

Prologue: V-Commando

The 2080s

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10:45am Geoday 9 November 2084

Zak returned to the real world. He lay, reclined in his gaming chair.

‘Go kill yourselves,’ he said, addressing the videos of his friends on the wall.

After waiting a moment to sense his limbs, he tilted the chair forward to an upright position, and kicked out his legs to give them a stretch.

Another mission accomplished. But now he had to take an enforced five minute break before he could start the next. At fourteen years old, Zak Carter had to suffer the restrictions of *junior* V-Commando.

Zak despised the junior version. If the next mission went to plan, this would be the last time he’d ever have to play it.

As usual, he would use the break-time for learning, whereas his three team-mates used it for smoking.

‘Ready to die?’ boomed a deep, croaky voice.

The signature video of Zak’s favourite V-Commando player, Abel White, opened up on his bedroom wall. A two-time world champion, White had a reputation for robot-like accuracy with an automatic rifle. Zak aspired to perfect the same techniques.

He swivelled the chair round to face the wall across his bed. The room had just enough space for the bed, a wardrobe, and the gaming chair. But it didn’t feel cramped because these bulky items were the only things that required space. All forms of entertainment and education were on computer, and accessed via the network. The walls were covered with video sheet, which provided ample space to arrange pictures, videos, and other nik-naks over the dynamic wallpaper.

The video sheet emitted a soft glow, and was currently the only source of light in Zak’s room.

Footage began of White’s latest tournament match. The video stretched across the entire wall, a metre in height, filling his vision.

As White's first victim flew across the screen, from a clean shot to the head, Zak puzzled over the law - I'm allowed to watch adult V-Commando, but I'm not allowed to play it. That's stupid, he thought.

The screams of opponents soon filled the room. Then one screeching noise sounded out of place.

'Zak!'

It belonged to Skye, Zak's sixteen year old sister.

'Aw get lost... ' moaned Zak, as the image of Skye replaced the match footage. Zoomed-in, her face filled the frame from top to bottom, and her bright skin lit up the room. From the largely pink background, he could tell she was speaking from her bedroom next door.

'Yeah! What d'you want?' he said.

'Mum's trying to get hold of you, but you've blocked all the downstairs links,' said Skye.

'I don't want to be disturbed while I'm playing.'

'Well she needs to speak to you,' said Skye, impatiently. 'So get downstairs now.'

'What!' said Zak, with irritation. 'I'm busy. As soon as Tom and the others get back, we're starting a team mission.'

'You think *I* like being disturbed. So cut the cheek, it sounds important,' said Skye sternly.

'Yeah. So's this mission!' he retorted. He cast a sharp look towards a set of icons positioned along the top of the wall. The image of Skye closed, and sound returned to his video.

Zak could sense what was coming, Skye never appreciated being cut off. He remained leaning back in his chair, and faced the bedroom door. A few seconds later the door clicked and opened. Skye strode in and stopped right in front of him. She put her hands on the arms of his chair and thrust her face towards his.

'Hey don't be rude to me,' she said firmly. 'I'd be happy for you to stay shut in here all day.'

Although he had now grown taller than her, Zak still felt intimidated as she glared at him. He hadn't seen it on the video image, but she had configured her long blond hair into an upward swirl. Fear forced him to suppress a laugh. He said nothing until she backed off.

‘I’d like to stay here all day as well,’ he said calmly. ‘The team’s got a very important mission coming up. We’re just on our break.’

‘It’s just as well you’re forced to take a break, otherwise you’d live in the damn game.’

Skye paused a little before every reply. This unsettled Zak, who always suspected she was concocting a remark to wind him up.

‘I’ve got to put the time in, to improve my world ranking,’ he said.

Skye sighed.

‘Another V-Commando game?’ she asked.

‘Yep,’ said Zak. ‘*V-Commando: Arctic War 3*. Released this morning.’

He pointed at the wall, then darted his eyes along the icons at the top. The game’s cover video appeared, then advanced into some sample action. Deep in a snow-covered mountain forest, two sets of opposing soldiers were engaged in a skirmish. Being the junior version, the projectiles comprised of blue gunge which splattered on impact.

‘It’s brilliant!’ said Zak, enthusiastically. ‘Although we’ve spent most of the time trying to get up a cliff.’

Skye watched it for all of five seconds, then tutted.

‘Are you not playing the adult version yet?’

A typical Skye taunt. But Zak was ready for her this time.

‘Not yet,’ he said.

‘Then you’re still on the kids’ version. Not much point talking about world rankings when most of the world is playing the proper game.’

Zak smiled. Smugly.

‘No, but Tom’s got a cheat code that will unlock the adult version of *Arctic War 3*.’

Skye’s face turned sour.

Zak struggled to contain his glee.

‘Not only that,’ he continued, ‘but it will put the game on the True-To-Life setting. We’re going to enter the code on the very next mission. That’s why it’s such an important one.’

Skye was visibly stunned, and took longer than her usual pause to respond.

‘But True-To-Life has no pain threshold. It’s as if it were real,’ she said, then laughed with incredulity. ‘Only professionals are allowed access to that - don’t you realise what it’ll be like?’

‘Course I do. Proper weapons and human enemies. We get shot and feel real pain. It’ll be great,’ said Zak, ending with a huge grin.

Skye swung a fist and walloped him on the arm.

‘Wha!’ yelled Zak, as the force almost toppled the chair.

‘You don’t know what pain is,’ she said, mocking him.

Zak recovered his composure once the chair stopped rocking.

‘I know it’s going to be tough, but I’m ready for it,’ he protested seriously, while conscious of his throbbing arm.

‘No you’re not. You won’t last five minutes!’ said Skye.

‘I’ll do better than that,’ said Zak defiantly. ‘But when I do get killed, I’ll get to experience *death*.’

‘Death!’ cried Skye with derision. ‘You think you’re going to enjoy that do you? Your body getting ripped to shreds by bullets.’

‘I’ve been told it’s the best thrill in the world.’

‘By your *mentor* Tom? I wouldn’t trust him. He’s full of it.’

‘But you said it yourself. I’ll never become a professional if I just play the kids’ version.’

‘Oh come on! You’re not still dreaming about that are you.’

Skye stood with her hands on her hips, which Zak recognised as her sign of contempt for him. But he had an answer to that. He turned back to the wall, and swiftly presented her with a huge table of names, one of which, near the bottom right hand corner, was highlighted.

‘Yeah. And why not? I’m now ranked 249th in the world at junior level,’ he said with pride.

Skye took that in for a moment.

‘That’s rubbish,’ she said dismissively.

‘What!’ said Zak. ‘In the world! Considering I’ve still got nearly four years left at junior level.’

Skye again took a moment to respond.

‘Zak, you’ll never make it as a professional,’ she said firmly. ‘These stars who play in the big leagues are a different breed to you. They’re ex-military, or former gang members, or come from parts of the world with no child protection. They’re from the wrong side of the tracks. They’ll rip apart a pampered kid like you, who’s not had a single real adventure in his life.’

Zak sighed with frustration.

‘That’s why I need to start playing on True-To-Life now. If I wait till I’m eighteen I’ll be way behind so many others.’

Skye shook her head.

‘I bet you’ll play it once, and be too scared to ever play it again.’

Zak normally tried to be unmoved by Skye’s provocative remarks. But these stoked a genuine fear within him that he had already left it too late to start playing the game for real.

‘Do you want to shake on that?’ he said, his voice unintentionally croaking.

‘Yeah!’ said Skye confidently. She lifted her hand, but put it to her ear and glanced away.’

‘Mum wants you downstairs now,’ she said.

‘I’m not going,’ said Zak.

‘Suit yourself,’ said Skye. She spun round and walked to the door.

‘By the way,’ said Zak, as she opened it. ‘What happened to your hair?’

Skye snapped her head back.

‘You’re one to talk, with your spiky mess,’ she said. ‘This is the latest design. I’ve got the most expensive hair system - I’m gonna use it!’

Zak waited until she had left the room and slammed the door.

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘but computers weren’t invented for you to do that to your hair.’

A deliberate cough echoed around the room.

‘Tom,’ said Zak.

‘Ready to see some real fighting Zak?’ said Tom. ‘We’re all waiting.’

‘Yeah. I’m ready,’ said Zak, his voice taking a nervous wobble.

‘In we go then,’ said Tom.

‘I’ll show you Skye,’ muttered Zak under his breath. He always psyched himself up at the start of a mission, and this time he had Skye’s taunts ringing in his ears as extra motivation.

His gaming chair tilted back into its reclined position, putting Zak almost horizontal. It was generously padded, and so comfortable that he immediately started to feel as if he was floating. Over the head rest lay the Mind Mat - the standard interface for virtual reality. By simply resting his head on the Mind Mat and closing his eyes, he would experience the game in his mind. By feeding his five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch; and the body’s internal sense of orientation and movement, the Mind Mat would completely immerse him in the virtual world. And to prevent distraction, it would limit any external stimuli such as sound from reaching his in-game consciousness.

To leave a game, Zak simply had to express the intention to leave and force open his real eyes. For anyone on the outside, it was a little more difficult to get his attention.

Zak let the back of his head sink into the Mind Mat, and closed his eyes.

*

Solid white letters emerged against a black background and falling snow - “Mission 3: Castle Arkanovich”. This lasted several seconds while the level loaded.

Zak found himself standing in deep snow alongside his three team-mates, Tom, Van and Arnie. Only Tom hid behind his avatar, while everyone else was skinned as their true selves. That was not obvious, since all bar Zak represented extremes. Little Arnie was stuck in a ten-year-old’s body. He was dwarfed by Van, whose lanky frame was the consequence of growing too fast. Van even stretched over the mighty Tom, whose over-muscular body appeared to push the limits of avatar design. Zak was rarely happy to be average, but made an exception for body shape.

To one side of the boys was an enormous frozen lake, and on the other, a mountain with dense snow-covered forest. The mission was set just after dawn. It was overcast, but the light was good. They stood right on the edge of the lake, and just below was a metre wide hole in the ice. Zak peered into the dark water.

‘I can just see the lights of our underwater vehicle,’ he said.

‘It’s a rescue mission,’ said Tom. ‘I expect this is where we return.’

The hole began to whiten and freeze over, making it harder to see.

‘Get your bearings,’ said Van, ‘we’ll need to remember the exact spot.’

The boys took a good look around.

The icy lake was several kilometres across, and surrounded by steep mountains. Where they stood the ground was flat, and snowfall continued to settle despite a blustery wind whipping it up. The forest was cut back thirty metres from the edge of the lake. Beyond that, the base of the mountain rose gradually to start with, then steepened to become a sheer cliff, which stood out due to the lack of trees. Above the cliff, the forest thickened again and remained solid right to the top, upon which four towers could be seen stretching above the canopy.

‘Cool, another cliff,’ said Zak. ‘I’m gonna make it over this time.’

‘That castle up there is our target,’ said Tom.

The yellowish stone towers appeared to be the only splash of colour in the landscape, which was otherwise dominated by just two tones, the white of the snow, ice and sky, and the darkness of the trees and rock.

‘I’ve got a small rucksack with a spare pair of ski-boots,’ said Arnie.

‘They must be for who we’re rescuing,’ said Tom, ‘Perhaps someone else better take those.’

‘Good idea!’ said Arnie.

‘Anyone got any other items?’ asked Tom.

The boys checked. They were kitted out with the latest in arctic combat gear. As well as helmet, goggles and ski-boots, each wore a single-piece snow-suit, that covered the rest of their body. The suit was thin, light, and so comfortable in action it was like wearing a t-shirt and shorts. Its camouflage skin was made from reflective material, which even from a short distance made the suit look a jumble of shapes, and almost invisible against a backdrop of trees.

Zak had read the equipment guide. It claimed the suit was waterproof, windproof and thermal lined. For the junior version, this protection against the elements had always been irrelevant. For a moment, Zak wondered how effective the suits would be once the cheat was activated.

Other features of the junior version were more striking, since its entire purpose was to destroy the illusion of reality. Above each boy's head hovered a glowing coloured star. The stars were only visible to team-mates, not the enemy. But Zak hated them, because when the bright colours were in his field of view, it was more difficult to pick out danger from the subtle shades of the forest. Ambient music was another source of irritation, drowning out small sounds that could be important.

Each boy was equipped with a rifle. Unfortunately, this too had no resemblance to any real-life weapon.

'I've got a wall climbing set,' said Van.

'Okay,' said Tom. 'Zak, perhaps you should take the boots.'

'Will do,' said Zak. He took the rucksack from Arnie and put it on his back.

'Where's our mission brief?' asked Van, impatiently.

Suddenly, a non-camouflaged figure materialised into view in front of them. It was the Commanding Officer. His age, build and facial expression suggested he was going to bark orders and tell them what a rotten lot they were. Instead, he spoke softly.

'Hello children. I'm here to explain your mission.'

The boys looked round at each other and smiled cynically.

'Our mission is to unlock the adult version,' said Zak.

The Officer was not listening.

'Take a look at the map,' he said.

A solid three-dimensional map appeared, hovering in the air in front of the boys. It was an aerial view of the terrain, overlaid with chart symbols. The boys were familiar with the format. A black gloved hand hovered over the map, which would point to features referred to in the Officer's briefing.

The boys gathered around, and began to study it. Tom was quite animated, dancing around the map to inspect the various features in detail.

'Your mission,' continued the Officer, 'is to rescue a senior diplomat of the Western Alliance. He was kidnapped five days ago in Berlin and has just been delivered here to the castle of General Arkanovich.'

'How did you find that out?' asked Van.

The Officer ignored the question.

'This diplomat is privy to our military plans for the Eastern Front. The General is skilled in the use of torture, and will push a man to death to get information. Our diplomat is in the gravest danger,' said the Officer, emphasising the last point with an appropriate tone of voice.

'I wish these dummies would answer our questions,' said Van. He stepped up to the Officer and knocked on his forehead. The Officer did not react.

'You make your way up to the castle through the forest,' he continued, 'which is packed with security measures to detect and destroy intruders. There are tree mounted cameras, automatic gun turrets, and you will encounter patrols circling the perimeter. Wild animals also roam the forest, so be on your guard at all times.'

Having studied the map, the boys now started to shuffle around impatiently. They had heard this kind of briefing many times before, but were unable to get going until it was over.

'Once you reach the castle, you make your way to the top of the South Tower where the diplomat is being held. Give him the spare pair of ski-boots, and escort him back here.'

'Can he ski?' asked Van.

'Finally, let's run through your kit,' said the Officer, ignoring him again.

‘Oh come on!’ wailed Van, ‘We need to know!’

‘It’s a VIP rescue,’ said Tom. ‘That’s all we need to know.’

The boys stepped away, leaving the Officer to finish the briefing alone.

‘When do we enter the cheat code Tom?’ asked Zak, excitedly.

‘We have to make it into the castle first,’ said Tom calmly. ‘On the ground floor there is a Communications room with several computer terminals. We have to enter the code into one of those terminals. But once that’s done, the cheat is activated for the rest of the mission and all future missions.’

‘Thank God,’ said Van. ‘Splattng all these Spongemen is turning me into a disturbed individual.’

Tom laughed. ‘You’re gonna love it,’ he said, clearly amused at what he knew, but they didn’t.

Zak had another question about the cheat code, but couldn’t decide whether it was worth asking. Before he could make up his mind, Tom took charge of strategy.

‘We need to punch a hole in their defences and clear the path of guns and patrols for the return journey,’ said Tom. ‘So let’s split up. Get thirty metres apart, and move forward in parallel. Then, before the bottom of the cliff, head either left or right, and follow the tracks up the steadier incline. Once we’re over the cliff, it should be an easy route to the castle. We’ll gather outside the main gate, then talk again. And one other thing - try not to get hurt on the way up.’

Van and Arnie nodded. But Zak frowned at Tom.

‘Hang on a minute.’

‘No Zak,’ said Tom firmly. ‘Let’s get going.’

The Officer had finally finished, and was fading out.

Tom set his feet apart and leaned forward.

‘Open!’ he commanded.

A red light flashed on the outer side of each boot. And as it did so, the ski started to extend. At the front and back the ski slid out from its holding position on the sole, making a soft beep. At about six inches either side, they stopped, clicked into place, and the light turned to green. It was a perfectly formed miniature ski, with a slightly more curved lip at the front than a full length one. Attached to the outer side of each boot was a small horizontal cylinder.

‘On!’ commanded Tom.

Instantly, the lights turned off, the cylinders fired a fierce blue flame, and Tom was propelled forward. Starting smoothly, and accelerating rapidly, he crouched like a downhill skier, but holding his rifle rather than sticks. The skis cut parallel grooves in the snow as he drove forward. He banked to the right, then the left, creating sprays of snow as the skis cut in.

Van and Arnie quickly followed suit.

Zak paused and gazed up at the mountain.

‘I can jump the cliff,’ he said. There was no need to shout, as they were all linked by a voice communication channel.

‘No you can’t,’ said Van, who was already reaching the trees.

‘I can. I’ve worked it out,’ replied Zak.

‘Zak,’ said Tom. ‘I’m fed up with this. We can’t get over the cliff. How many times have we tried.’

‘Lots, but I’ve now realised how it can be done,’ insisted Zak.

‘All the cliffs we’ve tried stick out at the top, and I checked this one on the map,’ said Tom. ‘It’s the same.’

‘It’s designed that way Zak,’ said Van, as if he knew the makers of the game. ‘It’s not a proper route, it’s just a red herring.’

‘There’s no point in going the boring route. I want to get the top quickly, and this is the way,’ said Zak.

He knew he shouldn’t try it, not this time. But not only did he find the challenge irresistible, the idea of taking the easy route positively repelled him.

‘Zak, we haven’t got time for this,’ said Tom angrily. ‘I don’t want to be waiting around at the top for you.’

‘I’ll beat you to the top,’ said Zak assuredly. ‘So don’t you keep *me* waiting.’

He activated his ski-jets, crouched down, and was on his way.

As he entered the forest, he glanced around to check the progress of his team-mates. They had become impossible to see due to the camouflaged clothing. But the junior version of the game ensured he could tell their position easily, due to the bright stars hovering above them – red for Tom, who had headed to the left side of the cliff, blue for Van, to the right. Zak headed straight towards it, where in front of him, Arnie's green star jiggled about - which meant that he was still alive and on the move.

As Zak started to ascend the mountain, the forest became steeper and more dense. He could no longer pick out a straight route through the trees, and had to continuously bank from side to side. Picking out a perfect path was the key to going fast.

He could see that Arnie was also headed straight for the cliff, both from the position of his green star, and his ski tracks, which Zak crossed repeatedly in the otherwise fresh snow. He felt a moment of surprise that Arnie was still alive. But just seconds later, Arnie's star exploded, creating a shower of sparkling green embers. When the effect subsided, a dull remnant of a star remained, stationary. He was now dead.

'Arnie's gone,' said Zak.

'Shame,' said Tom. 'That must be a record for him though.'

Zak wondered how he had made it so far. Arnie had been invited on the team because he was a beginner. They were trying to improve their skills by taking on tougher challenges, and missions were much harder if there were only three in the team. So they were happy to allow Arnie to tag along, and get killed at an early stage.

Zak soon encountered the first outer defences of the castle. Two gun turrets hung from trees, wrecked and smoking. Arnie was learning. His admiration turned to amazement when he passed a Spongeyman patrol. Three guards lay motionless in the snow splattered in blue gunge.

'Well done Arnie!' said Zak.

Zak was closing in on the cliff, and was aware that near Arnie's dead body, another patrol would be lying in wait. He pulled the rifle from his back-mounted holder and put it by his side. It was bulky, though this was due to its futuristic design rather than for any practical reason. The gunge rifle was another fictional item like the ski-jets, only this time created purely for the junior version of the game. Its white plastic casing suited the camouflage, but on the base was a large sac that emitted a bright blue glow. Zak enjoyed using the rifle, but looked forward to the dramatic effect of a real life gun, with its noise, power and devastation. He wanted to see things ripped apart by bullets.

Suddenly, a Spongeyman stepped out from the cover of a tree ahead, with his rifle aimed at Zak. But Zak was too quick for him, and sent him flying with a shot to the head, the gunge neatly wrapping itself around his face.

Zak was already glancing around and spotted two more either side of him, both lifting their rifles ready to fire. He had to act immediately to deal with them both. He jumped into the air and twisted his body sharply around to the left. Despite being airborne for only a short time, he managed to swivel a full 360 degrees, and shoot first the one to his left, then the one to his right, both with headshots, and land facing forward again.

Adrenaline pumping, he took a quick deep breath.

'Groovy!' whined a scratchy voice.

'Shut up!' exclaimed Zak.

He continued on, having lost no speed during the encounter.

Within seconds, Zak sped past the prone body of Arnie. His chest had taken several hits, but it looked like a bucket of green gunge had been thrown over him. His face was concealed by a mask, which had bright painted eyes and a big upturned smile. This was a feature of the junior version, to signify that he was dead. Zak regarded such symbols as ridiculous.

He felt another wave of excitement at the prospect of playing the True-To-Life setting and experiencing death. Arnie had experienced a painless end to the game. When the cheat was turned on, death would be painful - so Zak had been promised.

He now approached the cliff. Up ahead, the slope rose sharply and the trees became more sparse. His view of it quickly became clear. Near the top of the cliff, as the slope became vertical, there were only a handful of trees, that had somehow managed to grow from ledges that stuck out. The snow gave way to ice, and even that became patchy, so he would have to select his path carefully.

These strange cliffs had appeared in the earlier missions, and were one of the game's new features. Zak was sure that they were not a barrier, but a challenge. They had all tried several times to make it over, but without success. The cliffs jutted out a little at the top, which meant that even if they had enough speed to reach the top, they were propelled away from the cliff. It seemed that no amount of acrobatics could prevent them from crashing back into the forest below. The others had concluded it was impossible to make it over. But Zak had realised that as they tried to twist around to get over the cliff, the jets were pushing them further away. His solution was to control the jets.

Zak quickly selected the route he was going to take up the icy slope. He slotted his rifle back into its holder, and crouched down. The slope became steeper, but he raced up it without losing any speed. It continued to rise, and soon became vertical. He kept to the ice, and his velocity propelled him up the cliff-face.

As he neared the top he could feel his speed dropping, as gravity began to overpower both the force of the jets and his momentum. He was now facing up into the sky, and travelling a path that disappeared ahead of him. From his perspective, the lip of the cliff looked like a tiny ramp. He tried to maintain a mental image of what he was going to do.

He reached the top faster than he remembered. He flew into the air above the cliff, but guided away from it by the lip.

'Off!' he shouted. The jets extinguished on his command. All he could see was sky, but he carried out his plan. He pulled himself round in a backward somersault. First the forest came into upside-down view. Then, as he became upright again, the cliff emerged. It seemed miles away, but critically, much closer than ever before. He was still rising, and quite high above the edge.

‘On!’ he shouted again. He had reached the peak of his jump and was starting to fall. The jets fired up. Now facing the cliff, Zak was immediately propelled towards it. Gravity pulled him down faster, and the jets accelerated him forward. He approached the edge of the cliff at increasing speed, all too quick for him to judge what was going to happen.

Zak suddenly feared he wasn’t going to make it and stretched out his hands to grab on to something. There was an impact, but it was his skis hitting the top side of the lip. He landed heavily, but slid forward to safety.

Before he had a chance to catch his breath, he spotted two tree-mounted gun turrets locking onto him. He whipped the rifle out of its holder and despatched them in an instant. He glanced around again, and judged the immediate danger to be over.

An overwhelming sense of excitement erupted within him.

‘Off!’ he shouted. The jets shut off and he turned back towards the cliff edge, stopping to survey the scene. He had a towering view of the forest below and the frozen lake and mountains in the distance. Far below him, and to either side, he could see red and blue stars moving slowly along the shallower routes up the mountain.

‘Look at me!’ he roared with delight.

‘Uh?’ came two replies.

‘I don’t believe it!’ said Tom, seriously.

Zak smiled at the thought of them looking around for his yellow star, and then finding it high above them.

‘You said it couldn’t be done,’ he jeered in triumph. ‘I’m right! You’re wrong!’

‘Okay Zak. Well done,’ said Van, with typical irritation.

‘Y’know, I think you guys are losing your nerve. Maybe I should look for some new team-mates,’ said Zak, silently laughing.

‘Right,’ said Tom, sounding shaken. ‘Well, let’s get to the top first yeah.’

Zak was about to rub it in even more when he heard movement behind him. He jumped in the air and swivelled 180 degrees to face back toward the mountain. He saw wolves. Four of them were sprinting towards him, close together, teeth bared. Was there time?

He aimed the rifle and shot the closest one just below its head. There was a yelp, and the wolf was stopped in its tracks by a coating of blue gunge. The one behind it jumped over the flailing body. Zak had aimed at the next closest. He fired again, with the same accuracy. There was only a small delay between each shot, but it seemed far too long. The remaining two were close. Was he too near the edge of the cliff? He had aimed at another, but for some reason it was the one furthest away. He fired once more. The sounds became mesmerising - gunshot, yelp, gunshot, yelp. He cursed the background music. The last wolf was upon him. Zak aimed the rifle precisely. It jumped at him, and he pulled the trigger too soon, as the rifle hadn't completed its recovery. It didn't fire.

Zak saw a wide open jaw come towards him. He leant back, and then felt the impact as the wolf snapped its jaw at his neck. He flew backwards into the snow, and the wolf went over him.

Zak noticed his health gauge drop a hefty forty percent. His vision blurred, causing the trees that towered above him to split into multiples and then dance around. This was a feature of the game, making him completely disoriented. He heard the growl of a wolf behind him, so he frantically got to his feet, and rushed to get behind what he hoped was a genuine tree. Running was difficult with the skis extended, and he felt clumsy and vulnerable.

'Close!' he commanded.

The skis withdrew, and he dived behind the tree. He breathed a sigh of relief as his vision returned to normal.

Then Zak realised that he did not have his rifle. He peeked out. The wolf was getting up right by the edge of the cliff. It shook itself to get rid of the snow picked up by its fur as it rolled over. He scanned intently for the blue glow, but there was no sign of it. The rifle must have gone over the edge of the cliff!

Van's voice cut in. 'Hey Zak, waiting for us eh, that's a bit cheeky.'

'Don't get cocky Zak,' said Tom. 'No-one likes that.'

Zak had to ignore them, the wolf was on the attack again.

From behind the tree, Zak waited to see which side the wolf would go. It charged the left side, so Zak darted to the right. But the wolf followed him round with ease and jumped on his back.

Zak fell forward into the snow. His back was protected by the rucksack, but this also made it difficult for him to manoeuvre. The wolf had its jaws around the rucksack, but in clawing at him ripped away the lower back of his snow-suit. Zak managed to swing his right elbow, and heard a crack and a yelp. The wolf pulled itself away and ran off.

Zak rolled over and got to his feet. But to his frustration, saw that the wolf had also recovered, and was readying itself to charge again. He had to kill it. But he had no weapon.

The rucksack pulled awkwardly on his back. He thought of its contents, a spare pair of ski-jet boots. The jet was not a weapon, but it discharged a lethal flame.

The wolf trotted towards him and bared its teeth. Zak had no time to unpack the spare boots. He bent down and unclipped his left boot, then wrenched it off his foot. The wolf started its charge.

‘On!’ he shouted, as the wolf leapt towards him, jaws wide open. He held the boot up, jet facing away, and a concentrated stream of fire burst out of it and into the gaping mouth that descended on him. But Zak hadn’t thought of the other physical effects. The force of the jet flung his upper body backwards, while the right boot he was standing on fired forwards. He did a backwards somersault and kicked the wolf in the stomach, flinging it up into the air. The wolf went flying over the edge of the cliff, and Zak almost went with it.

‘Off!’ he screamed, as he completed his somersault and landed face down in the snow, somewhat dazed himself.

His first thought, having overcome this particular ordeal, was the loss of his rifle. He couldn’t go on without one, and to have to go back down to the bottom of the cliff would be particularly humiliating. He pushed himself up onto his knees, then broke into a smile. Just a couple of metres away, squashed down into the snow with the blue section submerged, was the gunge rifle.

He breathed a sigh of relief, and checked the positions of the others. They were now getting near the top via their slow routes. He retrieved his rifle, but now where was his boot? It wasn't in the disturbed snow around him. He cautiously approached the edge and peered over. Half way down the cliff-face, where the snow met the ice, the boot stuck out.

'Damn,' he said, as he realised he'd blown it.

'What's that?' said Tom.

Zak decided that while it might be tough on the diplomat, he would have to borrow one of his boots. He took off the rucksack and quickly unpacked it, taking out the left one.

He pulled up the thick sock on his left foot, and found it was sopping wet. His health bar was down below fifty percent, and gradually slipping lower.

'It would be a lot easier if you could feel these things,' he muttered.

He put his foot into the boot, and it went all the way in without touching the sides. He lifted his foot up, but the boot only came up with his toes. It hung on them for a second, then slid off.

'This boot's massive!' he cried. 'I can't carry on with this.' He took the boot and slammed it into the ground in frustration.

'What are you doing Zak?' asked Van sternly.

'I've messed up Van,' said Zak sorrowfully. 'I'll have to go back down.'

He noticed Tom's red star storming up the mountain. He'd reached the level of the cliff the long way round, and was now heading towards the castle.

'Your new team-mates are going to love you,' said Tom.

Zak felt pretty miserable as he packed up the rucksack. He wondered if he could make his way down gracefully. There was no need to fire the jets to go downhill. He lifted his left leg in the air, hopped over the edge of the cliff, and tumbled down the ice, ploughing into his boot with a thump.

Zak opted to take the easy route back up. His concentration had been shattered, and he couldn't risk another attempt on the cliff. He finally reached the others, who were waiting at the castle, lying down behind a snow bank scouting the scene.

'That's the thing I hate about team missions,' said Van, 'waiting for the slowcoaches to catch up.'

'It's your own fault Zak,' said Tom grumpily. 'If you stopped doing stupid things like prancing around at the top of that cliff, you'd be in the top 10, not just the top 250.'

Zak didn't reply. He wasn't in a particularly good mood either.

As he laid down in position behind the bank, he heard his name being called, from a distance. It was a female voice. Then he felt his body shake, even though he wasn't moving. He knew what all this meant, but ignored it.

The others waited to let Zak survey the scene ahead. The castle was at the top of the mountain on a plateau, and he could see that behind it, the forest fell away down the other side. Nevertheless, there was still room for a moat, with a drawbridge lowered over it. A few armed guards patrolled the area, while other uniformed soldiers supervised activity. A truck turned out of the East gate and made its way along a narrow track to the North. Zak deduced the paths taken by the guards from the trails of footprints in the lightly falling snow.

Tom shifted, ready to issue commands again.

'Okay, here's what we're gonna do. Van, you go round to the South side and scale the tower. Zak, our job is to make a direct attack on the castle, and create enough of a distraction to give Van a clear run to the top. We'll approach the castle through the East gate, and there's an entrance just beyond it. I reckon the Communications room won't be far from there. You need to cover me as I go in, then I'll do the same for you.' He smiled. 'We'll have that cheat turned on in no time.'

Zak observed the way Tom constructed a plan and led the team. Zak was undoubtedly the most physically talented player among the three, but had never led an assault. He intended to learn that side to the game.

Van wasted no time following the instructions. He headed left to make his way round to the South side, using the trees to stay hidden. Tom waited for the moment at which all the guards were facing away from them, then broke cover and hurried towards the East gate. He climbed down at the edge of the moat, hung off the drawbridge, and sidled along. Some guards turned around, but none saw him. Zak watched carefully, waiting to see if Tom would be spotted, as he didn't want to kick up a fuss sooner than necessary. Inevitably, one of the guards became suspicious, and moved towards the drawbridge to investigate. Zak knew he had to eliminate him, and lifted his rifle to take aim.

Suddenly, Zak's vision went blank. He opened his eyes to find his mum standing over him, having pulled his head off the Mind Mat by grabbing hold of his ears.

'Ow!' wailed Zak, as she let go.

'I do not appreciate waiting around while you play games,' she said loudly.

'But I'm in the middle of a mission. I can't just drop out,' he pleaded.

'You knew we were waiting before you started,' she said. 'So that's tough.'

Zak spotted Skye standing in the doorway, arms folded.

'Okay,' said Zak. 'Just let me sign out. Please?'

Mum reached forward and swiped the Mind Mat off the gaming chair. She clutched it to her chest and glared at Zak.

This was serious.

Without another word, he leapt out of the chair, and followed her as she turned and marched out of the room.

Skye winked at him. Had Mum not been so furious, Zak would have delivered a kick to Skye's backside.

He co-operated because he'd pushed Mum to the limit. If he pushed too far, she was not afraid to dish out the ultimate punishment – confining Zak to his room and denying him access to the computer. No computer meant no entertainment, no information, and no communication. There would be nothing to do but stare out the window of a grey room.

Zak followed her downstairs. He stepped into the lounge, to be confronted by a single word displayed in huge bright letters across the main wall – “WAITING”.

‘Yeah okay,’ he said, irritated. ‘You’ve made your point.’

As he spoke, he realised it was not directed at him. All of the usual hideous wallpaper had been replaced by a dark blue background. The message signified an official conference call.

Mum stood there with her arms folded, still fuming. Zak wondered why his mum was acting so serious lately. She no longer seemed to appreciate anything he would consider fun, or even take her own pleasure from life. She left her short brown hair unstyled, and wore clothes so dull they appeared to pre-date modern materials. He couldn’t see where Skye had got her flamboyance.

He heard a noise from the hall. Peering round the doorway he caught sight of his dad backing out of the kitchen.

‘No Rover, you stay in there,’ he said, slowly retracting his arm and pulling the door closed. A dog’s nose poked though momentarily, and there was a little whine as the door clicked shut.

Zak’s dad was in his late fifties, and starting to look a little frail. His wispy overgrown hair seemed out of place in the family. He looked as though he’d mislaid his glasses, although of course no-one wore glasses these days.

‘It’s probably better if we stay standing,’ he said.

With a quick glance at the main wall, Dad got things underway. The video sheet lit up with a row of five faces, each in their own window.

‘Oh my god!’ said Zak, recognising them immediately - four of his schoolteachers, and in the centre his headmaster, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith was looking down at his note pane.

‘I don’t like being kept waiting Carter.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Dad.

‘I was talking to the boy,’ said Mr. Smith.

‘No-one calls me Carter,’ said Zak, very quietly. ‘Even your lot.’

What were they doing calling him on one of his weekend days? And surely most of them would be on their days-off. One of the teachers was definitely speaking from his own home, judging by the eye-melting pattern that drifted on the wall behind him.

Mr. Smith slowly looked up.

‘Mrs. Carter, I believe you handle your son’s education.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mum timidly. She stood head slightly bowed, the Mind Mat still in her hands.

‘Let’s get to the point,’ said Mr. Smith. ‘By the end of the last school year, Zak had established himself at the top of his class. Indeed, I recall a meeting similar to this one, in which we praised his performance.’

Mum nodded. Mr. Smith stared straight ahead.

‘So, it is with regret that we find a steady decline in marks over this term. Falling in the region of 5% per week. His current average mark is down 43% on last year’s. That leaves him incredibly, now ranked second bottom.’

Mr. Smith paused, allowing the statistics to sink in.

‘What has been your response to this decline?’ he demanded.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know about it,’ said Mum. ‘I haven’t been regularly checking.’

‘Not checking!’ barked the headmaster. ‘You should have the chart on your wall, where you’ll see his progress every day. You can’t miss a big red line going downwards.’

‘Yes, I’ll set it up right after this meeting.’

‘That’s just a start,’ said Mr. Smith firmly. ‘I decided to personally review his work. He has submitted every assignment, but over time there is less and less effort going into each one. It only takes one blink to submit – and his last entry suggests he barely did more than that. I want an explanation for this behaviour.’

Zak wanted to crawl away. This was news to Mum - her face showed it.

One of the female teachers coughed and leaned forward with a sympathetic smile.

‘Are there... family problems?’ she asked, tentatively.

Mum's grip on the Mind Mat tightened, twisting it. Zak winced. It was sturdy gear, but the instructions warned – *no twisting*.

'No,' said Mum after a deep breath. 'I know what the explanation is. Zak spends all his spare time playing games.'

'I see,' said the headmaster, raising his eyebrows. 'But clearly you have the power to do something about that.'

Mum looked down at the Mind Mat in her hands.

Zak did not like the way this conversation was headed.

'I don't like it,' said Mum, 'but it's all he's interested in. I've tried to persuade him to do other things.'

'We are not opposed to the Mind Mat,' said Mr. Smith. 'There are thousands of educational programs that we recommend pupils to play, from... experiencing life in a bronze-age village, to flying with a swarm of african bees.'

'Sounds great,' said Zak under his breath.

'Just minimise the amount of frivolous usage Mrs. Carter.'

'Yes, I will do that,' said Mum.

'You need to make sure he does a variety of activities, so he doesn't get obsessed with any one of them. I would also recommend shoving him outside regularly so he can get some fresh air.'

This was going too far.

'But I can't play outside can I?' Zak retorted. 'It's too cold. There's been a blizzard for the last month, and the snow's too deep to walk in.'

'You're not in a position to answer back,' snapped Mr. Smith. 'As a child you do as you're told. When you reach eighteen you can decide for yourself.'

Zak wanted this conference to end as soon as possible.

'Okay. I will work harder,' he conceded, letting his head drop.

'You had better,' replied the headmaster. 'This school has exceptionally high standards. We will review your performance again at the end of the calendar year. If there is not a significant improvement, you will be excluded from the school. I'm sure I don't need to spell out the consequences of that.'

Excluded! That was extreme, especially since the school was suffering falling numbers. Mum and Dad looked equally horrified.

‘We had problems with Skye,’ mumbled another female teacher, on his left. ‘We should have confronted the parents then.’

Mr. Smith motioned to the teacher to stop talking, but had turned to the opposite side by mistake. On realising, he flapped his hands.

‘Okay that’s it,’ he said, irritably. ‘Some of us are at work today. We’ll announce our decision at the end of term, but your chart will tell the story.’

The walls returned to wallpaper, and the room brightened.

‘What a nightmare,’ said Zak. ‘He creeped me out last time, and that was with good news. Do we have to *entertain* them in our own home?’

‘How dare you!’ shouted Mum. ‘We had to fight to get you into that school. And now you put us through this. Why did we bother?’

Zak recoiled. His eyes fixed on the Mind Mat. Tom and Van would have carried on without him. They could have activated the cheat by now. The situation required some serious tact.

‘I did do well at school,’ he said. ‘But now I’m working hard at the game, and I’m doing well at that.’

‘It’s always good to do your best Zak,’ said Dad. ‘But the game is not as important as your education.’

‘But what’s an education for – to get a job,’ said Zak. ‘If I get really good at the game, I can become a professional. I’d make a lot of money.’

Mum reacted as if hit by a bad smell.

‘You can’t give up your education because of some far-fetched idea of becoming a game star. It’s not a proper career path.’ She held up the Mind Mat. ‘I have to take drastic action. I’m going to confiscate this until I see your results improve.’

Zak simply froze.

‘Zak, you’re too young to commit yourself to such a gamble,’ said Dad. ‘Times are changing. We don’t know what the future will hold. You need a good education, so you can adapt.’

Zak did not know what Dad was talking about. Dad had never discussed the future with him, and so he had plotted his own course. All that mattered now was getting back to the game.

Zak put up his hands.

‘You’re right,’ he acknowledged. ‘School is very important and I’ve let it slip. I’ll forget about the game for a while, and try and get back to being top of the class.’

‘Good,’ said Mum tentatively.

‘Actually, my next assignment has to be done this weekend. The deadline is first thing Tuesday. I’ll start it right now and get it finished today.’

Zak smiled enthusiastically. Mum and Dad returned cautious smiles.

‘Yeah, I need the mat,’ said Zak, pointing to it.

‘Can’t you use the Mind Patch?’ asked Mum, suspiciously.

‘Er..., that’ll be difficult,’ said Zak. ‘It’s a Business Studies roleplay. We have to do a sales pitch for solar panel paving, so I’ve got to act the part. *Body language* is 30%.’

Zak gazed at Mum expectantly.

She screwed up her face. Then slowly handed the mat over to Zak.

‘Thanks,’ he said, cradling the mat as if it were some precious material, and straightening it out.

He calmly turned and strolled out of the lounge without looking back. Once he reached his room and closed the door, he let out a deep breath and checked his watch, which was rendered on his video wristband.

‘Not too much time lost,’ he whispered to himself.

He unfolded the Mind Mat over the top of the gaming chair, and leapt on.

Before tilting the chair back, Zak considered the mess he had created for himself. How was he going to find time to complete schoolwork as well as dedicate himself to the game?

He would have to deal with that problem later.

On closing his eyes, he appeared back in position near the castle. As he expected, the game had moved on. Tom had extricated himself from the tangle in which Zak had left him. A few dead guards lay face down in the moat, but the scene was otherwise deserted. It was all strangely quiet.

‘Anyone home?’ asked Zak.

‘Decided to join us again have you,’ said Tom. Zak could hear him over the communication channel.

‘What’s going on?’

‘We’ve done all the hard work and broken through the main defences.’

Tom broke off to fire a few shots.

‘I’m trying to get into the Communications room,’ he said, ‘but there’s a couple of Spongeys holding out. I’m also defending the corridor, as they keep sending back-up. So I could do with you here sharpish.’

‘Coming,’ said Zak. ‘What about you Van?’

‘I’m halfway up this tower,’ said Van. ‘The cheat’ll probably make my job harder, but it’s what I’m here for.’

With the battle raging inside the castle buildings, there was no one outside to challenge Zak. The grounds were icy, so rather than run, he used the ski-jets. He powered his way up to and over the drawbridge, through the East gate, and across a courtyard littered with dead Spongeymen. Tom had been hard at work.

He reached the entrance and closed his skis, returning them to boot form. Cradling his rifle, he pushed through the door.

The inside was surprisingly bare. A great entrance hall with a dirty chandelier and empty picture frames suggested that the castle had once been used by aristocrats. Now used by the military, the most striking feature was a pile of broken crates dumped by the stairs.

Squeaks and splats echoed around one of the tall dark corridors leading out of the hall.

Zak shook his head.

‘Not long now,’ he said, setting off and following the sound.

Blue flashes ahead told him the action was just around the next corner.

He snatched a view. A single Spongeyman had his back to him, taking cover behind cabinets lined up along the wall. At the far end, from below a red star, Tom redecorated the metal furniture with his rifle.

Zak was never so wasteful. With a single shot, he blasted the orange-coloured guard, who crumpled to the ground in a sticky mess of blue gunge. He ran to join Tom, taking a disdainful glance at the mask solidifying over the Spongeyman's face.

Without hesitation, the two boys burst through the door of the Communications room and dealt with the resistance inside swiftly and accurately, causing no damage to any equipment within.

'You see,' said Tom with a smile, stepping over the bodies, 'it takes more than twice as long with one person instead of two. Now where do we enter this code? We'd better get a move on, as back-up will be here any second.'

The walls of the room were tiled with video sheet, displaying an array of footage, charts and text. Several keyboards were scattered around on desks up against each wall. Tom looked around the room, scanning the items on display.

'We're looking for a Visitors Book,' he said. He pointed to an image of an open book. 'Found it! Now which of these keyboards?' He hit keys on each keyboard on the desk in front of him. On the fifth one a stream of characters appeared in the Visitors Book entry form. 'This one!' He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket, and held it up to read.

'Hey Tom,' said Zak urgently. 'Can I do it?'

'Sure,' said Tom, and handed him the piece of paper. Tom then moved to check the door. 'But before you do that, I need to remind you both of something. Are you listening Van?'

'Should be okay for a minute,' said Van.

'Okay,' said Tom. 'This cheat puts the game on the True-To-Life setting. You know what that means – you cannot choose to quit the game. You can only get out by completing the mission or getting killed.'

Zak remembered how difficult it was as a beginner to stop himself opening his real eyes. He couldn't imagine not being able to quit.

‘I know you’re both keen to experience death, and you probably will,’ continued Tom. ‘You won’t be disappointed with that experience. But a nasty fate is to get terribly injured. If that happens, you just have to endure the pain. Believe me, ten minutes can seem like hours. But try not to freak out, okay.’

Zak knew this, but hearing it right now turned his excitement into anxiety.

‘Thanks for that Tom,’ he said ungratefully.

‘What if your Mum drags you off the Mind Mat?’ said Van, chuckling.

‘Yeah,’ laughed Tom. ‘The game can’t stop Zak’s Mum. That is another way out.’

Zak blushed with embarrassment. But he held back a retort as he had a question. He had wondered whether it was possible to deactivate the cheat. If so, returning to the junior version would provide yet another way to quit the game. He hesitated about asking, in case Tom took it to mean he was worried. He would never do it anyway.

‘Quick! They’re coming,’ said Tom. ‘Type in the code then find cover immediately.’

Video on the wall showed CCTV of the castle corridors. Purple and orange suited guards hurried along.

He approached the desk and held up the piece of paper in his hand. It contained a sequence of twelve letters and numbers. Sweeping his right hand across the keyboard, he typed the code.

The Visitor’s Book faded to black. Zak looked at Tom, who showed no sign of concern. There was a beep, and a message appeared – “Cheat activated”. As this happened, the lights dimmed for a second, and the entire wall of video sheet flickered. The music stopped and the room fell silent but for the distant sound of boots clacking.

Zak saw the red star above Tom's head disappear, along with the information that hovered in his own peripheral vision. The stuffed heads of the Spongemen deflated and turned into human heads, while their uniforms drained of colour. Zak glanced up at the CCTV. In place of coloured toys were dark figures in long coats. Soldiers coming to kill. The light changed, sucking out every splash of bright colour, and recasting sinister shadows.

He looked down, and in his hands the gleaming plastic rifle morphed into a metallic machine gun, even taking on a worn and battered look. The moment he had wished for had arrived.

'Aaahhh!' he yelled.

An icy blast had rushed through the back of his suit. The chill pulsed through him as if he'd been punched by it. He saw that his suit was in tatters around his lower back, where the wolf had clawed at him. It was soaked in blood.

He choked and coughed hard, blood spluttering from his mouth. He put a hand to his throat and realised that the wolf had also sunk its teeth in. His throat felt like it was burning, yet as he breathed in, the air was ice cold. Unfortunately, neither sensation quelled the other.

With no health bar in his field of vision, Zak realised that the pain told him his condition.

'You're in a bad way,' said Tom. 'Do you want to pull yourself together, or are you going to die before we even start.'

'Yeah,' choked Zak, trying to recover from the shock. He fumbled with the now blood stained piece of paper and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he made for a metal desk at the back of the room to take cover. Despite the severity of the injuries he was suffering he still became aware that his left foot was completely numb, and his right elbow felt like it had splintered.

Tom tucked in behind a metal cabinet, and smiled broadly at Zak.

'Cool isn't it,' he said.

'Cool! It's freezing. And I'm used to cold!'

'Okay Zak. Prepare for Armageddon.'

Zak was grateful for Tom's casual attitude. It calmed him a little, for he was feeling a sensation he had never experienced in a game before - fear. He crouched behind the desk, waiting for the soldiers to burst through the doorway.

Zak checked the CCTV, and saw a stream of soldiers shuffling along the corridor outside. He expected them to appear at that moment, but a few seconds passed. Confused, he poked his head above the desk to check the situation.

Immediately, there was a hail of bullets, but he withdrew before any hit home. The barrage continued above him. He wondered if he was protected enough by the furniture, as the top of the metal desk was buckling as each bullet ripped into it. The wall behind him was taking hits, showering him with debris. There was such a noise, with the sound of the guns firing and the impact of the bullets, that he found he was squeezing his eyes tight shut in an effort to block it out.

'Hey Zak!' shouted Tom. He was on the other side of the room, but Zak couldn't hear his voice through the air, only through the communication channel. 'What are you doing! These soldiers are a lot smarter than the Spongemen. Stick anything out, and it'll get taken off.' Zak could see Tom mouthing the words to accompany what he could hear. 'When they stop firing, let's give them a burst of our own.'

Zak was relieved that his mistake hadn't cost him. He felt the weight of the machine gun. Steel, not plastic. He had wanted to fire one for a long time. The time finally came, as the soldiers stopped firing and withdrew to the door.

Zak and Tom jumped out simultaneously from their cover and let fly with the machine guns, causing the soldiers to scramble for cover. Zak was flung back against the wall by the force of the recoil, but managed to keep the gun steady enough to keep it aimed at the soldiers confronting him. They jolted with the impact of each bullet, and fell to the floor as if finishing a crazy dance.

More soldiers arrived in the doorway. Zak picked them off before they could take a position. He held the machine gun up to use the sight. He could see the flash of each bullet leaving the barrel, and the spent cartridges flying out to the side. Rather than fire continuously, he darted around behind the desk and fired in short bursts when he saw any body part on show.

He was in both a thrill and a panic at this. Himself and Tom holed up in an enemy compound, fighting a raging battle. It was the stuff of dreams. But unlike his previous experiences, this was distressing. As he gripped the gun tightly, he found his right elbow was the dominant pain, but he was shivering violently with the cold, barely able to feel the gun in his hands. He was still choking and hobbling, and the noise was drowning out his attempt at concentration. Despite these afflictions, he judged himself to be making a good fist of the battle so far.

The soldiers kept coming. Zak wondered if the entire army was going to get mown down in this doorway. The latest soldiers to arrive on the scene were crouching behind the pile of dead bodies for cover. Zak noticed that a significant amount of blood had been spilled, and the dark red glistened. How much longer could this go on?

No longer, as the enemy changed its approach. An object was thrown into the room towards Tom. It was only the size of a pebble. It bounced off the top of the cabinet, hit the wall behind him and fell into his lap. He didn't see it until too late. It exploded with a flash of strobe light, and a low throb. Zak had shut his eyes in time, and opened them to see Tom sway around then lurch into the centre of the room.

'Tom!' shouted Zak. But Tom was completely disorientated. A soldier opened fire on him from outside the doorway. He was thrown back against the wall, and hit it with a thump, making a tremendous groan on impact. Zak winced. But Tom didn't fall over. Instead, he fumbled for his gun, and let fly with a spray of bullets. As he did so, the response was more fire from outside.

Zak watched as Tom was thrown back against the wall again by the force of the barrage. His head was targeted. As the bullets ripped through his helmet, red and grey streaks coated the video sheet behind him.

Zak was transfixed. He had never seen that before. On TV, the bullets only punched little red holes in their victims. Here, his friend had been torn apart.

More soldiers burst through the doorway. Zak could not think. Instead of keeping cover, he leapt up in front of them, hugging his gun. He squeezed the trigger, and steered the gun from side to side. Bullets sprayed on the soldiers in front of him. They were all thrown back before they could react. Arms and legs flailed everywhere. As Zak waved the gun indiscriminately, the glass in the windows and doors shattered, desks and cabinets jolted and warped. The blood of the soldiers splattered all over what was left of the wall behind them.

He continued to fire, then realised there were no soldiers left standing. There was a movement from a prone soldier, and Zak steered his gun towards the floor. Just as he saw the soldier convulse from the impact, he felt a pop in his right side, followed by a burning pain. He noticed a gun slide out of the soldier's hands. There was a moment of lost consciousness, and he found himself lying on his back, behind the desk he was using for cover.

There was quiet again. The wave of enemy soldiers had ended.

Zak was breathing heavily, almost hyper-ventilating. His hands were shaking, and he realised that for the first time ever, he had lost control. He pushed himself to sit up, but pain exploded in his right side. He saw a dark red patch spreading across his grubby white suit, and let himself slump back onto the floor.

He waited a minute, then tried again. Grabbing the top of the desk he hauled himself upright, his face contorting with the agony.

He saw Tom crumpled in the opposite corner, and staggered across the room to get a closer look. The head was barely recognisable. The helmet and top of his head were missing, while his lower jaw appeared to be hanging off. The eyes were somehow still intact. Zak looked into them, and the look back was blank. Previously, he had only been able to see a mask when a team-mate or soldier was dead. All his life he'd been looking at the equivalent of stuffed toys. Now, he was looking at a mutilated dead body. He suddenly felt very sick.

'It's only a game,' he muttered, angry at himself for being so overwhelmed. He thought he should be enjoying this, but right now it was hell - all his wounds screamed for attention. He tried to get a grip on himself, but the pain battered every positive thought away.

Desperate for some respite, what had seemed unthinkable a few minutes ago, now became a serious temptation.

He plunged a shaking hand into his pocket, and pulled out the piece of paper with the cheat code. The paper was sticky from the blood and the writing was smeared.

He searched for the book. The wall was riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel, but the video sheet was still active, displaying its content as before, except that most of it was unreadable or missing. He found the image of the book. A bullet had lodged right in the middle of the entry form, warping the sheet around it. To his frustration, he couldn't interface with the computer in order to simply move the book.

The keyboards had been scattered, and some were in pieces. Zak hit keys on the usable ones until he found the one that generated characters in the entry form. The letters appeared as a mangled mess. He cleared the form and attempted to deactivate the cheat in the standard way, by entering the code backwards.

An unreadable message appeared, but nothing happened. He checked the piece of paper, but some of the writing was no longer clear. He thought that maybe one of the letters was an R, not a B, but he couldn't remember. He retyped it using R, and this time received a different but still unreadable message. In despair at not being able to read the code, what he was typing, or the message, Zak slammed both fists down on the desk. He let out another cry of pain.

A voice came over the communication channel.

'Hey, how's it going?' said Van, with excitement in his voice.

'It's a disaster,' replied Zak, coughing to clear his throat.

'Oh,' said Van, surprised. 'I'm having a great time. I shot a Spongey off the top of the tower, and the cheat came on as he was falling. By the time he hit the ground he'd turned human.'

'Yeah great,' said Zak flatly. 'But Tom's dead, and I'm injured all over.'

'Tom already! How was his death?'

'His head was shot off.'

'Brilliant!' said Van, laughing. 'Gotta see the vid of that.'

Zak wasn't seeing the funny side.

'I don't think I can carry on,' he moaned. 'I want to turn off the cheat.'

'What!' snapped Van, 'You have to carry on,' he said sternly.

'Are you injured yet?' asked Zak.

'No.'

'Then you don't know what you're talking about.'

Zak heard Van tutting. This annoyed him. He stood head bowed, hands on desk, breathing deeply, hoping for the throbbing pain to subside a little. Just as it did, he coughed, and that ignited all the pain again.

'This is what it's all about Zak,' said Van. 'It's what we've been waiting for. I can't believe you're complaining.'

'I'm not complaining,' said Zak. 'I just didn't realise it would be this gruesome.'

'It's meant to be realistic,' said Van. 'What you see on TV has all the bad bits turned off.'

Zak groaned as his back reminded him that it too was in pain.

‘It can’t be this bad even in real life.’

‘Get a grip for god’s sake,’ said Van. ‘Now I want to see what this General’s doing to our VIP. So if you turn off that cheat I’ll come down and shoot you myself.’

Zak didn’t reply. He remained there, absorbing Van’s rebuke.

There was the rattle of machine guns over the communication channel. Van had returned to business.

Zak stood upright. It was not the respite he had hoped for, but the conversation had enabled him to get his brain in gear.

He realised what he had done.

Why had he tried to quit? When they reviewed the mission later, they would all see it. So much for his ambition. He’d cried off within the first five minutes. How would he live that down.

So, lucky for him he couldn’t turn the cheat off – it meant he had a second chance. A chance to regain some respect before facing the others again. Either he completed the mission or experienced death.

And he wasn’t the type to commit suicide.

He took a deep breath, which helped to ease the fire raging within him, and lifted up his gun ready for action.

*

Zak stepped out of the Communications room into the corridor outside. The battle had created quite a mess. The bullets had torn into the windows and walls, leaving the floor covered in broken glass and masonry, with dust drifting in the air. He tried to move quietly, stepping over the fallen soldiers, but debris on the floor crunched beneath his feet.

He stumbled as he stepped on a chunk of masonry. The bullet wound in his side reacted worst, and a blob of blood oozed out of the hole in his suit. He wiped it with his gloved right hand, and held up his palm to take a closer look at the blood. He’d never had much more than a dribble from a cut in real life, so he was fascinated to see a handful. But his glove had been showered with dust and grit, congealing the blood into a kind of paste. He wiped it off on the front of his suit.

His objective was to make his way to the South Tower, and draw soldiers out from its defence. This would make Van's job so much easier, and give them a chance of completing the mission. He was unable to move at much more than a stagger, but he pushed on, hoping he would get there in time to make a difference.

It wasn't long before he encountered more soldiers. Advancing slowly through the corridors, he found the defenders spread out and stubborn in holding position. But with growing composure, he battled through the pain and dealt with them ever more swiftly.

Now Zak started to enjoy himself a little. The atmosphere was fantastic - a grim setting, deafening noise, blood and destruction - this was real war! Not that he knew what real war was like.

The thrill was numbing the pain. But he wasn't so keen on the stench. It smelt like a sewer.

After getting so into it, he was somewhat disappointed when Van called in with news of his progress.

'Hey Zak, I've made it to the top. Thanks for taking some of the heat off. I'm going to burst in, do the business, and hopefully I'll be joining you with one VIP.'

Zak listened in as Van launched his assault. There was a single burst of machine gun fire, followed by an exchange of fire which lasted a few seconds. Then, a gargling scream, unmistakably Van's.

'Van?' shouted Zak.

There was no reply.

Zak puffed his cheeks. It was all down to him. If he could pull this off...

He continued on inside the castle towards the South Tower, but it took him some ten minutes and several confrontations to reach the base of it. The entrance to the tower led to a wide stone staircase that spiralled upwards.

He looked forlornly at the steep steps. He had used all his energy just to get to this point. But it was the only way to go.

Cautiously, machine gun held at eye level, he made his way up. After a minute of dizzy climbing he encountered a body spread-eagled over several steps. It was Van, on his back and upside down. His body was riddled with bullet wounds and blood trickled out of his mouth up into his hair. His eyes were open, staring blankly. Zak was wary of a trap. He kept his gun ready, and made to step past.

‘Zaaa...’ groaned Van. Zak was so startled he nearly fell backwards down the stairs.

‘Woah. You’re still alive,’ said Zak.

‘Oh god Zak,’ said Van, barely audible. ‘I’m in terrible pain.’

‘Don’t complain Van,’ said Zak. He grinned, but it made his throat flare up.

Van tried to move, but his body just twitched, and he groaned again.

‘Zak. Shoot me dead,’ he said.

‘What! Get over it, we’ll be finished in a few minutes.’

‘No please. I’m in agony,’ said Van, shuddering as he spoke.

‘So am I,’ said Zak. He stepped past Van, and started climbing the stairs again.

Van summoned up the strength to protest.

‘Don’t leave me here, Zak. What if you end up like this? We’ll be stuck here.’ Van took another deep breath. ‘Kill me now, and if I see you in trouble, I’ll end the mission.’

Zak turned back to face Van. ‘How?’ he asked.

Van’s mouth contorted, but Zak couldn’t tell if it was a smile.

‘I’ll call your mum.’

Zak squirmed. But Van’s condition convinced him that it was worth keeping the option open.

He aimed the gun at Van. But as he was about to pull the trigger he felt his skin crawl. He couldn’t do it. He let the aim drift.

‘Trust me Zak,’ implored Van.

Zak took a deep breath and aimed the gun again. The words of Van’s last jibe ran through his mind, and this gave him the spark to pull the trigger.

As Van’s body went limp, Zak suddenly felt very sick again. He stared at Van, almost in a daze.

‘Drop the gun,’ said a voice from behind. ‘Hands up.’

Zak snapped back into full alertness and lowered the gun.

‘Drop it!’ came the shout from behind.

Zak knew that even he wasn’t quick enough to turn and shoot before getting shot himself. He decided to do as instructed. He loosened the grip on the machine gun, and let it fall, clattering down the steps. Slowly, he lifted his hands.

‘Turn around!’ said the voice.

Zak slowly turned around. He faced a guard, training a machine gun on his head. Zak was alarmed at the casual demeanour of the guard, who wore no helmet and had a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

‘Killing your own side eh? Interesting tactic,’ said the guard, who then spoke via his own communication channel. ‘I’ve got him General.’

‘Bring him in,’ came the reply.

The guard motioned Zak up the steps, then harassed him to move quickly. It took a minute for Zak to reach the top, by which time he was utterly exhausted from his pains. The guard ushered him through a door.

The room inside appeared to be the one room in the castle whose elegance was retained. Desks, chairs and bookcases all gleamed with polish and fine finishings. This despite being occupied by a group of military personnel. There were various uniforms on show, all belonging to men. Most sat round the desks, and a few stood by open windows.

Zak was startled to see one non-military person. Sitting on the floor in the corner, a man in a business suit, bound and gagged, with an expression of concern in his eyes. Judging by the long legs and huge feet protruding in front of him, Zak assumed he was the VIP.

Zak felt a simultaneous wave of both fear and excitement. Captured alive! He’d never experienced this in a game before. He wondered what they were going to do to him, and whether he would have any chance now of completing the mission.

Only one of the men there could be General Arkanovich. One stout man bearing a patchwork of honours sat at the front of the largest desk, resting one foot on a chair, and even smoking a cigar for good measure. He leant forward to stand up, then ambled over to Zak, stopping so close that he towered over him. Zak gagged at the stink of cigar smoke.

‘So, a rescue squad eh?’ boomed the General. His accent was an equal mix of East European and American. He smirked, and glanced over at the VIP. ‘Come to rescue this big fella? Well we’re not finished with him yet. He’s not volunteered any information, so we’re going to have to squeeze it out of him.’ The VIP squirmed at this remark. ‘And while we’re at it, we may as well squeeze you as well. Aha ha ha!’

He turned and laughed to his men, until they all joined in.

Then he stopped laughing abruptly and sneered at Zak. ‘Your mission has failed!’

Zak was intimidated, but couldn’t help answering back.

‘The mission isn’t over yet,’ he retorted. His slimy throat made his words high pitched.

The General blinked in disbelief, and snorted.

‘What kind of pipsqueak soldier are you?’ he said with contempt.

He leant over, put his hand to Zak’s neck, grabbed the back of his helmet and ripped it off. He was taken aback when he saw Zak’s face.

‘Whaat!’ he said softly. ‘What’s this? A boy!’ His voice rose with anger. ‘Pretending to be a man!’

Zak felt the freezing temperature bite again, and a heaviness in his stomach. He was alarmed by this reaction. How could the characters in the game be aware that he was a child?

The General turned to one of his men, an aide. ‘We must report this to High Command,’ he said angrily.

Zak wondered if that actually meant reporting use of the cheat. This was not good news.

The General looked at Zak with pity. ‘Is the Alliance that desperate that it’s sending children to do its dirty work? Even we let our children grow up! You should be playing games with mud guns and monsters, not fighting wars. That’s a man’s job.’

The aide approached the General and whispered in his ear. The General frowned.

‘You’re in luck!’ said the General. ‘It seems we are not allowed to shoot children in cold blood. But let me tell you what I think boy. You and your comrades have come here, gunned down dozens of my men and wrecked my castle. I don’t think you deserve to be shown any mercy. What do you say?’

Zak still harboured the thought there was a way he could complete the mission, so made an assessment. He counted nine healthy people armed with machine guns, whereas he was battered and completely unarmed. Without the cover of his helmet, the wind blowing through the open windows attacked his senses, and left his exposed ears very sore - yet another affliction. At some point he would surely drop dead from the accumulated damage.

‘You’re the bad guys?’ he ventured.

The General turned and nodded to the guard who had escorted Zak in. He strode up to Zak and walloped the butt of his gun into the bullet wound in Zak’s right side.

Zak screamed. His body convulsed, and he collapsed to the floor. Waves of piercing pain enveloped his body. If that wasn’t unpleasant enough, he was sick, he was dizzy, he was distressed at losing control. Up till now the pain had been just bearable. But this was gut wrenching, and his body seized up as all the muscles pulled tight.

It was too much. He tried to open his eyes and return to the comfort of home, but the only eyes that opened were his in-game eyes. Of course, he could not quit. Neither could he think straight, his mind was spinning. Thoughts raced and churned over. It was desperate. He needed help.

‘Van!’ he screamed. ‘I quit I quit I quit!’

The General shook his head disapprovingly.

‘Van!’ screamed Zak again. ‘Help me. Tom. Get me out!’

‘Hello, what’s this?’ said the General. ‘A packed lunch?’ He squatted next to Zak, and pulled the rucksack off his back. Zak hardly noticed.

‘Ah, ski-jet boots,’ said the General. ‘For our friend here. I hope these boots are big enough, have you seen the size of his feet? It doesn’t matter, I can tell you that he won’t be going anywhere on them. But the jets could prove useful, in case we need to burn his skin. Aha ha ha.’

There was laughter all round. Zak continued to writhe on the floor.

The General stood up, and threw the rucksack to his aide. His laugh turned to a grimace.

‘I’ve never seen such an ill-prepared bunch of commandos,’ he said. ‘Did you think you could just march in, all guns blazing? Didn’t you have any kind of plan? Any kind of strategy?’

Zak was no longer able to listen. He tried to think of what he could say that would release him from his torment.

‘Help me,’ he groaned. ‘End it please.’

‘I’m very disappointed in you boy,’ said the General. ‘You bring shame on yourself. You see in war, you cannot quit. In war, it is a fight to the death. You either win, or die.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘But seeing as you are so desperate to meet your end, I will show you mercy.’ He motioned to the guard. ‘Show the boy the elevator.’

The guard put his arms under Zak, and picked him up like a baby. Zak tried to struggle, but couldn’t find the co-ordination to even wiggle his arms and legs about. He tried to think of a way to complete the mission, but was too disorientated to even know where the General was, never mind attack him. But as he was spun round, one image did make it into his head, that of the VIP cowering with utter terror in his eyes. The look so shocked him that it seared itself into his mind, remaining there as he was carried away.

Zak suddenly found himself looking up at the sky, then felt the arms release him. A rush of cold air billowed into his suit, as the top of the tower came into view, then withdrew into the distance, like a rocket taking off. He was falling. In panic he turned over away from the wall to see himself approaching the icy grounds of the castle at high speed. There was no time to think any further. He heard a thump, then all went black. His entire body screamed again.

Surely that was it - the death!

But his body wouldn't shut up. He thought he would be released immediately. Had he entered virtual limbo?

An uncomfortable sensation on the back of his neck made him jolt. It was water, trickling down. He turned his head round and worked it out - he had plunged into a snow drift against the castle wall. He was still alive!

Zak so wished he wasn't.

As he moved, he wondered how it could possibly be. Besides the pain, he sensed his right arm moving in the opposite direction to what he intended. Now he could tick off broken bones!

He tried to heave himself up, as much to try and break his own body as get out. He hooked his left hand into the snow wall above him.

The snow gave way, and he collapsed to the bottom of his hole.

Zak's groans were by now barely audible. Would anyone ever find him here? Maybe if he stayed put, Van and Tom would get bored, and end it.

He curled up.

Two shameful attempts to quit. He might rather stay here, in his misery, than face the others. Did he really want to do this for a living? True-To-Life was nothing like the junior version. Skye was right, he would never play it again.

He had heard the warning, but the message didn't get through. How many others rushed to play True-To-Life, and suffered the same fate. Well, Van for one – he begged to quit also. Maybe this happens to everyone, but they can't all be giving up.

Could he bring himself to have another go? Could he learn to cope? His whole body throbbed, as if to make its feelings known. But the sensation had numbed slightly, losing its edge. Perhaps deep in his subconscious, his mind knew that it was not his real body crumpled in a heap, despite the Mind Mat feeding it all the correct signals.

For every person he could outlast, he would rise a place in the world rankings. And once a game was over, there would be no harm done.

This mission had failed miserably. But it was rare that the team completed a mission first-time round. It was a game. You fail, you have another go. Tom's strategy had been all wrong. Next time, Zak would keep the three of them together.

Voices snapped him out of his line of thought. They were foreign, the General's soldiers patrolling nearby. The game had carried on without his active involvement. Maybe there was still a chance he could do something.

Zak wanted to win. He recognised himself again.

A new thought entered his head. He was ambitious. He wanted to be a professional V-Commando. But would achieving that really satisfy him? Maybe he wanted more out of life.

It was time to bring the game to a conclusion. He was coping, but the pain was still deeply unpleasant. Rather than wait there and die alone, he would make one last, if futile attack.

He put all his effort into scrambling out of the hole. His limbs flailed, and not every one was capable of applying force. But as he pushed, the snow gave way, and he tumbled out and onto hard ice. Right at the feet of a soldier.

'Hey!' shouted the soldier with alarm, alerting two comrades also in the area.

Zak sprang to his feet.

The soldier brought his rifle up, but Zak was on him, slamming into his chest and headbutting him in the mouth. It was crude, but it knocked the soldier off balance. Zak felt him slip on the ice.

As they lurched together, Zak got a hand to the barrel, and parried it. The gun went off, sweeping a burst of automatic fire across the direction of an approaching comrade. Down he went.

As they spun round, Zak bore the weight of the soldier. He skidded as he tried to stay upright. The remaining soldier came into view, lining up his sights – Zak let himself fall.

More shots cracked out. Zak heard a cry in his ear.

As the soldier rolled over him, Zak was pulled up onto his feet. He had his left hand on the barrel of the gun, the soldier had let go, and his comrade was reloading. What a chance this was!

Right hand to trigger. But the hand pointed the wrong way – the limb was snapped.

He wedged the butt under his right arm and tried to hook his left forefinger round the trigger.

He felt the tip of his gloved finger touch the side of the trigger, but in pushing to get it through the loop, nudged it sideways. The rifle slithered out of his grasp, falling to the ground.

The last soldier was ready again. Zak looked him in the eyes, and accepted his fate. The soldier fired.

Every bullet exploded into Zak's chest. He was knocked back with such force he hit the ground hard and skidded several metres on the ice.

He tried to move again, but he had no breath, and no sense of body. There was nothing he could do. His conscious self seemed to drop out of his head and roll backwards, before falling into a deep hole.

Before he could make sense of that, his real eyes opened. He was back in his bedroom again. It was warm, and he was suffering no pain.

He leapt out of the chair and checked himself all over, laughing incredulously. There were no marks or soreness. Of course there wouldn't be. It had all been experienced through the mind.

'This is one hell of a game!' he shouted.

His friends were waiting for him. Three windows open on the bedroom wall.

'Nice effort!' said Tom.

Zak opened and closed his fists, to relieve tension in his hands, the only physical aftereffect.

'Thanks for not ending it Van,' he said.

'That's okay,' said Van. 'I enjoyed your pain.'

Zak would choose another day to get back at Van.

'Can't believe I screwed up so early,' said Tom. 'I was supposed to help you through it.'

'No matter,' said Zak. 'I realise I had to go through that. And it's changed things. I've decided that I want to be more than just a professional V-Commando player.'

His friends faces dropped. They looked puzzled.

‘You’re not giving up are you?’ said Tom.

‘No. I’m gonna be World Champion,’ declared Zak.

A few moments passed, while Zak let everyone digest his statement.

‘Oh that,’ said Tom. ‘Yeah it’s funny, lots of people say that after their first go on True-To-Life. It must be the emotion.’

‘Huh?’ said Zak.

‘But that’s the right attitude anyway,’ said Tom. ‘Unlike most people, you *do* have a chance.’

‘Good,’ said Zak with relief. ‘I’m not going to tell my family though. That’s the last thing they want to hear. Trouble is, they’ll keep an eye on me now, so sooner or later there’s gonna be a big fall out. But what can they do? As long as I’m on this planet I can hook in somehow.’

He shook his head.

‘No. They’ll never stop me.’