

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

KARL MEAD: a private security contractor, who has seen better days.

RODNEY DARLING: a man who knows more than is good for him.

CLIVE RIVERS: Rodney's long-suffering bodyguard.

MALIK: a man with an unusual talent who has difficulty keeping himself together.

CIARAN NUNN: an immortal, who would like his wife to stop bothering him.

THE FINGAL AISLING, a gentleman's homunculus.

THE TEACHER: someone with a plan. He enjoys tea.

THE HEAD: A head. He has also seen better days.

SHAMSUN: an immortal, whose answer to life's complexities is to hit them until they stop.

### PROLOGUE: We all make mistakes

Karl

THIS was the place where the clouds kissed the sea, the place where jagged teeth of rock emerged from the jade green depths of the ocean, where life clung to every exposed surface. This was the place of islands, some so tiny they could only house a single gull, some that presented their backs like antediluvian leviathans, sacrificed in some ancient god's violent act of creation long before humans had set their timorous paddles in the deep water.

The silences here could be powerful, accentuated rather than interrupted by tide and birdcry. At first, the chudding noise of the helicopter's rotors were absorbed into this muffling background, but then the noise became distinct. The helicopter was flying low, not more than fifteen feet above the surface of the water, moving at great speed over the restless swell of the waves.

Less than five kilometres away, a team of men were working rapidly and efficiently to clear away the camouflage netting that concealed a black tarmac helipad, which occupied the centre of a nondescript island that rose like a spiky crown from the dark waters. The men had only just finished clearing the pad when the incoming helicopter came in with alarming speed, flared, and set its wheels to the tarmac.

Drops of condensation were already starting to bead on the slick black surface of the helicopter as the rotor blades began to cycle down. A thick wet fog was rolling in, and the ground crew had to wipe their goggles clear before they emerged from their cover positions and ran to the aircraft. The cargo doors of the helicopter slid open, and members of the flight crew, whose grey uniforms matched those of the ground crew, carried out a gurney, popping its wheels out as they carefully transferred a stretcher from craft to helipad.

Strapped to the gurney was a massive man, who thrashed and strained at the restraints which kept him in place. His head was a thatched mass of hair and beard, so thick it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. Glaring out of the mass was a pair of rolling, wild eyes, and the man roared as he struggled: “You dumb bastards, you dumb bastards! Don’t knock me out! You hear me? Sons of bitches! DON’T PUT ME TO SLEEP!”

Rodney and Clive

THE 1971 Buick Centurion, a monster of the road that swallowed gasoline like a six hundred pound grouper swallowed minnows, roared its way down the New Mexico highway. And Rodney, his hands dusting the wheel at the ten and two o'clock positions, told Clive the shark story.

“There’s this guy just outside of Vegas,” he said, shifting his ass with a squeak on the plastic bench seat. “He’s got a big place. All kinds of crazy shit. Angles, you know; guy runs all kinds of crazy angles. One of them is this Sexaquarium. For, you know, fish-fuckers.”

Clive sheltered his hands around his Zippo, lit up a Dunhill, and drew the smoke in. He felt the smoke going into his lungs, relaxed, exhaled. “Fish-fuckers, huh?” He knew Rodney wasn’t going to stop, but he also knew Rodney liked to be encouraged.

Rodney sneered, teeth like slats on a hillbilly shack. “Guys who like to fuck fish. Don’t ask me. But the real shit, the crazy shit, the real dark crazy shit, was shark-fucking.” He shifted again, the plastic squeaking under his ass. His left hand tapped the steering wheel.

Clive looked out at the desert rolling past them, the tiny bushes, the broken terrain that dipped and disappeared and lied. He drew again on the cigarette, looked over at Rodney and raised his eyebrows.

“Tiger shark. Big bitch. They put her into this harness thing, in waist-deep water, just waiting for you. You only have, like, less than five minutes, you know? ‘Cause sharks have to keep moving or they die. So I step into this freezing salt water – man, it was cold! - balls deep, with this big bitch of a tiger shark waiting for me...”

There was a pimple right where Clive’s sunglasses rested on his nose. The sweat was making it worse.

“...and this bitch’s tail smacks me right on my cock...”

Not for the first time, Clive idly fantasized about shooting Rodney. Not part of the job description, sadly.

“...and I'm just *givin'* her and then one of the harness rings snaps, pop! Right open...”

Another draw on the cigarette. Clive pulled his sunglasses down, rubbed at the spot where the pimple was.

“...so all I'm seeing is this huge goddammed mouth of jagged teeth, I mean, my number is up. But this crazy tiger shark bitch says to me, “Thank you, Rodney. That was the best *fuck* of my *life*.” Rodney starts laughing, a hyena laugh, short barking yelps, his shoulders bouncing up and down.

“So Rodney...”

“Yeah, bud?” Still chuckling, his shoulders still pumping up and down, up and down.

“When I said to you, 'Rodney, take the wheel for a while, because I'm bagged and I need a nap'...”

“Yup.”

“What the fuck did you hear?” Dunhill down to the filter. Clive flicked it out the window.

“*Jeezus*, Clive. Okay, okay, whatever.” Hurt tones in Rodney's voice.

Clive leaned towards the open window. Even at this speed, the air coming in felt like it was straight out of an oven. Better than the smell of Rodney in close quarters, though. He closed his eyes.

“The best *fuck* of my *life*...” came the soft mutter.

Fifteen hundred miles to go, thought Clive.

Malik

WRONG place, wrong place, wrong time! Thought Musa'ab frantically as he sprinted down the street in the twilight. He reached a corner and turned it, keeping his back to the wall as he sank down, gasping for air. The street was dead quiet as Musa'ab tried to slow his breathing down and figure out his surroundings. He set his precious crate of oranges down between his feet.

The oranges were not for him to eat, nor for his family to eat. They were for selling, for money that his family needed, always needed. The oranges were grown less than twenty miles away, but for the people of Musa'ab's encampment, they may as well have been on the other side of the world. Truckloads – truckloads! - of oranges came up the road from Ramleh, only to be stopped by the IDF checkpoints.

May God be infinite in His Justice, thought Musa'ab as he caught his breath, and remember His people in their suffering and those who make His people suffer! Flats of oranges sitting on the trucks, slowly spoiling in the sun as the Jewish soldiers reminded the Palestinians who rules this land. Farmers cursing the Jews – under their breath, of course – as their harvests rot on the side of the road.

So what farmer wouldn't try to soften his losses a little by selling a crate to young Musa'ab, even at half the price? Little Musa'ab, eleven years old and starvation thin, who can slip through the cracks in the incomplete section of the Security Wall and sell the crate for three times what he paid, to hungry Arab villagers fenced away from what used to be their orchards.

Except this time, he'd screwed up. He always waited as late as he could, letting the asking price drop as the farmers' hopes of getting through the checkpoint fell. This time he'd left it too late, and it was past curfew.

He took a deep breath, rose, and risked a look around. Empty street. A breeze rushed through discarded newspapers, raised the dust. Five days without rain, nothing to settle the dust to the street.

Two blocks over, and he'd be in the drainage ditch that would take him past the Security Wall. Probably another month until this section was finished; then he'd have to find another route.

Time for it. He took a deep breath, fixed his grip on the crate, and sprinted across the street, keeping his body low. As he reached the other end of the block, he skidded to a stop, gulping air. Then he heard a burst of radio static, followed by voices.

IDF patrol.

Oh, God, thought Musa'ab. Oh, sweet God. Musa'ab tried to shrink against the wall. If they were coming up the next street, then he was caught and faced a beating at the very least. If they were coming up the street he had just crossed, then he had a chance as long as he ran, right away.

Gulping back a sob, he ran, heart hammering, head down. His feet thumped along the dusty road. His sweat mixed with the dirt on his face, his hands, his legs, making his feet slip inside his sandals. He stumbled and fell, choking back a cry as the skin peeled from his palms and knees. In pure animal terror, he crawled to the end of the block.

No shouts. No shots. He was still alive. But his crate of oranges lay where he had tripped, back out in the street.

This was too much to bear. Musa'ab started to cry, silently, tears making tracks down his dirty cheeks. Oh God, I have never been this afraid, he prayed. I place myself in Your hands. I trust to Your love to protect me. You know why I do what I do. My deeds are pure.

Suddenly, bursting into the silence of the twilight, he heard the call of the muezzin, summoning

the faithful to prayer.

Surely this was a sign from God. Musa'ab pushed himself to his feet, squared his tiny shoulders and ran back into the street. The crate of oranges, lying there in the dust, was the centre of his vision, the centre of his universe. Musa'ab had never felt so strong in his life as when he picked up that crate of oranges and ran back down the street. He felt as if angels were lifting his sandals as he flew past the corner, straight as an arrow towards the drainage ditch. He slid down the bank and into the filthy water. The muezzin was still singing his call into the evening. Fifty yards along the ditch to the unfinished section of the wall, then an easy quarter mile home.

A rifle's bolt action slammed home like a shutting gate, above and behind him. Musa'ab felt freezing cold and sick to his stomach and oddly weightless, all at once. "Look at this, Avner," came a lazy voice from above. "Look at the shit-eating rat in the ditch."

Musa'ab heard death in the man's voice.

"Filthy rat, Yitzhak," came another voice. "So many filthy rats coming from the filthy fucking Arabs these days."

Musa'ab closed his eyes, tried to stop himself from shaking. If this is Your will, God, then I am but Your servant. Let it be so.

"Should we call the exterminator, Avi?" Idle curiosity. Like it was even a real question. Musa'ab, tears rolling down his cheeks, knew better.

"Oh, no, Yitzhak." Boots shifting, grinding the dirt as the man steadied his feet to fire. "I think we can -"

A sudden rushing, sliding noise, a terrible impression of *speed*. "What the fucking -" sudden scrabbling in the dirt atop the bank, a sound like someone trying to cough, pneumonia-wet. An overwhelming reek of hot tar.

Silence. Musa'ab kept his eyes tightly shut. Then, he could *feel* a presence right behind him. So close he could hear deep, bubbling breath. The smell of tar so strong Musa'ab thought he might faint.

"Peace upon you, brother," said Malik, black and wet.

"And upon you be peace," Musa'ab managed. Again, a slithering, sliding rush, and the presence was gone.

Musa'ab had no memory of his journey home. His mother clucked like a hen over him, scolding him for his lateness and praising him for the crate of oranges. His younger brother asked him why he smelled like a newly made road, the hard kind the Jews made in their settlements that lasted forever.

Ciaran

HE was washing the dishes and listening to the Fingal Aisling go on about ice hockey. Ciaran wasn't sure why the Fingal had decided to take an interest in hockey, but when they had moved to Canada hurling and camogie had gone out the window.

“That's why they're such fecking wastrels in the playoffs. Everyone liked to blame the goalie, but that's a far cry from the truth, boy, you mark me words. No extra gear for the playoffs, and that's the truth! Pair of cunts, those bloody twins.” The Fingal perched on the windowsill above the sink, one foot up and one hanging down, chewing tobacco and holding forth.

“Well, I'm not saying you're wrong, Fingal.” Ciaran placed a mug in the drying rack.

“As if ye could, laddie, as if ye could. Mind ye, in two thousand and eleven they were just going through the motions. Practically *fell* into the final. In nineteen ninety *four*, now-”

The Fingal stopped abruptly. Ciaran paused in the washing and looked up. The Fingal was standing at the window, staring out and absentmindedly scratching his bum. “Feck me.”

Ciaran stood on his toes to look out the window, and saw his dead wife staring at him from the front lawn. Ciaran sighed and dried his hands. He dropped the dishtowel on the counter and walked down to the front hall, tramp tramp tramp. In the front hall was a side table – she had bought it, Ciaran realized suddenly, and howled like a banshee when he had thrown his keys on it and left a scratch – which had a single drawer. He slid open the drawer and rummaged through flyers and dead batteries until he found the tubing of his slingshot. Ciaran dragged it out and gave it an experimental pull.

“Feck me,” repeated the Fingal, manifesting on the tabletop. “Ye'd think she'd cop on. How long does it take to get the *message*, I wonder?”

Shot. He needed shot.

He sighed and opened the drawer further. He pulled out a Chinese takeout menu and put it on the table. Indian restaurant. Pizza place. Another pizza place. Old phone bill. He stacked them neatly. Duct cleaning flyer. Update from his local MP.

“For fuck's sake.”

His fingers found something that felt right, and Ciaran pulled out a thick pellet, half the size of his thumb. He held it up to the light. Lead core, thick-baked clay surrounding it, a carving of a spiral in the clay.

“There's the business,” said the Fingal approvingly.

He opened the door and walked onto the front step.

His dead wife had taken the form of a crow, standing bold as could be on the lawn, yellow-black eyes rolling as she cocked her head. Ciaran put the stone in the sling, pulled it back to maximum tension as he took aim. "You really need to stop doing this," he said as he let fly, striking the crow squarely and crushing its skull.

PART ONE:  
Ill met in Idaho

THE one they called the Teacher looked down at the glass of tea he held cupped in his hands, a sprig of mint circling atop the dark liquid. He smiled at a thought that flashed by, and he looked up at Shamsun, who was pulling back the thick curtain at the entrance to the cavern. "Any sign of him?" he asked.

Shamsun let the curtain fall, irritably brushing a strand of his hair away from his face as he turned back into the cavern and took a seat near the Teacher. Shamsun made the stool look like a child's toy as he balanced his heavy frame upon it and took a glass of tea in his hands. A third glass remained on the metal fold-out table. "We all agreed," Shamsun rumbled discontentedly. "This is bad manners."

"Then please accept my apologies," came the voice from the rear of the cavern.

Shamsun swore as he jumped backwards, knocking his stool over. The Teacher only laughed softly. "I did wonder," he said. "You have a habit of appearing in some very dark places, brother. Would you like some tea?"

"Shaitan's balls, Malik!" Shamsun righted his stool and crouched upon it once again. "You can apologize to the state of my pants if you do that again!"

Malik's answer was a series of wet coughs, possibly laughter. "I will take no tea, brother, thank you. I find myself quite hydrated."

The Head, perched in the middle of a fold out table, emitted a series of barking laughs.

The Teacher sipped at his tea and set the glass down. He looked in the general darkness at the back of cavern and asked politely, "How was Palestine?"

Silence. Then: "A mistake. You were right, and I was wrong. There is no acceptance there. No home."

The Teacher pulled his broad features into an expression of sympathy. Shamsun looked down and shook his head. "I am sorry to hear it, brother," said the Teacher.

"He who travels widely will need his wits about him," cackled the Head, "the ignorant should stay at home."

Shamsun growled, deep in his chest, which only made the Head laugh louder. The Teacher waved his hand irritably, and the Head fell silent.

"And I am sorry for the pain this discovery must have caused you," said the Teacher solicitously. Then he waited, drawing the silence around him like a blanket. Shamsun stared at his glass, tiny in his hands.

Finally, there was a burbling sigh from the back of the cavern. "Very well," said Malik. "There is no place for me out there. I will join you."

Shamsun put his glass of tea down with a loud clack and sat back, his huge hands resting on his knees, nodding approvingly. The Teacher smiled. "Then it is time to go back to work."

\* \* \*

CIARAN dug two holes, three feet deep, one beside each post of the soccer goal at the far end of the field. He straightened up, and took a precautionary look around. It was past midnight, and there was not a soul to be seen. The nearest house had its lights off, and the woods were quiet. Ciaran reached into the burlap sack and fumbled around. He pulled out a sodden lump of meat and bone, and dropped it into the first hole with a grimace. It landed with a wet thump. "Heads I win." Ciaran walked over to the second hole, and upended the sack. The legs, ribs, entrails and other mortal remains of a ginger cat slid out of the bag and fell into the hole with a gentle patter. "Yeurch," said Ciaran, as he toed a ropy length of intestine down. "Tails, you lose." He poured a bottle of water over his hands and scrubbed them vigorously. He refilled the holes and carefully replaced the sod over the top of them. He folded the shovel and picked up the empty sack. "This really does need to stop," he said regretfully.

Ciaran started to whistle softly as he walked back across the field. The Fingal popped onto his shoulder. "Why bury her at the goalposts? It's not like a crossroads or nothin'."

"No particularly occult reason, Fingal. I just really hate soccer." The Fingal sniggered and pulled his cap tightly over his ears.

Suddenly, as if he had been struck, Ciaran stiffened. He felt the blood roaring in his head, and briefly wondered if he was going to pass out. A sense of *wrongness* washed through his whole body.

Then it was gone, as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Feck me!" gasped the Fingal. "What in the proverbial was *that*?"

Ciaran tilted his head up, like a dog trying to catch an elusive scent. “Oh dear,” he said to himself. “Somebody is trying something they shouldn't.”

He began to run across the field.

\* \* \*

KARL slumped back in his chair and stared at the computer screen. No new emails. Five goddam resumes, five cover letters, five more attempts to explain what had happened to him and why it shouldn't be a concern to any prospective employer in his field. It didn't matter. As far as the security industry was concerned, he was damaged goods and no one was going to touch him.

*So how do I explain that it wasn't my fault, without sounding like a whiny bitch?*

Well, that was the trick, now, wasn't it?

There was no denying that it didn't look good. A total breakdown in Iraq, everyone at the base dead except for him, and him missing for days, then popping back with his head all fucked up and no memory of exactly what the fuck had gone down. A mess of a time with him strapped to a gurney in and out of sedated sleep, dead to the world or having full-on screaming fits.

He rubbed his freshly shaven head and knuckled the tiredness out of his eyes. He felt more and more like he was in a toxic relationship with his apartment; every hour he spent here was more and more like prison time, but some days he felt like it took more energy than he had to leave, even for a coffee or (less and less) a beer with old buddies.

That was part of the problem as well. Drinking buddies were not the same as friends, and contractors tended to be a superstitious bunch. Whatever bad luck had hit Karl, no one else wanted any of it to rub off on them. He had become a cautionary tale, a piece of gossip to go around the circuit, the iron man who had cracked up and gotten everyone around him as dead as Pontius Pilate.

It was, Karl thought, time to consider other options. His savings were almost gone, and soon he would need to start selling his gear just to make rent. A steady diet of instant noodles was costing him muscle mass, and the thought of just eating a bullet was appearing with alarming frequency.

“Fuck this.” Karl put the computer to sleep and got up from his chair. He went to his bedroom and found a close-to-fresh shirt and pulled it on, strapped his gear belt around his jeans and tied up his boots. “Time to head to the wrong side of the tracks.” Word of mouth mattered on the professional contractor circuit, but there was always a market for big tough bastards who knew how to play rough and didn't ask a lot of questions.

Looking back, Karl realized that he should have known that it had been way too easy, but at the time all he cared about was finding a job, and fast.

Two afternoons making his way through some downtown bars got him an offer for a serious interview, and by the third day he was in a freshly pressed suit, walking into the Pacifica Building on Pender, looking for an office on the tenth floor. An express elevator ride took him to his destination: Blenheim and Associates. He walked in and courteously presented himself to the receptionist. She blinked once at the giant who had walked into her office, and promised to alert Mr. Klava, if Karl could just take a seat in the meantime.

In truth, Karl cleaned up well. His size made him stand out in almost any gathering, but he had trimmed his beard down to something reasonable and the suit had been custom-tailored years ago. The creases on his slacks were immaculate, and broke smoothly over his Oxford wingtips. As long as no one sees my apartment, he thought, then it's all good.

“Please follow me,” the receptionist said, as she got up from behind her desk and walked him down a hallway. The doors were all closed as they proceeded, without even so much as windows beside the doors to give an indication of what lay behind. After a right turn they reached a door (Forty-three paces, thought Karl, out of mindless habit) which the receptionist opened and said, “Mr. Klava, Mr. Mead is here for his appointment.”

Karl stepped in briskly, his body language radiating polite efficiency. He extended his hand, “Mr. Klava, pleased to meet you.” He was met by a balding man in a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a suit jacket hanging from the chair behind him. His forehead was wrinkled with worry lines, and he had a tiredness in his eyes. Karl's hand enfolded a hand that felt a little like a leather glove.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Mead. Call me Barry. Have a seat. My goodness, I hope the chair can hold you,” Barry Klava's jocularly seemed a little forced. Karl, who from long experience only had reinforced furniture in his apartment, gave a small smile.

“Ordinarily, we leave it to our associates in the field to take care of contract issues, but when we heard about your... resume, we were very excited.” Barry Klava had a file folder on his desk with Karl's name on it. Karl was impressed. *This guy might be serious*, he thought to himself. “Five years regular forces, two years JTF2, then three years as a private contractor...” Karl nodded again, trying not to tense. *Here it comes*, he thought.

Except that it did not. “I understand why your...recent difficulties have made it difficult for you to find employment through regular channels. But rest assured, for us, this does not constitute a problem, and your skill set makes us very excited.” Karl felt like an electric charge had jolted his system. Involuntarily, he sat up a little straighter. Barry Klava smiled and leaned forward. “So let's talk business.”

\* \* \*

“FUCKING Idaho,” Rodney moaned. “I hate Idaho. Why the fuck did we have to drive through Idaho?”

Clive had lost count of the amount of times that Rodney had moaned and whined his way

through this particular rant during the last six hours. It had become one of Rodney's favourites, right up there with “What the fuck kinda bodyguard lets us get caught in a roadside ambush?” and “What kinda goddam country lets militias roam free?” but his preferred choice, beyond doubt, was “Fucking Idaho.”

Truth to tell, in between those times when Rodney was blaming him, Clive blamed himself. His employers had given him a heads-up, warning him that there appeared to be an increased interest in Rodney's whereabouts. It had been Clive's decision to abandon the interstate highway system in favour of roads less travelled.

Unfortunately, it turned out that there was a reason these roads were less travelled. Clive had steered them straight into militia country, and the local bubbas apparently kept a very close watch on who was driving through their turf.

It hadn't taken much to throw a wrench into Clive's plans, and he grudgingly admired the neatness with which it had been done. One deadfall tree across a mountain road, two pickups roaring up behind them, packed with good ol'boys, and all of a sudden Clive and Rodney were the “guests” of one Colonel Brent and his Sons of Liberty.

Amazingly, thought Clive, it had never occurred to Rodney to fear for his life. Rodney had a kind of Herculean lack of awareness that acted as a permanent shield from the things that would worry most people.

Clive was worried, though.

He knew from experience that these militia groups liked to regard themselves as pseudo-military, but really had no discipline and were fraught with the fragile egos and insecurities of their members. This bunch was just smart enough to realize that they had caught some kind of big fish, but they were clearly not in the loop when it came to exactly who Rodney was. There was no way this bunch of heavily armed country bumpkins had swept them up by accident. Somebody had dimed them out.

So who the hell had done it, and why? And why pick these bubbas, of all people, to execute anything? Clive had a glimmer of an idea about that, but before he could follow it, the wooden door to the shack banged open, and there was Colonel Brent.

Colonel Brent was a simple man whose life rotated between two poles: a reflexive hatred of both federal and state governments, and a love of shooting really, really big guns. Once, during a never-to-be-forgotten gun show outside of Atlanta, he had been able to pull the lanyard on a WWII German 88mm antitank gun, and watch the shell explode against the nearby hillside. In the diary of Colonel Brent's life, that moment came only slightly behind the birth of his son, Spartacus, and definitely ahead of his marriage to Glenda Mae.

Truth be told, Colonel Brent was feeling rather overwhelmed by recent events. He had been delighted by the success of the Sons of Liberty's ambush and capture of the two men (whom he had mentally catalogued as “all-right sumbitch Clive” and “I wanna kill that sumbitch Rodney”),

but now felt out of his element. His contacts had told him where and when the pair would be driving, and had then told him to “keep them on ice and don't bash 'em up.” Well, so far so good, but Colonel Brent was feeling more and more awkward about the role of kidnapper and captor, and Glenda Mae wasn't shy about letting her opinions be known. “It'll all end in tears, Brent Beasley, you see if it don't,” she had said. Mind you, she said that about a lot of things.

Just thinking about these boys was starting to give him a headache. Still, he was the commander of the Sons of Liberty, goddamit, and that meant he was the one who had to lead from the front.

“Howdy boys!” boomed Colonel Brent, with an enthusiasm he did not feel. “How's the day treating ya?”

Rodney started up with, “If you redneck assholes think-” before Clive silenced him with a kick to the ankle that was, if Clive was honest, a little sharper than necessary. “Fine, thank you, Colonel,” said Clive, with a deferential nod to the militia leader. Colonel Brent tried to wait him out, to get him to ask for more water or some hot food or a chance to walk around outside, but Clive had played this game before, against better opponents.

Rodney, however, had not. “What the fuck do you guys think you're playing at? You dog-humping good ole boys, if you had any idea what you're fucking with – Ow! Godammit, Clive! Son of bitch, you wanna cripple me?”

Clive, sliding his foot back, did not respond. Colonel Brent felt a certain camaraderie with the man. Clive obviously loathed Rodney as much as he did. “Clive, ya wanna beer?” He pointedly did not even *look* at Rodney.

Clive smiled at Colonel Brent. “Why thank you, Colonel Brent, I'd love one.” The Colonel, feeling strangely flattered, tipped his hat to his captive, and walked out, the screen door springing back with a slap behind him.

Blocking out Rodney's inevitable hurricane of invective, Clive began to once again chase the insight that the Colonel's entrance had driven away. Okay, let's walk this through, he thought. Anybody who knew about us has access to some serious information, so they must be serious players. Colonel Brent's boys are not serious players. But they did happen to be right in the middle of our route. So somebody was desperate to put us on ice, and they used the tools at hand. Which means that right now, some serious players are hauling ass to Idaho to claim Rodney and put me in a hole in the ground.

Which means, thought Clive, we need to escape. Right now.

\* \* \*

JOHN Miller settled into his long, leather couch with a contented sigh. By his standards, he was home early – it wasn't even eight o'clock – but he had decided to reward himself for an excellent, productive, and profitable set of meetings that had started off at six this morning. He lifted his whiskey glass and tilted it back and forth appreciatively, hearing the ice tinkle and watching the

play of light through the finely cut lead crystal. Sometimes, he thought to himself, it was important to take a breath and appreciate the simple things which came in the wake of his success. He slipped his shoes off and wiggled his toes appreciatively, before feeling suddenly embarrassed by the childishness of the action.

And then, as happened too often, his thoughts turned to Melanie, then Joshua and Piper. He frowned. He hadn't seen his kids in three months, and even then it had been a pro forma sort of affair, the three of them on the patio of the Jardin X and all of them looking like they'd rather be someplace else. He had thought they'd enjoy some of the best haute cuisine in the city, but it had proven to be an ordeal, his attempts to elicit more than monosyllabic replies exhausting until he had finally given up trying to sustain a conversation, and they ate in silence, Joshua sneering at everything and Piper glued to her phone. *Like some goddam crack addict.* Even then, he had felt somehow that he was failing them by not trying harder. The whole episode had left him with lingering feelings of guilt and failure that he was unused to and that he found most unwelcome. He had felt like throwing them into the taxi that took them back to their mother.

Their mother. At least his feelings there were uncomplicated. *What a stone cold bitch.* Melanie had taken everything which his success had won for them, and yet complained at him constantly. At the office, he was a titan, a god – and yet when he finally came home, she tried to belittle him, sitting in the kitchen and saying nothing, not even acknowledging his existence, except when she tried to emasculate him by notifying him of some event for the kids which she knew he would never be able to attend.

John sat on the couch, his mood ruined. *Jesus*, he thought, *this is why I don't leave the office early.* “The hell with this,” he growled to himself, “this is supposed to be a reward.” He grabbed the phone and scrolled through his contact list to find the number of the agency.

“John Miller.” The voice came from across the room, from a pool of shadow near the patio doors. It was breathy, faintly accented.

John bolted up from the couch, holding the heavy glass in his hand like a weapon. “What the fuck? Who's there? What the hell are you doing in my house?” With his other hand, he tried dial 911 without looking, and ended up opening a stock market app.

“John Miller. Chief Financial Officer, American Assurance. Co-conspirator in the subprime mortgage market. Guilty of financial fraud that destroyed the lives of millions. Cheated your creditors and the taxpayer by arranging your own buyout even while the company was collapsing. Total profit from your heedless destruction: one hundred and twenty-five million dollars in pay, bonuses, and stock options.”

*Oh fuck*, thought John, *it's some kind of Commie.*

“Not a surprise, really. Prior to American Assurance, chief negotiator for Wellburton's ‘cost-plus’ contracts in Iraq. A fortune made from war profiteering, cheating your own government and the Iraqis who were promised a better future. Never faced a day in court. Never charged. Never had to face the victims of your crimes.”

John took his eyes away from the shadows long enough to access the number pad on his phone and dial 911. He heard the first ring and started to back away into the kitchen.

The hairs on his arms stood up as he heard a gurgling chuckle from the darkness. “You might find the emergency services slow. They've had to face budget cuts recently. I wonder why?”

Then there was a terrible rushing noise, and a burbling, choking cough, and John Miller was no more.

\* \* \*

CIARAN ignored the polite inquiries of the flight attendant and curled into a miserable ball on his first class seat/couch/whatever. He *hated* flying, for so many reasons, and this particular journey most of all. Everything felt so completely and utterly wrong. He was meant to have his feet on the ground, to *feel* that connection with the earth. Even when he walked on concrete or asphalt, the beat of the earth was still there, drumming beneath the surface. But this – this! - this was like some terrible freefall, no connection to anything, just free floating nausea where you didn't dare move for fear you made it worse.

“Ye're a miserable cunt to travel with, did ye know that?” The Fingal was rooting around in the pocket in front of Ciaran, looking for any stray cashews. He felt too awful to argue, and besides, the Fingal wasn't wrong. Just looking at the homonculus' trousered backside poking out of the pocket made him feel ill.

Ciaran didn't travel well by conventional means. If he had to leave North America, he vastly preferred to go by sea, which at least held some form of, well, planetary connection. But recent events had made it obvious that time was at a premium. He needed information, and that meant the Hill of Tara, and the Lia Fail.

And that was the worst part. Ciaran was really, *really* tired of Ireland.

\* \* \*

TRUCKING down the I-90 just outside of Spokane, Washington, Karl took his eyes from the road long enough to gaze down at the Armalite AR-15 assault rifle with black market automatic conversion kit he had picked up at the Puyallup Gun Show some three hours previously. *My fuck, I love the Land of the Free*, he thought to himself. With the assault rifle, the other goodies in the back, and the happy rumble of the Chevy Suburban's engine, he felt more at home with himself and his life than he had in a long time.

“And I fell down, down, *down* into a burning ring of fire...” he sang happily along with the radio. “Hello, Idaho!” he bellowed, as he passed the sign indicating the state line. The highway immediately became worse, as Washington State's smooth tarmac disappeared in favour of Idaho's patched and repatched section of the Interstate. “Serves you right for not making a tax shelter for Bill Gates, Idaho!” Karl laughed as he drove.

Karl was working again. And for the moment, that was really all he needed.

“Personnel retrieval,” Mr. Klava had explained. “We have two of our employees who are currently being held by a local militia group in northern Idaho.” Karl had leaned forward to open the dossiers Mr. Klava passed across the desk. He saw two faces staring back at him. “Clive Rivers.” Mr. Klava pointed to the face on Karl's left, a man in his early thirties whose hair was already beginning to grey. *Security op*, thought Karl immediately. *You can tell it in the eyes*. “He is a personal security operative who has been with us for quite some time. Excellent performance record. He is currently providing close security to this fellow.” Karl looked at the second picture, which showed an absolute road accident of a man. *Probably been in a car accident, or something*, thought Karl. *Nobody's born that ugly*. “This is Rodney Darling,” said Mr. Klava. Was it a misperception, or did Karl detect a wince on Mr. Klava's face? “He is, for our purposes, the package. He is in possession of important information, and it is vital that he be returned to us safe and undamaged. He is your priority.” Mr. Klava looked directly at Karl to make sure he understood. Karl nodded. *And Clive is an optional extra*, he thought. *Duly noted*.

Karl had reviewed the other information swiftly but thoroughly. The two were being held by the Sons of Liberty, one of a half-dozen militia groups that operated through Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon, Idaho, and Montana; or, as Karl thought of it, Redneck Rampage Country. The ATF and FBI pretty much left these guys alone; after public relations disasters like Ruby Ridge and Waco, as long as the locals weren't complaining the feds stayed away.

Mr. Klava's dossier had included an FBI assessment of the Sons of Liberty. Run by a good ol' boy named Brent Beasley, who styled himself “Colonel Brent.” No record of military service, just another John Rambo wannabee. That being said, his bunch apparently weren't that much trouble; they kept to themselves on their mountaintop community just outside Clearwater National Forest. The only remarkable thing about the Sons, according to the FBI, was that Colonel Brent seemed astonishingly well connected with some of the biggest names in the militia movement: guys like Randy Weaver, tragic “hero” of Ruby Ridge; “Colonel” Bo Gritz; William Luther Pierce; and Richard Wayne Snell. Colonel Brent's contact list and pedigree were apparently as good as it gets, but more for reasons of Brent's likeability and willingness to network than because of any history of radical actions against the government. Karl could see why the FBI had decided to leave him alone. Why kick a sleeping dog in the nuts?

Except now ol' Colonel Brent had decided to ambush and kidnap people. *Where the hell had that come from?* wondered Karl. Whatever the reason, it all boiled down to Karl hauling ass to Idaho, where his orders were to retrieve Rodney Darling and deliver him safe and sound back to Blenheim and Associates, of Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Oh, and Clive Rivers would be nice. But not necessary.

And it had to happen quickly. Mr. Klava's dossier noted that Colonel Brent had not attempted any ransom calls, or negotiations with anyone. Without a last-second call from Clive Rivers, his employers would have had no idea where the two were. The lack of contact suggested Colonel Brent was holding the two men for someone else. And that meant there was a ticking clock, and Karl had no idea how much time was left on it.

Which meant Karl was hauling ass to Idaho, with a truckful of weapons, singing happily along with Johnny Cash.

\* \* \*

“DOCTOR Allan Jenner,” whispered Malik, sliding a tarry tendril along the struggling man’s cheek. “May I call you Allan? You don’t mind?” he asked rhetorically, as the slightly built, balding man was thoroughly roped and gagged by extrusions from Malik’s mostly human form. “Past president, American Psychological Association. Degree from Cornell. A significant – *very* significant – amount of personal wealth, thanks to certain confidential contracts with the Central Intelligence Agency.” Malik let a thin surface of tar slide across the man’s nostrils, blocking his breathing. The doctor’s face turned red, and his eyes began to bulge. “An article in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology*, titled...what was it now?” The doctor’s eyes took on a pleading look. “I know it will come to me...” Malik mused. The doctor’s face had started to change from red to a sort of pale blue. “Oh yes! ‘Controlled Environments and Personality Regression.’”

Malik let the tarry membranes slip. Doctor Jenner made a choking, gasping sound as his body frantically drew in air, his chest heaving, his eyes streaming with tears and his legs making spasmodic jerks. Malik gave him a moment, before once again binding the doctor’s body and cutting off his oxygen supply. “You were the one who introduced, and I quote, ‘forced rectal rehydration as a means of demonstrating total control over the subject’s body.’” Malik’s eyes flashed as he locked gazes with the suffocating doctor. “You know, Allan,” Malik whispered, “I have some thoughts of my own in that regard...”

Malik extended another tendril. The doctor’s eyes widened as he tried to scream.

\* \* \*

“OKAY, Rodney,” said Clive, “now here's what's key.” Rodney, not making eye contact, leaned back in the lawn chair and nodded sullenly. “Rodney. You with me, buddy?” Rodney nodded again, still not looking up. Clive took a deep breath. “We need to be on the same page for what's happening next.”

“What's happening next is you're sharing a beer with that good ol' boy,” Rodney said petulantly. “You guys fuck the same cousin or something?”

“Jesus. I'm being friendly with the guy to get him off his guard. We need to get the hell out of here, and we need to do it soon.” Rodney looked up. “Escape?” he asked, his face twisting and somehow making his appearance worse.

“Damn right, escape,” replied Clive fervently. “The clock is ticking. Colonel Brent is holding us for someone, and whenever that someone gets here, things get a lot tougher for us. We need to move, now.”

Clive watched as a series of thoughts crossed Rodney's mind. *And this is why Rodney should*

*never play poker*; he thought to himself. “Holy shit,” gasped Rodney. “You think that...”

“Yeah. They want you back. Did you think this was some random event?”

“Fuck me!” Rodney stood up and started pacing the cabin floor. “Oh, fuck me! Clive, we gotta get out of here!”

“That's the plan, buddy,” said Clive. “So I need you to listen carefully, okay? Now, here's what's key...”

\* \* \*

THE Teacher sipped his tea and watched the candle gutter in the soft breeze. He had made the cavern as comfortable as possible for his needs. His resting place was covered with several animal skins, courtesy of Shamsun, and a multitude of carpets hid the rocky floor of the cavern from view. He had his place, and he had his tea, and for now, that was enough.

There was the Head, of course. Disruptive to his serenity, but still useful. Useful enough, anyway. And currently sleeping, thankfully.

He felt Malik's presence, even slightly before he heard the shifting slither at the dark rear of the cavern. “Hello, brother,” the Teacher murmured.

“Hello, brother,” came the heavy, rolling gurgle. “It is done.”

The Teacher nodded. “So I hear. Was it what you wanted?”

“It was...satisfying. It felt right.”

“Good.” The heavy curtain was drawn back, a brief burst of sunlight suddenly blocked by the massive presence of Shamsun. “Hello, brothers!” rumbled the new arrival.

The Teacher sipped his tea, put it down. “The pace of events is picking up. The situation in the Northwestern United States has more...undertones than I first thought. It would be wise for us to have a more direct role there. And quickly. Shamsun, this task falls to you.”

A smile crossed Shamsun's ursine face. “I will be very glad to do this,” he said.

The Teacher nodded. “Let us discuss your next task, brother,” he said, turning to Malik.

“Good,” Malik breathed heavily. “I feel time...pressing.”

The Teacher composed his features into an expression of sympathy. “Of course.”

“The herd knows the time for home, and leaves the grazing ground...” murmured the Head.

\* \* \*

“FUCKING IRELAND,” Ciaran muttered to himself as he regarded the leering leprechaun caricature above the bar. The flight had made him feel so utterly done in that he had decided to fortify himself with a Guinness as soon as he was clear of Dublin Airport. Now he was regretting that decision.

“Ye what, mate?” said the fellow bellied up to the bar alongside him, a fellow whose skinny arms were covered in tattoos. He had spacers in his ears, and a short beard dusting his face. He looked at Ciaran aggressively.

“I wasn't talking to you, you fucking Dublin hipster.” Ciaran could be quite charming when he wanted to, but he had had a terrible day.

“Well I'm talking to you now, ye cunt!” The fellow was standing now, and the last word had been matched with an aggressive finger poking at Ciaran's chest. Before the man had made contact, however, Ciaran had grabbed the finger and stepped toward the man, so that there was not two inches between them. Ciaran locked eyes with the fellow. The man gasped. Ciaran's pupils and whites had disappeared, and instead his eyes were jewels of darkly luminous green fire.

“Alright then, you little shit, now I'm talking to you,” hissed Ciaran, so softly that no one else could hear. “I said fucking Ireland, and fucking Ireland I meant. You lot don't have a clue. You're the heirs of the greatest land that was ever known to creation, and you shit on it. You dig up the turf where the Tuatha de Danaan played shinty and build stadiums to play the games of the thrice-cursed English. You pour lager down your throats and vomit up your chips and crisps in the alleys of these miserable bloody coal choked cities where you make your prisons. I fought with Brian Boru at Clontarf when he broke the Viking hold on Ireland. I walked with Aengus when he sought his one true love, the woman he saw only once but who held his spirit until the end of his days. I hunted the stag of Osraige with Cu Culhainn for fifty days and nights. So don't you step to me, boyo, unless you want your ghost to go wandering the Crumlin Road trying to find where I kicked your *fucking* bollocks.”

Ciaran released the man's fingers and turned away, walking angrily out of the bar. The man stared down at his hand, then at the door, and tried to sit down, missing the stool and falling spreadeagled on the floor. The leprechaun above the bar leered down at him.

“Ye should have nudded him,” cackled the Fingal.

“Ach, shut your gob,” said Ciaran tiredly, walking down the street.

“Suit y'self then.”

\* \* \*

KARL pulled his truck off the road just past the bridge over the Salmon River; from here on, he would need to go on foot. He pulled his pack out from the back of the truck and did a quick

check to make sure he had everything he needed, then carefully rested the pack and the assault rifle against a tree while he pulled a camo tarp over the truck. He strapped on his pack and shouldered his AR-15, and gazed up at what awaited him.

This was dense country; real no-bullshit backwoods country. The forest was thick and heavy, with vegetation everywhere. Due east sat Buffalo Hump, some seven thousand feet above him, a smooth-backed peak covered with pine and fir trees. To the southeast was Gospel Peak, some five or six hundred feet shorter than its cousin, but still an imposing giant looking over the Salmon River. And between the two mountains lay the camp of Colonel Brent Beasely and his mighty Sons of Liberty, smack dab in the middle of nowhere.

Karl pulled his plastic-covered map out of the pocket on his chest strap, aligned his compass carefully, and sighted on Buffalo Hump. He had a good six or seven hours of forest-bashing ahead of him, and as soon as he was within a mile of the camp he was going to have to slow his pace down to a crawl. He had no idea what the attitude of the Sons might be regarding perimeter security, but erring on the side of safety had kept him alive thus far.

An hour or so later, Karl had settled into his rhythm, and was enjoying himself immensely. This was exactly the sort of thing that he was very good at, and although he was keeping himself at a very high state of awareness, he also found the hike enormously relaxing. Once again, Karl had a purpose, and all of the complexities and existential questions of his life had disappeared in favour in the immediacy of the moment. Nothing mattered except the task in front of him, and he was confident that no one could perform this task better than him.

The forest was not silent; no forest ever really is, unless something very serious is about to happen. The trick was not to move like a ghost, but to move like you belonged. The noises Karl made were of a kind with the rest of what was going on; a badger busily working on his burrow, squirrels engaged in furious combat with their mortal enemies – other squirrels – a whisky jack signalling to his family that a human was in the forest, and hopefully stupid enough to leave stuff lying around.

This continued for quite some time, and every hour or so Karl paused to have a drink of water from his canteen and check his map. He was making good time, and soon he would need to get low and slow his pace down while he watched for sentries and/or booby traps. Happy forest time over, thought Karl, as he wiped sweat from his forehead.

And then all hell broke loose.

\* \* \*

“JEE-ZUS, Clive! Are you serious? I mean, there's always been rumours, but...”

“No word of a lie, Colonel,” said Clive, tossing back the remainder of his beer and crumpling the can. “It was nerve gas. Brought in by the Brits. And pumped in to the compound at Waco.”

Rodney sat in his chair – not a drop of beer for him, goddammit! - and watched sullenly as Clive

and Colonel Brent sat down to the serious business of getting seriously drunk. The two had positioned themselves on either side of a rickety wooden table, Clive sitting on a crate, and the Colonel in a canvas camp chair.

“I need him to sit in the camp chair,” Clive had said to Rodney earlier. “Those chairs are hell to get out of quickly, and that’ll give me the time I need.”

Colonel Brent popped the tops of two more Buds, and handed one to Clive. Numerous crumpled cans beneath the table attested to the length of their conversation. “So how the hell did they keep that quiet?” asked the Colonel. “I mean, even Alex Jones never said anything about it on InfoWars, and he’s *always* scooping everybody.”

“That’s why they started the fire,” replied Clive. “Fire was the only thing that was going to destroy any evidence of the nerve gas.”

“So how the hell do you know about it?” Colonel Brent asked, half-admiringly.

“I’ve got a friend in the Regiment, back in the U.K.,” said Clive. He tilted his head back and drained half the can. The Colonel followed suit. “My friend was close protection for the pointy-heads who supplied the gas. Poor bastard who actually invented the stuff killed himself.”

“Jee-zus. Death’s too good for that sumbitch,” Colonel Brent growled. “Innocent Americans, just trying to live free? Goddam, every government’s the goddam same...”

“Truer words, my dear Colonel,” said Clive, “were never spoken.” He clinked his can with the Colonel’s, began to tilt back. Colonel Brent followed suit, leaning back in his camp chair as he prepared to finish the can. In an instant, Clive flipped the flimsy table into the astonished Colonel’s face, and while the militia man was still trying to sort out what was going on, had slipped behind him, snaking his arms into a choke hold and falling backwards, pulling the Colonel out of the chair and on to the ground. Rodney, alerted by Clive’s signal, jumped up and ran over to the struggling pair, pulling the Colonel’s pistol from its holster and covering the door in case someone had been alerted by the noise.

No one entered. Colonel Brent ceased thrashing about. Clive nodded to Rodney. “Well done.” He extended his hand for the pistol, which Rodney reluctantly gave to him. “Quick-time now.” Clive worked on securing the Colonel with the gear he had found in the cabin – jumper cables and duct tape – while Rodney lifted the floor planks they had pried loose earlier. Once Colonel Brent was immobilized, Clive got up, a little unsteadily, made sure the pistol was securely wedged into his belt, and moved to the opening in the floor. Rodney, sneering, gave the unconscious Colonel a solid kick in the kidney. “Redneck asshole,” he snarled. Clive, who in spite of the circumstances had rather liked the Colonel, once again took a deep breath and held his tongue.

There was a good two feet of clearance between the cabin floor and the ground, and the two men slithered underneath the cabin, to the side opposite the door. Clive took a look around, satisfied himself that no one was near, punched through the flimsy latticework and rolled out from beneath the cabin. Rodney followed suit.

The two men ran across twenty feet of open ground for what felt like eternity before reaching the cover of the forest. "All right so far," Clive breathed. "Okay, now remember -"

"SON OF A BITCH!" came the roar from inside the cabin, and the two stunned men heard the cabin door bang open. "WE GOT RUNNERS, BOYS! FIND THE BASTARDS!" shouted the furious Colonel.

Rodney and Clive looked at each other incredulously. "How did he -" started Rodney, and it was at this delicate juncture that the mysterious men the Colonel had been holding them captive for arrived, with a storm of dust and gravel, in three black Ford F-150s.

And then, as previously noted, all hell broke loose.

\* \* \*

MALIK sat comfortably in the shadows and regarded the apartment building. A lowrise on the outskirts of Toledo, Ohio, and his target had an apartment on the ground floor.

It was not an inviting place. Malik had already noted the abundance of glassine crack vials and assorted human leavings in the alley that was serving as his observation post until the darkness deepened. *The detritus of an immoral nation, a lost and depraved people*, he thought to himself. He had seen the luxury in which the war profiteer John Miller had lived, and the contrast was large. *Like the hut of a Marsh Arab to a Saddamite palace*. The comparison made him feel melancholy, for reasons he did not completely understand.

Small animals began to rustle about as the night grew. Malik was perfectly still and did not disturb them as they went about their business. He waited until a light flicked on inside the ground floor apartment he was watching, and then began his slow, fluid movements to close the distance between himself and his prey.

His target had an air conditioning unit in the window. Malik flowed through the gaps that the unit's awkward placement gave him, and pooled himself in a corner of the bedroom, waiting.

He heard the low mumbling of the television set in the next room, the ding of a microwave, the muted thump of a refrigerator door, the crisp pop of a beer or soda being opened. Slippers shuffling on carpet, a lonely trickle of urine, a flush.

Slippers shuffling towards the bedroom. Malik readied himself.

A pause. Sound of a closet being opened, someone rummaging on a shelf. The audible *click-clack* of a round being chambered in a pistol. "I've got a gun," said a man's voice, matter of factly.

"It will do you no good," breathed Malik.

A pause. “Well thank God for that,” and a spindly-legged, middle aged man shuffled into the room. He flopped into a chair facing the bed. “You might as well show yourself,” the man said, flipping the safety on his gun and placing it on the armrest. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Malik did not move from his darkened corner. “Waiting for me,” he asked, faintly surprised.

The man smiled wanly. “Well, you or someone like you. Don’t believe we’ve ever actually *met*.”

“You are Lorne Cooke?” The man nodded. “Member of the Central Intelligence Agency, 1983 to 1991, contractor for CACI International, 2002 to 2006? Specializing in interrogation?”

“Yessiree, that’s me. Quit 2006, divorced 2007, declared bankruptcy the same year, in case you’re interested. Mind if I get another beer?”

“Do not get up,” Malik said sharply.

Lorne shrugged. “Your show.”

Malik was struggling to adjust to the situation. His target did not seem in the slightest alarmed, or in the least concerned for his life. *Be careful*, he cautioned himself. *This man may be much more dangerous than he appears*. “What did you mean, when you said that you have been waiting for someone like me?”

Lorne sighed, plucked his bathrobe closer around his chest, and looked directly at Malik, despite the darkness cloaking him. “Son, you know my resume, so I’m guessing that means you know what I used to do.”

“In quite some detail. And I am not your son.”

Lorne waved his hand. “Figure of speech. Whatever. Look. If you know what I did, then you know that no God-fearing man can do that sort of thing and expect to get away with it. It was wrong. It was,” Lorne rubbed his forehead, “*evil*.”

Malik narrowed his eyes. *Was this a ruse? Did the man expect to talk his way out of this?* “Yes,” he agreed, “it was evil.”

Lorne nodded. “I know,” he said simply. “Man does that, he’s gotta pay for it. And you’re here to collect the bill.”

\* \* \*

THE BLIND Imam sat in his armchair and waited. While he waited, he worked his way along his prayer beads, silently mouthing the words that had dug deep furrows in his consciousness, words that had become as significant for the effect they had on his awareness as for the prayers to God

that they formed. As he prayed, he kept in mind all of those for whom he prayed: the poor, the sick, the lost souls of Palestine, the victims of American covert wars, the families that suffered loss in the wars of Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and on and on...

The blind imam had been one of the most famous preachers in Isfahan, until age and sickness had come to chain him more and more tightly to the house where he now spent all of his time. Tapes of his sermons circulated throughout the world, although in recent times they had been replaced by speakers who were more fiery, less tolerant, less introspective. Visitors had become rarer and rarer, although the local families of the neighbourhood loved and revered the old man.

But today, he had a foreign visitor. One who had, apparently, travelled a great distance to see him.

The imam wrinkled his nose at the sudden, overwhelming reek of tar.

“Peace be upon you. Please forgive me for the smell. It is unavoidable.”

*What an odd thing*, thought the imam. “And upon you be peace. Please do not concern yourself with it.”

“Thank you.” A shifting, slithering noise. *Was this a djinn*, wondered the imam, *come to battle with me at last?*

“Learned sir, please accept my thanks for taking the time to speak with me,” said Malik. “My soul is troubled, and I am in need of guidance.” He tried, as much as he could, to make his speech simple and clear, but he could hear the bubbling, breathy nature of his words, and hated himself for it. *What a freak I must seem to the old imam.*

“I know that there is no god but God,” said the imam, “and Mohammed is His prophet.” He bowed his head in submission to the almighty will of God, who had placed these two men together in this place and time. “Please, brother, speak to me of your troubles, and I will do my best to guide you to walk the path that God has set for you.”

Malik did his best to breathe as softly as he could, to diminish his constant, rattling cough. “I have tried to be a good... man, to serve God in this life,” he began. “I was born...I was born different from everyone else around me, and regarded as an abomination from the moment of my birth. I was cast out, and forced to live in the marshes outside my village.”

The imam shook his head in sorrow. “Where were you born, brother?”

Malik hesitated, then decided to continue. *If I'm going to tell the tale, then make it as close to whole one as I can*, he thought to himself. “Al-Qurnah, northwest of Basra. The Americans used depleted uranium ammunition there, both the first time they came and the second. Strange births have become very common among my people.”

The imam nodded. “I have heard of this. A terrible thing, for which the Americans will have to

answer before God. But how did you survive, cast out as an infant? Who took you in?"

"A man. He lived as a hermit, in the marshes. He raised me as his own, taught me to speak, to read, to pray...everything."

"God is merciful."

"He is," sighed Malik, "he is. I thank God every day for the man who became my true father, and I pray for him every night. He taught me everything." Malik shifted, trying to make as little noise as possible while doing so. "And when my father passed away, I was still a young man. I had taken care of him in his old age, as best I could, and with his passing I was left without purpose."

"God has a purpose for everyone, brother."

"I know, learned sir, I know this. But I could not see it. And I was young, and angry; I blamed everyone for my loss, for my condition, for my sense of helplessness. So I turned to God, and...He found a purpose for me."

The imam nodded for Malik to continue.

"I decided to take up the jihad." Malik looked to see the imam's reaction, approving or disapproving, but there was none. "I have fought the jihad for many years now. I have fought in Palestine, I have fought in Iraq, I have even taken the fight to America."

"And has it brought you peace?" asked the imam, gently.

It was an unexpected question. "Sometimes," said Malik. "Sometimes, it has felt absolutely right. I have truly felt myself to be the instrument of God's justice. But more and more, I wonder. I still feel so alone. I still feel...very far from God."

"I have said prayers for more people than I can count," said the imam. "Many of them have been called martyrs. Were they truly martyrs? Do they live now in Paradise? I do not know. Only God knows. But I know many men who have called them martyrs in order to further their aims in this world. So much death. So much death," sighed the imam. "I do know this. You fight what the Prophet, peace be upon him, called the lesser jihad. The greater jihad is the fight within yourself. The fight for the cleansing of your own soul. If more men fought the greater jihad, there would be much less death in this world, and many more souls in Paradise, I think."

Malik sat in stillness, and heard the sound of roaring in his ears. He knew that the imam was right. He felt the fundamental truth in the man's words. *Why doesn't this make me feel any better? I know he is right. But why doesn't it make me feel any better?* "Thank you, learned one. You have given me much to consider. Go with God."

"Go with God," the imam replied. And suddenly, without knowing why, the blind imam knew that Malik was gone. He had heard nothing, but it was clear the man had disappeared. The smell remained, though. *Poor soul*, he thought. *What a painful world. I hope he finds God's plan for*

*his life.*

The blind imam returned to his prayers.

\* \* \*

HE REGARDED the hill of Tara silently. Still so beautiful, Ciaran thought to himself, in spite of everything. Part of it was the memories – too many memories, that he tried to keep firmly tamped down – but part of it was the place itself. *Some places have a kind of sacredness, in and of themselves, that even humans can sense without knowing the reasons for it.* Even the Fingal was silent. *Hell,* thought Ciaran, *I don't even know the reasons why this is a sacred place. I just remember all the things that have happened here. But the hill of Tara is even older than I am.*

Ciaran was humbled before Tara, and that was a part of why he hated going to Ireland; Ciaran hated to feel humble about anything. But it was here that he would get his answers. Whoever it was who was messing with the balance of the world's workings, whoever it was who was doing something that felt rather sinister, whoever it was who was giving Ciaran these nasty headaches, would be made clear.

Then Ciaran could find it, take care of it – hopefully – and then Ciaran could get back to his exile in Canada and focus on keeping his dead wife away.

*At least that was one blessing of being back on the Emerald Isle,* thought Ciaran. *She never bothers me here.*

*Still not worth it,* he thought.

Ciaran stepped over the chain theoretically prohibiting him from doing exactly what he was doing, which was walking on the springy, green grass of the hill of Tara. Equally theoretically, someone should be stopping him right now, but in this place of power, Ciaran didn't need to worry about being noticed by any mere human.

Unfortunately, Ciaran had been away for far too long, and had forgotten that Tara was likely to be occupied by other entities.

“Oh, Ciaran,” came a sigh from behind him, “what do you think you're doing?”

Alarmed, Ciaran spun around rapidly. Facing him was what appeared to be the same Dublin hipster that Ciaran had summarily dealt with the previous night. “Very funny,” snapped Ciaran. “Manannan mac Lir, I refuse to even talk to you unless you drop that ridiculous guise.”

With a shrug, the hipster transformed into a man in his late thirties, slightly taller than Ciaran, wearing denims and a thick Highland wool sweater. He was as bald as an egg, with a walrus moustache and a pipe jutting aggressively from his mouth. Manannan mac Lir took the pipe in his hand. “Suit y'rself,” he said, and crossed his arms.

“I take it,” said Ciaran, “that your presence is not an accident.”

Manannan nodded.

“I take it,” said Ciaran, “that you're here to stop me.”

Manannan nodded, grinning.

“I take it,” said Ciaran, “that your pipe is another of your silly affectations.”

Manannan raised his eyebrows, and was about to speak when he cursed and dropped the suddenly red-hot pipe from his hand, and tried to beat out the sparks that had appeared on his Highland wool sweater. He discovered that this is not an easy thing to do.

Ciaran, meanwhile, was sprinting across the grass towards the crown of the hill, laughing gleefully at Manannan's curses behind him.

“Go on, laddie! Go on!” cheered the Fingal, jumping up and down and pointing the way. “Oh, who's a fly man *now?*”

*I'll only have two seconds, maybe three seconds at most, thought Ciaran as he ran. Manannan's an idiot, but he can bloody move like a fish when he wants to. Then I'll have to be good and gone.*

“Like a fucking gazelle, that man! Go on, you!” crowed the Fingal.

There, on the crown of the hill of Tara, stood the Lia Fail, a thick phallus-like stone jutting from the earth. Ciaran was less than ten yards away. He heard Manannan roaring up the hill like a wave reaching its crest. Five meters. Manannan was right behind him.

*Thank God for slick grass, thought Ciaran, as he dove full length along the ground and slid towards the Lia Fail like a rugby fullback scoring a try. Not even two seconds, he thought as he prepared himself for the rather complicated series of things he had to do next.*

Ciaran's fingers touched the stone. He gasped. Then he disappeared.

Manannan, roaring, hit the Lia Fail like a rugby prop crashing into a goalpost, and knocked himself unconscious.

“Good enough to feck yer mother, ye bald gobshite!” The Fingal danced a victory jig on Manannan's head and disappeared.

\* \* \*

THE CLEARWATER National Forest territory sweeps across Idaho for hundreds of miles, from the sparse badlands of the south to the thick old growth pine of its northern end. It is a place you can go for silence, a terrible majestic silence, a sense of being alone in the world with nothing but you and God's magnificent creation.

Or, if you happened to be between Buffalo Hump and Gospel Peak on this particular day, you could be witness to the fauna of God's magnificent creation getting the hell away to somewhere else, because the humans were shooting at each other again, in truly epic fashion.

“So much for a quiet extraction,” muttered Karl to himself as he broke into a run. No time to worry about picket sentries or booby traps now. Whatever was going down, there was more than a good chance that it involved his principals.

Five hundred yards. The sound of firing grew more intense. Karl increased his pace. Four hundred. Three hundred. He heard the *crump* of a grenade. Two hundred. Karl hit the deck and proceeded forward at a fast crawl. He could see the camp now. There were figures all over the place, some stationary, some running crouched low. There was an enormous volume of fire – Karl's practiced ear detected assault rifles, shotguns, bolt action rifles, and even a grenade launcher.

Karl wiped the sweat from his forehead and wondered, what the hell is going on here?

The only one who really knew was Colonel Brent, and he was doing his best to sort the situation out without getting shot. He had been told that the captive pickup team would be arriving in three black Ford F-150s, and there they were, sure as glory. Unfortunately, they had arrived at just the wrong moment, when he had alerted the entire camp to the escape of Rodney and Clive, and his militia had wrongly assumed the men in the trucks were part of some enemy's rescue effort.

Why the hell hadn't the pickup team alerted him that they were close? Suddenly, Colonel Brent realized that they probably had. But he had either been drinking with Clive or...all tied up. “Cease fire!” he bellowed, without being so foolish as to stand up. “Cease fire, goddammit!” Sadly, there was no way the Colonel's voice could compete with automatic weapons fire, not to mention grenades.

“Son of a BITCH!” a grenade had exploded nearby, not close enough to hit Colonel Brent, but close enough to the cabin to send a cloud of nasty splinters into the Colonel's right arm and shoulder. He rolled back into the cabin, continuing to curse. That was Bob Calhoun's grenade launcher, he knew. Bob was so proud of the fucking thing. Colonel Brent continued to crawl further into the cabin, cursing, when he was struck by a thought. The P.A. system! That was the only way to stop this lethal stupidity. With a groan, he got up and began to stumble out of the cabin, towards his HQ bunker. He realized, glumly, that the likelihood of being shot by his own militia was very high at this point. He picked up his colonel's hat from the cabin floor, hoping that this would make him recognizable to his men. He paused at the cabin door, trying to ignore the blood soaking his right arm. “Remember the goddam Alamo,” he said to himself, then burst out of the cabin and began his run.

Karl watched in amazement at the scene in front of him. He had worked out what appeared to be two basic sides. One side was in camo fatigues and had an assortment of firepower, including one idiot with a grenade launcher. They were scattered throughout the camp, but mostly clustered around a low cinder-block building. Karl assumed this was the Sons of Liberty. The other side was in black flak jackets and cargoes with tactical webbing (rather like his own, Karl thought), some sheltering behind a group of trucks, but others steadily fanning out to flank the militia members. Karl had no idea who the hell these people were, but he guessed that they were his competition.

Then there was further movement, just within his peripheral vision. Karl turned to see two men to the south of the encampment, in cover, moving rapidly away from the whole mess. One man was running low, almost animal-like, but he was being slowed by the second man, who ran like a drunken gorilla.

*Paydirt*, thought Karl, and moved to intercept the pair.

Colonel Brent ran as low to the ground as he could without falling on his face, one hand steadying his balance and the other firmly keeping his colonel's hat on his head. "Don't shoot goddam it it's me don't shoot you fuckers it's me!" was his mantra. Surprisingly, it worked. He made it to the HQ bunker where his men stared open mouthed at him. "Boys, boys, this is a fuckup! It's a blue-on-blue!" They continued to stare at him. "These boys are friendlies! Friendlies!"

"Well they ain't acting too goddam friendly!" said one man, heatedly. He held a still-smoking grenade launcher loosely in his hands.

"Shut the fuck up, Bob!" replied the Colonel, with remarkable restraint. "What the hell do you know? You almost kilt me out there!" Without further conversation, the Colonel jumped down the steps into the bunker and swung open the door. He immediately put his hands up, faced with a very jumpy militia man in the bunker. "Friendly, goddammit! It's me, Bradley! Colonel Brent!"

"Sorry, colonel," said Bradley, moving aside for him. Colonel Brent switched the P.A. system on and grabbed the transmitter. "Now hear this, now hear this!" The speakers throughout the camp broadcast his message with surprising clarity, and for good reason: Colonel Brent liked the way his voice sounded, and he had spent a great deal of money on his P.A. system. "Cease fire! Repeat, cease fire! We -"

Unfortunately for everyone involved, this was when Shamsun showed up.

Shamsun was in a very bad mood. This was fairly normal for him, and his mood had only been worsened by the fact that the method of travel he had employed to reach the encampment always gave him terrible headaches. On the other hand, however, he looked at the chaos taking place in front of him, and he smiled.

When the only tool you have is hammer, every problem looked like a nail. And the encampment was positively chock full of nails.

Shamsun began to run, a slow lumbering run that picked up speed deceptively, and by the time he cleared the forest, he was at cannonball velocity. He hit the first black pickup truck with a thunderous crunch, and the vehicle crumpled and spun away, smashing into oblivion several men who would never know what hit them. He then turned and, clasping his hands together, smashed them down into the engine block of the second truck, which cracked and buckled beneath the blow.

Throughout the camp, the very expensive P.A. system broadcast, “What the FUCK?”

Shamsun squatted, picked up the third pickup truck, and hurled it at the nearest speaker, which was hanging from a tall pole in the middle of the camp. Truck, pole, and speaker crashed to the ground.

It was at this point that men on both sides recovered from their shock and began to direct their fire against Shamsun. It was entirely ineffective. Intent on destroying their ability to get away, Shamsun scanned the camp for the next vehicle.

A grenade exploded next to his ear, singeing his hair and making his headache even worse. Shamsun's eyes narrowed as he turned to the bunker from which the grenade had been fired.

“Oh fuck, Bob,” whispered Colonel Brent, “what have you done?”

\* \* \*

“JESUS CHRIST, Clive,” panted Rodney, “what are we gonna do?”

“Just keep moving,” replied Clive tersely. “I don't know what the hell is going on back there, but I'm not sticking around to ask questions.” He was moving at about half his possible speed, but Rodney's pace was appallingly slow, and protecting this idiot was the reason he was here.

They moved through the forest, fleeing the chaos behind them. Clive winced as he heard the *crump* of a grenade. Above the noise of the firefight, he could hear the panting of Rodney's increasingly anguished breathing. He knew the man was tiring fast, and all he could hope for was that Rodney's basic survival instincts had kicked in.

“I gotta stop, Clive,” gasped Rodney, his hands on his knees. “I'm done, pal. I gotta stop.”

“Not an option, Rodney,” snarled Clive, and picked Rodney up in a fireman's lift and resumed running. This additional burden made it impossible for Clive to do anything when an enormous man in a black t-shirt and cargoes stepped out from behind a tree some ten metres in front of them, raised his assault rifle to his shoulder, and barked, “Hold it! Stop right there!”

If he had been closer, Clive might have simply crashed into him and trusted to momentum, but the man was too far away. Instead, Clive simply dropped Rodney and raised his hands.

“Ow! Goddam it, Clive!”

“Shut up,” said Clive tersely, his eyes never leaving the man in front of him.

“Oh,” said Rodney, coming up to speed with the situation.

“Okay, everybody be cool,” said the man in black. “My name is -”

At this point there was a roar from the encampment behind them, followed by a shriek of twisted metal. The man's eyes flicked away from Clive.

Clive shot forward towards the man, one hand reaching for the barrel of the assault rifle while pulling his pistol out with the other.

The man stepped to one side, slamming the butt of his rifle onto Clive's shoulder, forcing Clive to drop the pistol and sending him crashing to the ground.

“I said be cool,” repeated the man, stepping on Clive's pistol. “My name is Karl, and I'm here to help you get out of here. Mr. Klava sent me.”

Clive was just registering this information when he heard Rodney scream, “Yeeeeaaaarrgggh!” and try to jump on Karl's back. Karl once again slipped to one side and Rodney slammed into a fir tree, then slumped to the ground.

“Jesus,” said Karl. “This must be Rodney.”

Many hours later saw the three men roaring down a dirt road in Karl's Chevy Suburban, Clive in the front passenger seat and Rodney stretched out on the bench seat behind him, moaning miserably. Clive rummaged through his pockets and found, miraculously, a battered pack of Dunhills. He looked inquiringly at Karl.

“Fine,” said Karl, “just put the window down.”

Clive lit up, and did so. He pulled the smoke into his lungs and breathed out contentedly. “You want one?” he said to Karl, who shook his head. “I want one,” moaned Rodney from the back. Clive, about to toss the pack back to him, remembered what happened the last time he had done so, and pulled a single cigarette from the pack and tossed it back to Rodney, who dropped it.

“Asshole,” murmured Rodney, but carefully under his breath.

\* \* \*

THE Teacher sat in his comfortable resting place and regarded Shamsun, who was sitting, cross-legged and morose, in front of him. “So,” said the Teacher, steeping his fingers, “we will not call that a success.” Shamsun mumbled apologetically. The Head was muttering and laughing under its breath.

“We still have a problem,” continued the Teacher, “and we will need other means to correct the situation.

He shifted as he sensed the arrival of Malik, in the shadowy recesses of the cavern. “Brother! You have returned with good news, I hope? We have need of it, and of your services again.”

“No,” said Malik flatly. Shamsun straightened up. The Teacher raised an eyebrow. “No good news,” Malik breathed. “I decided not to proceed with the assignment. And I came to tell you that I quit. No more.”

Shamsun started to rise, but the Teacher stopped him with a gesture. “No,” said the Teacher, smiling, “you will not quit. And here is why.”

The Head told him.

\* \* \*

Safely back home, Ciaran walked into a Shopper's Drug Mart and purchased a pair of expensive barber's scissors. He smiled absently at the cashier, as he continued to roll around in his mind the question that had been bothering him all day.

Why, he thought to himself, of all places, Idaho?