home.

* * *

Jack and Kate reached level three and slowed to a walk. There was debris everywhere and no people. The reason was obvious. A huge tongue of molten lava was creeping across the floor. Half the AICs were on fire as the lava licked its way around them, slowly crushing them in its midst and carrying the burning debris forwards. Sector two was being devoured by another lava flow which had consumed half the gyroscopes already. But they saw the hangar door was open, probably because the technicians were escaping down the mountainside. They ran to the nearest gyroscope and strapped themselves in.

‘Are you ready?’ He turned to look her in the face. She was terrified. ‘Don’t answer, we’re going now.’ Jack gunned the engine and altered the flight lever, he wouldn’t make the same mistake. He kicked the brake off and they sped towards the door but they could see there was only a few metres of runway free from the lava. The thirty seconds for take-off felt like minutes. They were both choking on the sulphurous fumes and pouring sweat in the heat.

‘Jack,’ she screamed into his ear and clung to his strong shoulders, ‘look, the lava!’

He had seen the problem, there was no concrete left by the door, only hot lava that would fry the tyres and make them crash to their deaths.

‘Hold tight!’ He looked at the speed dial, it was too slow to take off, or was it? There was no choice, he left his pull back on the joystick until a metre before the running red rocks and felt the gyroscope judder as it clipped the lava. They were a metre off the floor but not safe, in another 20 metres the rotor would smash into the top of the hangar door.

‘Jesus wept, hail Mary mother of God.’ Kit Kat wasn’t Catholic but it helped to pray, the only other alternative was to close her eyes and not see their end. So she did and then jerked them open in fear as Jack thrust the joystick down and literally bounced the machine under the door and over the ledge to freedom.

Kit Kat was quiet behind him. ‘See Kate, I trusted your instincts and we made it.’ She was pouring tears and leaned forward to hug him tight and give him a giant kiss on the side of his face. They laughed together as he gunned the engine to its maximum rpm and started a slow dive to try and find their friends.

Jack pressed his earlobe. He imitated a US rapper as he chanted across the airways. ‘We is Jack and Kate and we is doing great!’ There was a peal of laughter from the gang in the Hummer.

Marshall rapped back. ‘Good on you, did you have pooh, cos we am sure you need the loo.’

‘Too true Marshall, we certainly did more than wet ourselves.’ Jack was laughing as he replied but his pants were damp.

Brett called urgently. ‘It’s not over yet you guys, stay alert, over.’ Jack and Kate scanned the ground below, they couldn’t see the Hummer as it was shielded but the tell-tale dust cloud behind it was a dead give-away. Now even the CIA couldn’t stop that.

‘We are behind and above you guys, stay cool and we will search ahead to see if there are any enemies lurking, over.’ Jack surged forward and started to sweep in a large circle around the invisible Hummer. ‘All clear Brett.’

The aerial attack was totally unexpected. Twip Twop closed from the left and MM from the right. It was Kate who felt their presence and she shouted to Jack to climb a few seconds before the machine gun bullets would have ripped into them.

‘Oh my god...’ she screamed as he did the impossible and looped the loop. Then she vomited over the back of his head. But in front of them were two gyroscopes who had overshot their quarry. Jack flicked the red switch to arm his own guns and pressed the trigger to give a long burst aimed at Twip Twop. His reasoning was that without Twip Twop she might flee. The bullets ripped through the enemy’s machine and stitched a line up his back. Neither Kate or Jack spoke as they watched Twip Twop spiral downwards and hit the ground in a ball of flame. Death wasn’t funny, it wasn’t to be gloated over. When they looked up there was no sign of MM. She had flown away, scared of the two children.

As Jack lurched downwards again he was pleased to see the gyroscope quickly lift and settle into level flight behind the Hummer. As they circled their friends, they saw the gaping hole yawn out of the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. There was a gigantic explosion as years of gas trapped in the rocks caught fire and soared 1000 metres skywards. Thousands of tonnes of rock were ripped out of the earth and the shock waves buffeted the machine making it twist on its side and plummet towards the earth. Jack struggled to hold onto the joystick, the gyroscope seemed unflyable.

‘Flip, flip, flip’ Kit Kat was shouting in his ear. He was closer to the ground and they were about to crash. A last yank on the joystick took all his remaining strength, it was do or die. The gyroscope swooped upwards just missing the ground and clipped the top of a baobab tree, leaving a pile of twigs and leaves in his lap. He laughed like a maniac but they were safe. The Reason had helped them, or something else. That was for Kate to think about, he

just wanted to land and sit somewhere safe and comfortable, away from the madness of the last three months.

* * *

The Hummer skidded to a halt and Timmo woke up to see the others staring at him. 'What time is dinner, I'm starving?' He was back with them. They knew he would be alright because he wiped Mrs Hines slobbery kisses off his wet cheek. Brett spoke gently to them all. 'It's over everyone. You are under my protection here and about 100 US Marines by the look of things. Indeed, as they stared around they saw the hotel had been made secure.

* * *

Kit Kat leaned across to Jack as he commenced his landing on the strip by the river. 'You really messed up my hair today Jack George!' As they slowed to a halt, Jack wiped his sleeve across the slick on his hair. 'And you didn't, I suppose?' He helped her out of the gyroscope and put his arm around her to escort her into the hotel. The watching marines kept away. It was nice to see young, innocent love between the best of friends.

* * *

Brett prompted everyone to leave the Hummer. 'Come on. I also have a dozen agents inside the hotel and quite frankly, based on the stink, it's time for showers and then bed.' The sorry crowd collapsed out of the doors and walked slowly through the hotel lobby as the sun started to set. Only the night manager saw them arrive. A dishevelled gang. A mum, her three boys and her eldest son. He turned away, it wasn't any of his business.

* * *

Kit Kat's dreams were vivid that night. She was in the Hummer, bouncing across a dirt track, through a river, submerged for a minute and then safe on the road to Nairobi. Brett used his CIA stun gun on a giant Rhino and a lion that she thought was pretty with its pink fur.

Brett turned to her and said. 'We do have feelings in the CIA Kate.

Kate replied. 'Think of the lion like my little Wispy, a pretty soft-hearted cat...' it leapt for the half open window, a giant paw reached in within a fraction of a second and two claws ripped across her face.

Jack admonished her. 'I don't think Wispy would do that Kate! Flip me, she wouldn't even manage the jump up to the window as she is so fat.' And then she jerked awake. She was in a cold sweat and thought it was real, until she heard the others breathing nearby. They were all in one room for safety and outside were a ring of guards. That made her feel safe for the first time since starting the mission and she snuggled under her blanket and went back to sleep.

* * *

The following afternoon, the team all felt much better. The nightmare was over as they sat in the dappled shade of a mimosa tree drinking tea and eating yummy cream cakes. The Outspan Hotel in Nyere was luxurious and welcoming. Best of all it was private and confidential as the other guests had been moved out by the CIA.

Roger was chatty again. 'Did you know Lord Baden Powell used to live here?'

'Who?' Jack queried.

'Baden Powell. He started the scouting movement, which is really inspiring as I loved my time in the scouts.' No one was listening but they were all happy for him to talk about everything and nothing as they stared into the distance and thought of their parents back in England. 'Did you know our Queen, learned she had become Queen at Treetops, which is the sister hotel nearby?'

The sounds of Africa lulled their senses but the sound of a low flying jet jerked them back to reality. It was coming in from the east. A black jet that pulled into a vertical and totally impossible climb unless designed by a genius.

Timmo thought about his friend Techno and hoped he was at peace. They stared at the jet as it left black smoke trails in the shape of a four-fingered hand before zooming seawards.

Kit Kat gently touched Brett's arm. 'What about the slave workers, the technicians?'

Brett placated her worries. 'It will be okay Kate. International help is there already. All the children were escorted out of the mountain a few hours after we left, apart from those trapped on level four. They were transferred by French helicopters to an aircraft carrier off the coast and then debriefed before flying out of Zanzibar to their homes.' Jack turned away from the others as he cried. He had given the children the wrong advice and now he had to live with that bad decision and the death of all those children including Irish.

Brett saw the tears. 'No one knew the volcano was going to erupt. Things happen in wars that no one can plan for...it's part of growing up, living with your decisions.' But it didn't make it any easier and Jack shuddered as he sobbed.

Timmo stirred himself. He had been quiet because of the Tramadol, a painkiller that worked brilliantly but dulled the brain. 'Can MM control the world now?'

Roger answered him. 'She can try Timmo but we inserted a virus into the "world domination" game. It was easy once I had downloaded the codes from the SD card.'

Jack turned and dried his eyes on his cuff. He raised an eyebrow as he asked, 'and what else did I see you doing before you left the AIC?'

'I kind of uploaded my own little virus.' Roger giggled. They listened expectantly. 'Well not earth shattering like MM's. Every former player is offered a free book from Amazon entitled 'The Black Hand Gang' by Roger Ponsonby-Smythe.'

'Free?' Kate asked.

'Well, not quite free. All charges are made on Madame Musseine's bank accounts that were also detailed on the SD card.'

Timmo was delighted. 'That's cool. What happens when she finds out?'

'She won't until all her money has been spent as each transaction is mirrored in each account and therefore magnified a million times in a single day. So that means she'll know tomorrow!'

'Fabtastic said Timmo 'you make me speechless.'

'Cool splodger,' the others chimed in. Roger was still grinning. They looked at him expectantly.

'Even better, I telephoned my dad when we got here and he has bought 500,000 Amazon shares.'

‘Which will zoom upwards due to the huge sales,’ said Kate.

‘And be sold at a massive premium’ added Jack. ‘Then zoom down again.’

The children clapped Roger on the back in pure admiration. It encouraged him to intellectualise about The Black Hand Gang. ‘Did you know the original gang was a bunch of Serbians who assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and that led to the start of the First World War in 1914?’

‘Roger!’ A chorus of good-natured “shut-ups” made him stop but they didn’t really mind him being intellectual. After all he was their best friend and one of their gang.

Marshall left the party and went to his room to look after his mum. They had a lot of catching up to do.

Brett walked away towards the bar and a well-earned beer leaving Kate, Jack, Roger and Timmo alone. The older children stood and gathered around Timmo’s new wheelchair provided by the hotel. Jack ruffled Timmo’s ginger mop and looked at the messages already inscribed on both of his plaster casts holding his legs stretched out in front of him.

Roger had written, “Timmo isn’t a dimmo.” Brett, “the bravest boy ever.” Marshall had put, “bet you can’t hop 100 metres.” Kate, “love you loads get well soon, x x x.” And then there was Jack’s message. “Nearly lost but then found. I love you forever Timmo.”

The sun was setting over the jungle forests of Nyere National Park and they silently stood in awe of its beauty. Maybe their senses were heightened to a level never reached before, never reached by most people in their rather mundane lives. But the gang of four friends now knew the difference between living and existing. Now they had tasted real life and adventure, it was intoxicating and an irreversible process. They reached out their hands and clasped them together in the centre of their circle. As the sun finally set on their African adventure a loud

shout echoed across the river and disturbed the monkeys making them stare at their ancestral equivalents.

‘Who dares wins!’ The shout followed the hands as they were thrust skywards and clenched into triumphal fists.

* * *

The Black Hand Gang and Madame Musseine were stopped before they started by a company of best friends.

The Evil stopped by The Good in our small world.

The newspapers christened them “The Company”. A set of children but with no names mentioned. Lauded as saving our world, the one we think we understand but where no one knows what is really happening behind the facade of reality.

The stories in the media didn’t cover 99 per cent of the truth.

There are many evil people in our world and only a few brave and courageous children to defeat them, starting with you.

* * *

One week later, Roger sat at his desk at Eton Public School and blotted the splodge of ink on his history essay, ‘The Samurai, warriors of Japan – honourable despots or heroes?’

Timmo was at home with dad, his left leg was recovering well but his right was a mess. He was desperate to return to school and his mates but for now, the doctors had told him the damage would keep him in a wheelchair for a long time, maybe forever. However, there was

only so much Top Gear on Dave TV that even he could watch and re-watch and now he was bored.

Which left Kate and Jack. She glanced across at the handsome hero to her left. He was squirming at his school desk remembering the adventure of a lifetime and not paying attention to the English teacher droning on about William Shakespeare. He turned towards her and gave her the handsomest of smiles and she returned it before shyly lowering her gaze as she blushed bright red. The teacher continued to recite Shakespeare but now it was more interesting, at least for Kate.

‘Take all my loves, my love yea take them all;

What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?’

She sighed and remembered how close they had been in the volcano.

Jack the lad, a typical brainless boy just played with his pen, swooping it across the desk as if it were an aeroplane or even...a stealth gyroscope.

THE END

The second book in the series is called:

The Black Hand Gang rise again.

Madame Musseine and sushi.

Acknowledgements

To my son, Jack George who listened to my stories about ‘The Black Hand Gang’ whilst we were on holiday in Llafranc, Catalonia.

You prompted the story lines, demanding more from my imagination.

Do you remember the heat Jack? The scent of the pine and olive trees mixed with that of the brine as it evaporated on the shores of the warm Mediterranean sea.

Thank you for all your suggestions then. Thank you for editing the manuscript now.

Be inspired by our book and always remember to ask yourself; are you living or just existing?

Love Dad xxxxxxxx

Theme music for the film is “Africa” by Toto

I hear the drums echoing tonight
But she hears only whispers of some quiet conversation
She's coming in, 12:30 flight
The moonlit wings reflect the stars that guide me towards salvation
I stopped an old man along the way
Hoping to find some long forgotten words or ancient melodies
He turned to me as if to say, "Hurry boy, it's waiting there for you"

It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you
There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do
I bless the rains down in Africa
Gonna take some time to do the things we never had

The wild dogs cry out in the night
As they grow restless, longing for some solitary company
I know that I must do what's right
As sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti
I seek to cure what's deep inside, frightened of this thing that I've become

It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you
There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do
I bless the rains down in Africa
Gonna take some time to do the things we never had

Hurry boy, she's waiting there for you

It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you
There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do
I bless the rains down in Africa
I bless the rains down in Africa
(I bless the rain)
I bless the rains down in Africa
(I bless the rain)
I bless the rains down in Africa
I bless the rains down in Africa
(Ah, gonna take the time)
Gonna take some time to do the things we never had

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