

Short Horror Tales

Book Bundle 2

By
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Introduction

Here are three more of my *Short Horror Tales*. In each story, I hope to grip you with a swiftly-paced narrative that surprises, thrills and chills. They won't take long to read, but I hope the tales will linger in your mind for quite a while...

In fire investigations, two of the most important questions are: "Where did the fire start?" and "How did the fire start?" But what if the *Ignition Source* of a huge blaze was something beyond normal comprehension? What if it was something no one would ever believe?

Which creature would be the worst and most dangerous of all? The answer is probably a human being. For one thing, humans are all around us and we take them for granted. Who gets onto a bus and looks about, trying to guess if there's a serial killer aboard? Do you really worry whether your doctor, dentist or mailman might have a malicious, lethal hobby? And do you ever wonder if there's a killer hiding inside you, waiting for the opportunity to get out..? *House Of My Dreams* features a man with some serious problems. Is he a monster? A victim? A product of society? Or something else..?

In the Twenty-First Century, we're far better than ever at creating weapons. We can make them nastier, faster and so much more efficient. And we reckon we can keep our creations under control... *Bug Hunt* is a tale about one such creation.

Now, let's get along and join a night watchman for a very bad shift of work...

Ian Thompson
July 2016

Ignition Source

My head hurt.

I rolled over onto my stomach and cursed softly under my breath. My senses seemed to be swimming in confusion. My hearing absorbed a distant chaos of roaring, crashing and even what could have been screaming. I could taste blood in my mouth and something else too – oily crap from the shallow pool I had been lying in. A combination of darkness and flashes of light were captured by my eyesight; a vague recognition suggested that I was peering towards a large building some hundred yards away. My body took in the cold, wet of the concrete ground; the strange, slightly warm breeze; and, of course, that pounding ache in the back of my skull. Lastly, when I inhaled after swearing, I smelled a faint trace of smoke.

I used my left arm to lever my torso up a little and looked around some more. *Where was I?* The confused part of my brain thought I had fallen out of bed, but since my apartment is carpeted, that couldn't be true. I was at work. Which meant it was night – or had been when I hit the ground.

Recent memories trickled back as I withdrew fully from unconsciousness. It was Wednesday. As was usual for each weekday, I had reported in to work at the warehouse for 9 PM. Gideon's Warehouse was a massive building not far from the docks. By day, it was a bustling hive of activity – thousands of crates and boxes going in or out of storage every hour. Other than hazardous chemicals, the warehouse accommodated anything – from foodstuffs to auto-parts. The warehouse was split into three primary sections, running left-to-right: the left-hand 'Section 1' held perishable and time-sensitive goods; the middle 'Section 2' held the largest crates; the right-hand 'Section 3' held everything else, including the forklift truck storage area; and, yes, crates got mixed up and lost all the time. At night, the warehouse shut down – unless there was an urgent delivery or collection – and Bill McCaffery and myself arrived to watch over the place.

Bill and I were night watchmen of the lowest order. Worst possible pay. Hand-me-down uniforms. Armed with only a portable radio and a torch each. Our instructions in case of break-in were to call the police and attempt to intervene. Our personal agreed plan in such an event was to get the hell out and call the cops. Neither of us intended to die for the damned Gideon Warehouse. We'd already got one medal each and didn't want to try for any more.

At Five To Nine, I had checked-in with the warehouse foreman before he left. Jones, a fifty-year-old grizzly bear of a man, had insisted on taking me into Section 2. There, at the centre of the stacks, had been an immense square crate – over thirty feet across, reinforced by steel bands, marked 'SENSITIVE CONTENTS'. The labelling had made me frown even before Jones spoke. What exactly did that mean? If the contents were Fragile, you'd label the container 'Fragile'. If they were Hazardous in some way, you'd label according to the hazard (and they shouldn't be at Gideon's anyway).

"This box is very important," Jones had begun, in that gruff, superior tone of his. "Worth more than everything else in the warehouse put together. You understand?"

I had said "Sure", but had thought: *So what? It's crated and secure, in the warehouse, just like everything else. What could possibly happen to it?*

Maybe I shouldn't have thought that last question. Maybe that's when everything started to go wrong... And a one-of-a-kind apocalypse set course for Gideon's Warehouse.

* * *

My returning memories after watching Jones leave were vague. Not because of my head injury, but because my shift as night watchman was as mundane and routine as always. Fifteen minutes sitting on crates chatting to Bill – we didn't have an office and the foreman always locked his – then a slow meander to the front gates, which we locked up. Another fifteen minutes drinking coffee from our vacuum flasks, talking more shit about the good weather, football scores and how politicians should all be shot. The usual stuff.

Don't think that Bill and I are just lazy assholes. Well, okay, we're not the most hard-working of souls – but there's a certain logic to our behaviour. The perimeter of Gideon's warehouse is almost two miles in length. It isn't alarmed. There aren't any CCTV cameras anywhere. It's impossible for a pair of lowly paid watchmen to make the place secure. If we went round-and-round on constant patrol, intruders could still easily slip past us. Gideon's Warehouse Co. Ltd doesn't care about that – it employs us because the insurance says it has to as a bare minimum. So we, in turn, do the bare minimum too. We don't steal from the warehouse, though we easily could – like Jones does regularly – and we do carry out our assigned duties. We're just not over-enthusiastic.

There are other reasons we don't over-do it. We're both war veterans: used by the system and then spat out when we were no longer capable of doing our duty. Bill lost a leg and part of his stomach to an IED four years ago. On cold nights, he can barely walk due to the arthritis in his hips and remaining leg. On his best night, a three year old kid could outrun him. He's twenty-nine, physically and mentally traumatised, and stuck in a minimum-wage job that he knows he's lucky to have. Sometimes he tells me that he wishes the IED had killed him, like it killed his friends. When life deals you those kind of cards, it's hard to get motivated in the middle of the night. And my own situation isn't far behind his.

As I stirred on the cold, wet ground, my last recollection was of going 'out back' of the warehouse. It had been after midnight and this was one of the routines we did. Bill would have been checking the interior perimeter of the building, I checked the uncovered enclosure behind the warehouse. That area was a dumping ground for old pallets, defunct forklift trucks and other assorted junk – scattered, stacked and in mounds – surrounded by a fifteen-foot high wire fence. Twice a night, one of us would roam 'out back' and examine the fence by torch for signs of damage. I hadn't found any evidence of a break-in – instead the evidence had found me.

I vary the route for my fence-checks to alleviate the boredom. This time, I had decided to walk right away from the warehouse to the back fence, then search left or right according to a coin-toss. I had only paced a hundred yards, almost halfway to the fence, when—

I'd heard a rustle of motion behind me and felt a crashing blow across the back of my head. Then I knew only blackness. Did the thug who hit me think you could knock out someone harmlessly that way, like in an old private eye story? Or did he just leave me to die on that concrete-paved dumping ground? *Son-of-a-bitch.*

When I finally managed to manoeuvre myself into a kneeling position, I found out just how much trouble I was in.

* * *

The hundred-foot-high warehouse was on fire.

Huge tentacles of flame bled upwards from halfway along the ridge of the roof and spilled down its rear-facing tiled slope in brilliant torrents. These rushing, writhing masses stood out glaringly against the blackness of the night, and made the warehouse look like a man-made volcano beginning to erupt. Below the roof-line was a row of large windows. The centremost windows had exploded outwards and were bleeding great tears of fire down the rear face of the warehouse. Since the walls of the warehouse were wood over a steel framework, fire was spreading outwards from the broken windows and flame-tears. At ground level, the door I had left through was open, and beyond this I could see a seething mass of fire. Smoke was oozing out of the door and drifting down from the burning walls – the slight breeze I had noticed was billowing the smoke towards me.

My ears took in the sounds as my eyes absorbed the visual details. The fire was roaring like some ravenous giant beast, and crackling, hissing and snapping intermittently. Random crunches of collapsing *things* added percussion to this horrible melody – no doubt a combination of walls, crates and other structures being destroyed. For a moment I also thought I heard some kind of bellowed shriek: this couldn't have been human, so what could it have been? *Most likely my imagination or my rattled brains mistaking some normal sound.* There were vague alarm-sounds too – the warble of the warehouse's automatic fire alarm and – unless I imagined it – emergency vehicle sirens.

Whether fire-trucks were here already or not, I feared it still wouldn't be long before the entire building was an inferno. There was so much fuel for a fire just from the thousands of crates and boxes, let alone their contents. If the fire was already huge enough to reach the roof high above Section 2, it was probably spreading sideways rapidly into Sections 1 and 3. In fact, I couldn't understand how a fire could have reached the roof, but not be showing in any of the windows in Sections 1 and 3. Then again, I was no fire expert. All I knew was that my being knocked out by an intruder and this fire were not coincidences. Surely what I saw was a case of arson.

I turned my mind to the major problem I now faced...

The fence which surrounded the 'out back' dumping ground was fixed to the sides of the building. There was no gate and, thanks to our minor diligence, no gaps in the fence which I knew of... And I, like my buddy Bill, was a purple-heart war veteran. Two years ago, my right arm had been torn up by machine-gun fire. There hadn't been enough of it left to save and I'd had most of the limb amputated. In exchange I had eventually received a dummy prosthetic, capable of... well, just hanging there and looking arm-like. I could lock the elbow into a bent position if necessary using my left hand, and that was all. The stump I had below my shoulder wasn't capable of controlling a

mechanical limb... So there was no way on Planet Earth that I was going to be able to climb the fifteen-foot fence, let alone get past the barb wire on top of it.

Could I count on a rescue – on a firefighter checking behind the building and cutting through the fence? Maybe not, since they would be fighting the blaze and looking for survivors inside the building. However, I could count on smoke seeping from the building and blanketing the dumping ground where I was. That gentle breeze was blowing it my way. Already a low, undulating carpet of poisonous vapour was spreading out from the middle of the back wall. If the smoke got thick enough out here, I could get killed by the fire without hardly getting warm... Alternatively, airborne embers might set fire to the flammable crap out here...

So either I was stuck out here hoping for a rescue that might not come, or I had to risk going through the warehouse.

I made it to my feet. On the way, I spotted my torch, broken on the pavement. I hoped my radio had fared better. I withdrew it and tried the button.

“Piece of junk.” Not even a hiss came out of the thing as I tried a second and third time. I opened the battery compartment and jiggled the batteries – no luck. Even smacking the radio against the pavement failed to work. Further adjustments were above my technical skill level.

My eyesight roamed the fire-swathed structure of my workplace again. Part of me said *get in there before it gets worse*, another part wanted to procrastinate and avoid such a decision.

Yet there was Bill to think of. *Had whoever had knocked me out done the same to him? Was he lying helpless, waiting to get eaten-up by the fire?* I tried not to think that he could already be dead.

I was moving unsteadily even as the plan formed in my mind. I'd get in through the door on the right side of the rear wall, into Section 1. I wouldn't try to search for Bill – the place was just too damn big for me on my own. I'd get out, alert the fire crew and get them to find him.

“And what about the arsonist?” I asked aloud as I reached the door.

Long gone, I replied to myself. *For surely the bastard who had hit me, had set the fire and fled quickly. He wouldn't want to be caught or burnt alive...*

That sounded right. A case of arson fitted all the evidence I had.

If only things had been that simple.

End Of Sample

House Of My Dreams

Sometimes the weather seems to be setting the mood for your day.

My bus had dropped me about half a mile from Doctor Maybury's house. I had stepped out into a merciless, bludgeoning downpour and was soaked to the skin in seconds. The clothes I was wearing were cheap, second-hand and would show signs of mending to a careful observer, but they were the best I owned. I wore shoes, trousers and a shirt-and-tie rather than trainers, jeans and a T-shirt; my jacket was a little ill-fitting, but I had no other. All I could think was: 'I'm going to look like shit when I reach the doctor's door...'

And I was right. When I arrived at the detached house out in the city suburbs, I was dripping and dishevelled. The weather, however, had changed. Rain had fizzled away and stopped, clouds had begun to separate, and summer sunshine was beaming down upon me.

Just my luck... Or a sign that my luck was about to improve?

If Doctor Maybury was as good as I had been told, I might finally find a cure to the horror that had haunted me for twenty years of my life.

* * *

To me, the house looked like a mansion.

There was a white picket-fence before a flat expanse of perfectly-kept lawn. At the centre of the grass sat a round hydrangea bush, festooned with white blooms. Maybury's tarmac drive ran down the left side of the front garden, to end at the metal roller-doors of a garage.

The garage, I mused for a moment, was probably more spacious than any apartment I had ever lived in. And it was sure to have less rats and cockroaches than many I had been forced to inhabit.

Right of the garage sprawled the house itself. Two stories of pale grey brick, topped with a tiled roof of dark grey. Smoke trailed skyward from a single chimney. The ground floor had bay windows either side of a pristine white front door. I glimpsed curtains that were bright and cheerful – and I thought how welcoming this house was to anyone who approached it. If, as people said, homes reflected their owners, then the Maybury family must have been good people: loving to each other, kind to neighbours, decent folks. I felt a momentary wash of jealousy.

I went through the gate and up the paved path to the door. It opened before I could reach for the fancy door-knocker.

Doctor Maybury wasn't what I expected. I had conjured-up an image in my mind of a man near retirement, with receding silvery hair, a serious face and deeply-penetrating eyes. He would be cold, clinical and precise. Such were my estimates of a psychiatrist who would help special cases such as my own for nothing. Instead, his appearance and demeanour were that of a friendly uncle. Since I'm only five foot seven, his height of over six feet meant he towered above me. Maybury was also very broad-shouldered and his stout girth contrasted with my rather scrawny build. A loose-fitting grey jogging outfit covered his rather generous form, though I doubt he had ever run in this – it was worn for casual comfort.

Maybury's face was big and made up of big features. A square jaw and a dimpled chin. Thick lips around a wide mouth, filled with pearly-white teeth. A long, fleshy nose beneath a high, deeply-lined forehead. Bushy eyebrows and large, bright eyes of intense blue. Ears which jutted out like jug-handles. And a mop of blonde hair that seemed to have defied any attempt to comb it under control. Thick-rimmed glasses had been raised up and planted into Maybury's hair.

What I had heard about Maybury suggested he was at least fifty-five. He looked under forty, and most of this impression came from the exuberance of his grin and the power of his eyes.

Despite being soaked like a drowned rat, I couldn't help but return the infectious smile.

"Luke Smith?" he cried out, as if he were performing on a stage.

"What's left of him," I replied.

"And you swam all the way," he laughed. "Come on, young man. Let's get you in and get you warm and dry, shall we?"

"Thanks, Doctor May—"

As he ushered me in, he waved his hands in dismissal.

"No titles and crap here, Luke. You call me Charles."

* * *

The square hallway was over fifteen feet wide. Its walls were decorated with patterned pale blue

wallpaper, and the floor was of polished marble tiles. There were closed oak doors all around: two in the wall to my left; one in the middle of the right-hand wall; and a fourth in the wall facing me, to the left of the carpeted stairs which rose to the upper level. An ornate mirror and a Van Gogh print added to the wall decor. The furniture was just a small table on the right and a wooden coat-stand on the left.

I found my shoes squelching on the thick 'Welcome' mat. Rainwater dripped off my coat to spatter the tiles.

"I'm sorry." I grimaced. "I'm making a mess..."

"Don't worry."

Maybury helped me off with my coat before I could resist, and he shook it to spray the centre of the floor.

"There we are, can't get any worse!" He smirked. "I have a maid who comes in each morning. She complains that I'm much too clean and tidy. Now she'll be overjoyed to finally have something to mop up."

He hung my coat on the stand, where it was left to swing – making me think, eerily, of a hung corpse on a gibbet.

I still felt awkward, and blundered out a response: "Your wife and family won't mind..?"

Maybury paused a moment, and briefly seemed to shrink inward. "My wife died a few years ago. I live alone here."

"I'm sorry..."

The doctor raised a finger and wagged it. "No more apologies. You weren't to know. Now, let's take care of you."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, I was sitting comfortably in the psychiatrist's home office.

Maybury was a more than generous host. I'd been taken to an upstairs bathroom and been given a bundle of towels to dry myself off. Clothing had been found for me to wear while my own hung to dry elsewhere in the house. The replacement garments were another jogging suit and, although it was a little large, it was warm and snug. Maybury told me the suit came from his "slimmer years"... before "a love of pastries overwhelmed my waistline". He also gave me some thick socks, but apologised at having no other suitable spare footwear.

The office was the second door to the left from the front entrance. It was a spacious, windowless room, clearly designed to offer visitors as little distraction as possible. Plain white walls and ceiling, a beige carpet, an office desk, a few chairs, two couches and a coffee table. I noticed immediately that thick plastic covered the carpet.

"That's something for one of my regular visitors," Maybury explained as he guided me to a couch. "He's concerned with bugs, and fears that carpets are filled with them. Which, I suppose, they technically are. Microscopic ones, though."

The couch had the pleasant smell of well-cared-for leather and it was framed in mahogany. I sat back, buoyant on the firm springs supporting me.

Set upon the coffee table was a huge mug of hot chocolate and a platter of biscuits. Maybury had chosen to have just a glass of water with a slice of lemon. He lounged on the other couch, facing mine across the table.

"That chocolate will warm you up, Luke."

"Thanks. For everything." I took a hearty drink from the mug and found the taste exquisite. "That's great stuff. Probably got enough sugar in it to kill a rhino, but it's great."

Maybury patted his stomach. "You've probably noticed that I'm fighting a losing battle against indulgence."

"Maybe," I said, feeling relaxed enough to make a joke, "you should see a psychiatrist about that."

The doctor grinned. "I do. Every time I look in the mirror. He tells me it's okay."

I paused for a few seconds of quiet contemplation. Here I was talking to the man as if I had known him for years. Yet part of my problem was social awkwardness. I usually found it hard, sometimes impossible, to connect with others. Maybury certainly had a gift for putting people at ease.

"It's a pity," I told him, "that today's session is kinda screwed up. I get the feeling you could really help me."

He sipped at his water and I could see he wished it was hot chocolate.

"Your session hasn't started, Luke. I don't work on an hourly basis with special cases like yours. It's not even three o'clock yet. We have all afternoon ahead of us... and the evening too if it helps.

Hell, I've talked with some of my guests until breakfast the next morning. The important thing is that we help you. Nothing else matters."

We spent the next half-hour just chit-chatting in general. Maybury made no effort to guide me into discussing my history or problems – he just relaxed me further.

After he refilled my mug and got one for himself, I realised I was ready. I began to tell him what I knew...

Of course, the worst things were those I couldn't tell him...

* * *

I was born into a world of horror.

Other psychiatrists have told me that I've put up mental barriers to block virtually every memory from my early childhood. Ask me my earliest recollection and I'd describe something from the mental hospital in which I spent my eleventh and twelfth years: the smile of a nurse, someone comforting me after I awoke screaming in the night, or maybe an orderly making me laugh. Everything earlier than that is either erased or hidden. On rare occasions, I have had a flash of *something* – a vague, enraged woman's face or a woman's angry yell, with words indistinguishable – and I've been overcome with dread. Maybe that woman is a memory, maybe she was my mother, or maybe she's a monster conjured up by my damaged mind.

All I know is, the first ten years of my life are a black hole. And something truly sinister lives in there.

When I reached my teens, I was living in a halfway house. That was how the team who ran it liked the centre described – 'a halfway house where children waited for loving adoption'. Older kids like me knew it was really an orphanage; damaged kids like me also knew that no one would ever adopt us. I wasn't upset by these facts, however. I understood that my life consisted of ten years of 'something so bad I had blotted it out', then two years of care at the hospital, and finally the more open environment of the halfway house. I liked the adults who took care of us – especially the janitor who sneaked me old Batman comics – and I loved the schooling we received at the centre. Learning, to me, was true freedom. Knowledge was fuel for the soul.

Best of all, the nightmares I'd suffered from in the hospital had gone. I never slept well – the slightest noise would wake me and I always woke up scared – but I felt far more normal than before. I was a nervous, introvert kid who was afraid of the dark, of strangers, of... well, pretty much everything. It was hard for me to make friends and very difficult for me to trust and confide in someone. But my life had so much more freedom and so many possibilities.

Most of my time at the halfway house varied from contentment to happiness. I only recall one incident that troubled me deeply. It wasn't one of the occasions when I got picked-on by bullies – it was a quiet conversation with another kid:

"Hey, Luke," he had begun, while we wolfed our lunches. "You know those years you can't remember..."

"Yeah. My 'missing years'?"

"Well, you reckon some really bad shit happened to you, don't you?"

"Mmm..." My mouth was full. "The doc's say it was so bad I forgot it all on purpose."

"I just wondered, what if it wasn't that something bad happened to you...?"

"Uh?" I frowned. "Then what...?"

"What if you did something so bad, you forgot it?"

That conversation has haunted me every day since.

What if that blurred female face with the screaming voice wasn't my monster? What if my monster was me? What could I have done..?

End Of Sample

Bug Hunt

The instant Graves and I made eye contact, we were ready to kill each other.

He was slouched in one of the dozen plastic chairs of the briefing room. His long, slicked-back hair had been raven-black the last time I had seen him – now it was streaked with grey. Graves was still lean and gangly; there wasn't an excess pound of weight on his body, which was a reflection of how fast, strong and damned deadly the man could be. As always, when he sat he sprawled – when he stood, his back would be ramrod straight. Those narrow, dark, mean-looking eyes reminded me of a snake. The ugly scar underneath his clean-shaven chin reminded me of the time I'd slit his throat...

We tensed in unison. His left hand slid down for the automatic pistol holstered at his hip. My right hand was inside my jacket, my fingers on the butt of my own handgun.

Only one thing stopped us from turning the room into a scene from the Wild West: we were both here for a big payday. If we shot each other to death before we were even briefed on the job, it would be a damned shame.

So we froze, hands ready to draw and fire, eyes locked onto each other and blazing with searing hatred.

I rasped to Wilde, who was entering the room at my side. "What's that piece of shit doing here?"

For an executive of a billion dollar company, and a man unaccustomed to violence, Wilde was pretty dismissive of both my words and the reaction between Graves and myself.

"He's another mercenary – here for the money, like you." Wilde slipped past me and headed for the front of the room. "If either of you doesn't want two hundred thousand dollars for one day's work, feel free to shoot it out or leave. Your choice."

In perfect synchronisation, Graves and I released our weapons and relaxed. Graves raised his right hand to his throat and tapped at the digital voice-box which was attached there. His grating electronic tones were emitted, and I wished – yet again – that I'd cut deeper five years ago. I should have cut his bloody head off.

"There won't be a problem," Graves said. "We just have a history. And issues to finish at a later date... Isn't that right, Turner?"

I eyed Wilde. "While we're on your dime, we're your people."

"Good," the exec stated.

Whilst I truly hated Graves, I held an intolerable dislike for Wilde. The man was short and pudgy, mid-thirties and had a polished appearance. Perfectly styled hair; a crisp dark suit; an eye-dazzling coloured shirt and tie; jewellery on his wrists, fingers, ears and right eyebrow. I didn't dislike him because he was hugely rich, rather because of his lack of respect for anyone else. He acted like a god. I'd seen him treat underlings like filth – the group of merc's here only got better treatment since one of us might snap his neck. Wilde oozed superiority, and everyone he met simply existed to do his dirty work. And I also felt that if we all died on this 'job' of his, he wouldn't care at all. I'd already decided to listen to the briefing and quit afterwards if I didn't like the setup.

\$200,000 is worth nothing if you're too dead to spend it.

I took a seat at the back of the room, on the left. Graves was one row in front of me and on the right. I knew it would irritate the shit out of Graves to have me behind him. A smile crossed my lips.

There were three rows of four chairs, directed towards the large flat screen monitor at the front of the room. Four more men followed myself and Wilde in. Three were merc's; the fourth looked to be a tech of some kind.

I knew all the mercenaries.

McBride was ex-Irish Guards, tall and built like the proverbial brick outhouse; his mop of unkempt ginger hair was paling as he entered his mid-fifties, but he was still the toughest man here. I'd once seen him shot in the shoulder, chest and gut, and still take out four armed men with his bare hands. Close-quarter combat was what he excelled at: if his big hands locked onto you, you were dead.

Howard was American. If rumours were true, he'd grown up as a Kansas farm boy, done a few tours in the marines and then gone private for the big bucks. To be honest, Howard didn't even look military: you could imagine this twenty-four year old as a clerk in your local superstore. He was medium-height, of unremarkable build, round-shouldered, and had blonde hair that was receding fast enough to set an Olympic record. In a fight, his bright blue eyes had a way of hardening though – and then you knew he was a true killer. Howard was a good, reliable soldier, a decent man to have beside you.

Lee was Korean, and I knew nothing of his pre-mercenary years. I didn't even know if he was from North or South Korea. He stood just over five feet in height, was stocky, and his hard, stern

face expressed only his legendary lack of humour. When we had first met, people had remarked that Lee spoke far better English as a second language than I did, although I was British; I can still remember Lee trying to fathom my Northern England accent, which mellowed over the years as I travelled with work. A few colleagues also sarcastically called Lee 'Bruce' – on account of his martial arts skills, which were, quite frankly, piss-poor. The Korean excelled, however, with any gun from pistol to sniper rifle.

Making up the fivesome of killers-for-hire, were Graves and myself. Both in our mid-forties, born in the same county, soldiered in the same regiment, fought side-by-side until we quit the army. Our disputes arose when we both became mercenaries. I wouldn't fight for anyone who threatened my country of birth or who I hated on principle; Graves soon learned that terrorists and bloody dictators paid more, and he had no qualms training bombers or murdering helpless civilians. That had culminated in our encounter in Rwanda – when I'd slit his throat and left him to bleed out. I would have waited to ensure he died, but he'd shot and stabbed me several times, plus a hundred of his cohorts had been closing in.

McBride, Howard and Lee all gave me a slight nod as they filtered through to sit on the front row. I nodded back. It was a sign of respect, and their lack of doing so to Graves spoke of what they each thought of him.

I couldn't help but wonder what Graves was doing here. The other three merc's and myself had been contacted, then flown into a run-down city in a tiny North African country. The four of us had been collected together at the airport and driven to this anonymous suite of offices, where we had met Wilde. Graves had already been here, waiting, and there had been no prior mention of him. Wilde was clearly a man of intelligence, so why include two enemies in a potential team? To be honest, why include Graves ever – he couldn't be trusted, and that outbalanced the considerable skills he possessed.

I gave the tech guy a glance as he sat down on the remaining front row chair. He was around twenty, with black hair and a scruffy beard. Whereas the rest of us wore a range of comfortable clothing, he wore jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of some death-metal band. The tech had a tablet in his left hand and kept keying at it, like some train commuter who has to check Twitter on his iPhone every few seconds.

When the door was closed, Wilde moved to the wall-screen and touch-activated it. A swirling company logo appeared: VVB Biological Solutions.

"You don't need to know anything about VVB," Wilde began tersely, "other than we have a facility sixteen miles outside this city. It's underground. Work there is into the theoretical use of biological weapons and their delivery into populations."

Which surely made the facility illegal according to international law, and suggested VVB was linked to government black-ops departments. This didn't sound good at all.

"Over two hundred personal lived and worked at the facility." He touched the screen and a layout of the complex appeared. "As you can see, the facility is on one level and has been designed as three separate rings – one for living, one for bio-research and one for research into delivery systems. The three rings are set at the corners of a triangle, with long main corridors linking them."

Now would come the crunch...

"Yesterday, the facility went dark. There was an emergency call and a security team from the surface went down to investigate. The team did not return. We've not heard anything since."

McBride interrupted and the action made Wilde's face flush with annoyance. "So what's the emergency? You must have video-feeds, thermal imaging..."

"There's nothing at all down there. No monitoring of any kind." He paused. "To maintain such records would harm VVB's need for deniability."

I decided to annoy Wilde further. "So what do you have?"

"An audio recording of the initial request for help, plus one from the security squad."

"Let's hear them."

His expression changed. Wilde had clearly intended for us to listen to the recordings after the briefing – he'd heard them once and didn't want to hear them again.

"All right."

A few tabs at the screen brought up an audio player. He configured it and stepped back.

A woman's urgent voice shrieked from speakers either side of the screen.

"Security... You've gotta get down here—"

In the background, slightly muffled, something heavy was dragged across a floor. Two men exchanged words:

"What about Billy and Nina?"

“They’ve had it. They’re already gone...”

The woman’s voice yelled: “We have people dead down here. Christ, it’s awful. They’re out... They’re out... You’ve got to rescue us. We’re barricading ourselves in...”

An almighty crash rang out – almost loud enough to be a mortar shell exploding. Something fell over and shattered. A man gave a guttural cry...

And a terrific buzzing filled the speakers.

(At this point, Lee hissed: “Is that some crazy bastard with a chainsaw?”)

Then the woman screamed. The cry started as terror and ended as choking agony.

We were all relieved when the recording clicked off and died.

Until the second recording began...

“This is Jacobs to Surface. We’re down and we’ve exited the lift into the Living Quarters Ring. The lights are on. Everything looks normal. We’re accessing a security panel and...”

One of Jacobs’ team added: “No sign of fires or contamination according to the system. The facility wasn’t put on lockdown by anyone here – all the lab doors are still unlocked. I’ve also overridden the security codes for the doors to all personnel quarters to allow us entry...”

“Good man. You hear that, Surface? Looks like there’s no Biohazard at least.”

“You’ll need to confirm that yourselves in the Bio Labs, Jacobs. We need to be absolutely certain there has been no breach in containment.”

Jacobs offered with a doomed man’s humour: “If there has been, you won’t be getting that twenty back, you know.”

“Keep cool, man. What we heard didn’t sound like a virus. More like somebody went postal.”

“I know.” Jacobs tried to laugh. “One guy goes crazy and two hundred scientists can’t subdue him? I’ve always said these jerks were pathetic.”

He paused. “Team will split. Three left, three right. We’ll check out the entire Living Ring. While we do, we’ll seal off the linking corridor to the Delivery Systems Labs. That way no one can come from there and get behind us... Then we’ll head down the other corridor to the Bio Labs.”

“Proceed, Jacobs. And be aware, lift is on lockdown until situation verified.”

Heavy footsteps were heard, and calls of action between the security men.

One man said to his leader: “What do we do if someone jumps out in front of us?”

“Shoot and apologise later.”

For several minutes, the search went on. Rooms were entered and checked. Then:

“Jacobs, this is Team Beta. We’ve just sealed the link corridor to the Delivery Labs... Proceeding... Hold on, we’ve got a body here in the passage. Woman, mid-fifties. Major stab-wounds to the torso. Looks like someone used a damn harpoon on her.”

“Any ID?” Jacobs responded, then he changed to: “Wait, I’ve got something here too. A noise...”

Faint, barely audible on the playback, we heard the weird chainsaw-buzz from the first recording.

I frowned until my frown hurt.

The buzzing grew louder, and I instinctively wanted to call a warning to the security teams.

“We’ve got it here too now,” said the caller from Beta Team. “What the heck is it?”

“I dunno...”

Sounds seemed to explode from the speakers. First was twin buzzing roars, then the drumming blurts of gunfire... and then screams...

Until only the buzzing remained.

Wilde switched off the recording. He was as pale as a sheet.

“There’s... nothing more...” the exec explained. “That’s all we have.”

For seconds, silence haunted the room. Whatever this was, it was beyond the experience of any of the fighters here.

Wilde paced back in front of the screen.

“So... the situation is unknown, but it’s clearly more than our own security can handle. We need you to search the facility and eliminate any threat you may find.”

“Any threat you may find?” Lee repeated. “Your security assumed it was one of your own, gone crazy. But after your search-team split in two, both teams were attacked and taken out together. Are you now considering that the facility has intruders and is under their control?”

“No,” Wilde dismissed. “There’s one way into that facility: the lift shaft. Intruders would have to go past our surface security and down the shaft, which no one did.”

“So,” I put in, “it looks like a bunch of your lab personnel turned rogue? I take it they were all vetted closely when you hired them.”

“They were vetted extremely carefully. The situation makes no sense. Whoever has done this hasn’t tried to leave, nor have they made any demands.”

“Could one of your viral agents have turned them crazy?”

“Not that I am aware of. It’s a possibility, I guess.”

“Are there any guns down there?” McBride asked.

“None... Except for what the security team were carrying.”

“And the buzzing sound?” the Irishman prompted. “You must have an idea what that is.”

“Not a clue.”

“Bloody marvellous.”

Wilde looked around the room, feeling the tension and proving impotent against it. He took a deep breath and continued.

“Mister Graves has worked as a consultant for us several times. We contacted him and asked for a list of the best personnel within eight hours travel-time. He selected you four. Also joining the group will be Matt Robinson here.” Wilde gestured to the tech. “His job will be to deal with over-riding any computer control systems that might stand in your way. Matt will get you where you need to go. He’s one of our best personnel... Once the threats are dealt with and the Bio Labs are confirmed A-OK, you will then be able to return to the surface and the job will be done.”

“What if some of the super-bugs from your Bio Labs are loose?” Graves asked, via his grating electronic voice.

“You’d be infected and dying.”

Howard, who had listened intently and not spoken so far, snapped at this: “But we’ll be wearing Biohazard suits, won’t we?”

“If a virus is out,” said Wilde, “then it’s somehow got through stringent safety protocols – from filtering systems to multiple airlocks, and more. It would be what the lab guys call a ‘nightmare bug’. Against something so potent, a protective suit would be about as much use as a lucky charm.”

“In which case...?”

“You wouldn’t be able to return... We’d have to instigate a burnout. Incinerate the facility.”

“You mean burn us alive?”

“We’ll provide cyanide capsules for the worst-case scenario. You wouldn’t suffer.”

“Why not burn the place out now?” I input. “Kill whoever slew everyone down there.”

“It’s quite simple. The viruses down there, and the equipment, are valued at tens of millions. It’s worth sending you down there in the hope of saving such losses.” He added unconvincingly: “Besides, we hope there might be survivors.”

“Nice,” Graves commented. “I almost admire your ruthlessness.”

If I’d had any sense, I would have just left the room. The job was a rotten one; the client was of a kind I’d usually avoid on principle; and there was Graves’ presence to consider too. Unfortunately, some instinct in me wanted to make Wilde squirm. So I stood up instead.

“I’m going to speak for all of us. We’ll do your dirty job, but not for \$200,000. We could all be dead the moment we arrive down there. It’ll cost you \$400,000 each, paid into our accounts before we leave this building and head to your facility.”

For a moment I thought he was going to explode. A vein started beating hard in the side of his left temple. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Through gritted teeth, he uttered: “That’s... acceptable.”

“And there’s more,” I added icily. “Robinson: are you married or..?”

The tech turned and replied. “I’m single and without any family, that’s why I agreed to go. Other guys who could do the job would leave behind a... bigger hole... if they didn’t make it.”

“Fair enough.” I eyed Wilde again. “If he’s taking the same risk as us, he gets the same money. \$400,000, paid now before we leave.”

This time, I was convinced Wilde’s head might actually explode. Somehow, he restored his composure.

“That seems only fair,” he murmured.

Robinson looked at me in amazement.

“Final question,” McBride shot at Wilde, “before we really do agree. Who leads our team?”

Graves answered before Wilde could speak.

“Turner,” he stated, thumbing in my direction. “You guys all trust and like him. I trust him professionally.”

The other three soldiers accepted the statement readily. Robinson nodded, as if his vote really counted.

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s get moving, then.”

And I blatantly ignored all my gut feelings.

* * *

An hour later, we were on-site, geared up and ready to descend into the complex.

Our funds had all been transferred to bank accounts, then immediately re-transferred into other accounts. This made it impossible for VVB to get their money back. I helped Robinson to set up his accounts online – the guy was still so bubbling over with gratitude he could barely speak.

At the centre of a fortified compound, lost in hundreds of acres of arid wasteland, was the nondescript building which housed the top of the lift shaft. The local security team provided all the equipment we requested, acting with the kind of reverent respect that came from the knowledge of how far better-trained and capable we were. I guess they felt like animals peering higher up a food-chain at more deadly predators.

The six of us wore heavy army clothing, adorned with a camouflage pattern that would clearly be useless; flak jackets that would provide some protection against stabbing or gunfire; and climbing harnesses. Our helmets were strapped on tight, with lamps ready to be used if needed. Everyone had belt-pouches containing First Aid Kits and other supplies. Robinson had a small shoulder-bag filled with tech gear.

In terms of weapons, each soldier's primary was a Heckler-Koch MP7A1 submachine gun – a high-quality killing machine that was lightweight, gave low recoil and was supplied with magazines holding forty rounds each. The HK's armour-piercing bullets had great stopping power; surely they would be more than a match for anything we met below. Also, we all carried a Glock 18, a good handgun that fired 9mm bullets from extended 33-round clips, but had a recoil akin to a mule-kick for those not used to it. A survival knife, plus pairs of smoke grenades, frag grenades and flashbangs completed our arms. The tech accepted a pistol and promised not to draw it unless ordered to do so by one of us.

For comms, we had headsets that I had had set up to allow communication between only the six of us – I didn't want chatter from above causing distractions. If we needed to call the surface, there was a programmed handset radio on everyone's belt.

Entry into the facility was down the two-hundred-foot lift shaft. Robinson had blanched at the thought of a rope-descent. I explained that the lift couldn't be brought back up due to risk of contamination – something he should have already realised.

Robinson was buddy-connected to Howard for the journey down. We slid into the deep black hole like cavers descending into some abyss, our helmet-lamps arcing around. The only sound was the coarse whirring of our belay grips travelling down the heavy ropes.

Above us, the upper doors of the lift shaft were closed and hermetically sealed.

End Of Sample

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