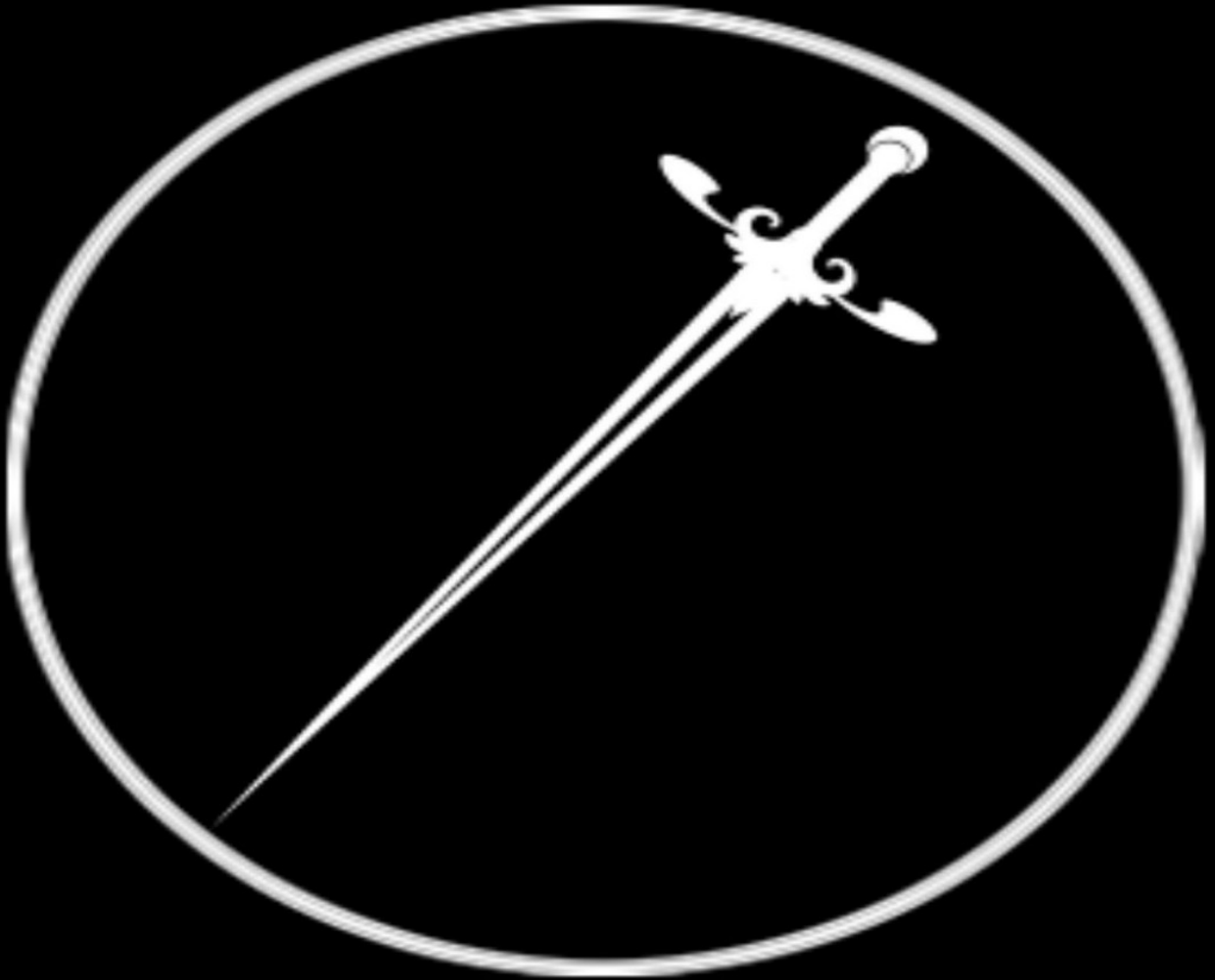


WAR

A FOUR HORSEMEN SHORT STORY



DAVE TURNER

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Dave Turner

Aim For The Head Books

60,000 BC

He was born of chaos and pandemonium. Forged in the crucible of creation, he had existed as a ball of pure energy surfing on the background radiation of the infinite. Time and space were of no concern, as inconsequential as a grain of sand blowing in a soft breeze a thousand miles away. He'd been minding his own business for millennia when, without so much as a by-your-leave, he was plucked from the cosmos and violently forced into the body wrapped around him now, the skin an itchy, ill-fitting suit.

He looked around with new eyes.

Sky. A pure, unblemished blue shell domed over him from one horizon to the other.

Ground. The thick grass cool and fresh against the soles of his bare feet.

Beard. Huge, untamed and auburn, as if someone had set fire to his chin.

He liked the beard.

A winged creature pinwheeled above searching for prey in the undergrowth below. Above and below. These unfamiliar concepts made the newborn's head spin. He brought his attention back to his surroundings. The new sensation of the wind whipped at his naked body. He stood on a hill that rolled gently down to a frost-shattered valley where the others below lined up facing each other.

Others.

Two large groups filled the valley, separated by a stream carving its way down from the mountains in the distance. Slope-browed and stooping, every one of them dressed in furs decorated with animal bones. The two leaders of the opposing armies approached each other, stepping into the fast-flowing cold water, soaking their crudely stitched fur boots. Tension filled the air like a static charge as they circled each other, exciting the spectator for reasons he didn't fully understand.

'You're new here, aren't you?'

From nowhere, a new being had joined him on the hillside. Its black cloak seemed to absorb the light from the sun. The scythe in one hand glimmered with the memory of a thousand dying stars. The sandwich in the other glistened with the memory of at least one dead fatty animal.

'Who are you?' The words felt strange in his mouth after so many centuries of silence.

The cloaked figure nodded at the beings gathered below. 'They call me by many names, but Death seems to have stuck.'

The naked being nodded back (it seemed the right thing to do) then asked, 'And who am I?'

Death shrugged. 'I'm afraid I can't help you with that. And please don't nod so vigorously. It's making things jiggle.'

'And who are they who call you Death?'

Death took a bite of the sandwich. 'You ask a lot of questions.'

'Questions are all I have.'

Death looked him up and down. 'Good point. They're called humans. They're interesting, but flimsy. If they can make it through this cold snap, they could do quite well for themselves, I think.'

'Are there any more like you?'

'Nope. Just me, all on my own, until you showed up.'

'What is this place?'

'I don't know, but it's all right, especially now I've invented these things.' Death waved the sandwich. 'I haven't given it a name yet, but I was thinking of calling it a Meaty Bread Slap. That's one of the fun things to do. Naming stuff. I named some creatures yesterday. The humans call them horses, but I'm calling them long-faced big boys. I reckon they might be quite popular.' Death offered the snack. 'Would you like a bit? It's bread wrapped around some cloud-that-says-baaa.'

He shook his head, instinctively the opposite of the nod and all that implied. He was getting the hang of this new body. 'How long have you been here?'

'However long it's been since the first of them stopped living. It is my duty to ferry them to the beyond when their time in this place has ended.'

'Where do they go?'

'Don't ask me, I just work here. Though I fear I may be busy today. This has been a harsh winter. Before now, the tribes had little interaction but they seem to enjoy breeding and competition for food and resources mean they're encroaching on each other's territory more and more. Nobody is happy about it. The river marks the boundary between the two tribes' land, which is why the two leaders are standing in it. Neutral territory. They're obviously trying to reach some sort of compromise. The fellow with one eye, they call - well - One-Eye. The other one is Kaleb.'

Grunts and snarls of primitive language echoed around the valley below them; a negotiation was in progress. Chests were beaten and claims made. Only the observers on the hillside noticed One-Eye slowly reach into his furs, a hand wrapping around something buried deep within.

'I think it's all about to kick off,' Death muttered. He threw the bread and meat aside, wiping his greasy fingers on his robe. With a speed that belied his

brutish frame, One-Eye pulled a sharpened stone from his furs. He lunged with the rudimentary knife, puncturing the thick hide clothing Kaleb, and found the soft flesh beneath. With a final look of betrayal, Kaleb collapsed into the icy stream, his blood clouding the water as it leaked from the ragged wound. One-Eye turned to his people and let forth a victorious roar, his blood-smeared hands held skyward.

The very first act of War.

The figure on the hill knew now who he was and why he was here. He strode towards the battle as the two opposing armies charged towards each other. They met in the water with the crunch of bone and slash of stone blade, fighting until they painted the valley red in a collage of blood and limbs. Ignored by the fighters, War moved through the valley, growing stronger with every blow dealt around him, until he too was sticky with the blood of the vanquished. A stranger to this world just minutes before, he now felt at home.

Soon, One-Eye had decimated Kaleb's horde, though he had lost many brave fighters himself. He prayed their souls made it to the hunting grounds beyond this life. Though he didn't know precisely who he was, One-Eye felt obliged to kneel before War and thank him for favouring him in battle. War smiled and nodded; he had no interest in who won the fight, just that it had taken place. But it was nice to be nice.

One-Eye would take Kaleb's people and land now. Others would look at his exploits with envious eyes and War thrilled at the idea that they would try to imitate him. Soon these humans would fill the world until there was a final reckoning; a war to end all wars. He would be there. But he would not be alone. There was Death. And wherever War and Death went, Famine and Conquest would soon follow.

61,965 Years Later

'Would monsieur care for another drink?'

The soft tone of the waiter's voice coaxed War's attention from the casino's roulette table. For the first time in what seemed like forever, he registered his surroundings. The soft chink of chips rubbing against each other; some pushed towards winners, most snatched away from a losing hand. His nostrils filled with a dangerous cocktail of fear and alcohol and the harsh glare of the lights stung his eyes. He rubbed them with a thumb and forefinger, an empty gesture against the unstoppable tide of exhaustion.

The Sixties weren't really swinging for War, though they had oscillated slightly for a week in 1962. He caught his reflection in the empty glass in front of him. The bowl warped his features, so he barely recognised himself. He studied the bags beneath his eyes and the the red smear of a beard. Straightening up to his full height, he smoothed back his hair and adjusted the black tie beneath his crisp white shirt's narrow collars. He pulled down on the lapels of his charcoal jacket, smoothing away the bulge produced by the revolver in his shoulder holster.

With just those few tiny calibrations, the centuries fell away from his appearance and went from big loser to high roller. 'A dry vodka Martini. Six parts vodka, one part vermouth, stirred until ice cold, with a slice of lemon peel.'

The waiter gave a slight nod of the head. 'Very good, monsieur.'

'And a little umbrella.'

'Oui.' As the waiter walked away, War grabbed him by the arm.

'And do you have any of those little plastic monkeys that hang off the side of the glass?'

'I shall have to ask, monsieur.'

'Make sure you do. And can I get some snacks, please?'

'Of course, sir. What would you like to order?'

'Two parts mature cheddar to one part pineapple chunk. Served on cocktail sticks and, preferably, in half a grapefruit or pear.'

The waiter nodded. 'Like a little hérisson? How do you say? A hedgehog? An excellent choice, monsieur. I shall ask the kitchen to prepare them at once.'

When the waiter had scuttled off, War surveyed the floor of the casino. It was a cathedral to chance and probability, the faithful with their heads bowed over the green baize covering the heavy, brass-framed tables. With no windows

along the golden walls, it was impossible to tell whether it was day or night and the only divisions of time that mattered were the croupiers' regular calls to prayer. War observed each gambler with a trained eye, evaluating them before moving onto the next until --

There.

His target sat at the kidney-shaped blackjack table. War guessed his greasy, pale face hadn't seen natural light in days and he'd been wearing the crumpled suit for just as long. He shuffled his gambling chips nervously, his eyes darting around the room as if following an irritating insect. War half-heartedly returned to his game, his attention locked on to the action taking place several tables over.

After the target had checked his wristwatch for what seemed the hundredth time, he stood up from the high stool and walked away from the table. War pushed his pile of chips across the green surface of the roulette table and asked the croupier to cash him out, pocketing the casino chips he received in return. He followed the target at a safe distance, glancing at the action on the tables he passed as if he was just another punter deciding where to play with his money.

With a final look over his shoulder, the target walked into the bathroom. War knew that this was the moment. He set himself, running through the mental checklist as he always did before a confrontation, and with a deep breath walked through the same door.

Once in the bathroom, War assessed the situation. Four toilet cubicles lined the wall ahead of him. A brief look through the gap between the doors and the floor confirmed only one was occupied. Urinals were attached to the white porcelain wall to his left, with the sinks opposite. An elderly bathroom attendant guarded an array of colognes and aftershave to the side of the nearest washbasin. War would have to deal with him. He put a finger to his own lips and fished a casino chip from his jacket pocket. He placed it in the attendant's palm and mouthed, 'Five minutes.'

The attendant shrugged and slipped the plastic disc into his waistcoat pocket. You'd be surprised how much international espionage was carried out in public bathrooms in the Sixties. Turning a blind eye had proved quite a lucrative sideline for bathroom attendants. Anyway, he needed a pee and could never bring himself to go in the bathroom he was working in.

When War was sure they were alone, he pulled his automatic revolver from his holster and cleared his throat. 'Professor Schmidt, could you come out, please?'

A defeated sigh from behind the cubicle door. The lock slid open. Professor Schmidt stepped out. 'So they sent an Englishman to do their dirty work, did

they? That's so undignified.' His clipped German tones dripped with disdain.

'Hands up please, Professor,' War instructed. 'Then place them against the wall.' The German did as he was told, leaning over one urinal, his palms pressed against the cold porcelain.

'Who are you meeting?' War asked, holstering his weapon and frisking the professor. He stopped when he reached the jacket's inside pocket and pulled out a plain white envelope.

A voice from behind answered. A Russian accent. 'Are you upset you didn't get an invitation? Well, they say three's a crowd.' War felt the muzzle of a silenced revolver pressed against the back of his head.

Sloppy. He hadn't checked the cubicles properly, too eager to get the job over with. War cursed the attendant for not warning him of the room's extra occupant. He mentally backed-up and re-evaluated the state of affairs. The goal had not changed. It was just the journey to it had become bumpier. He remained calm, not fearing the cold ring of metal spelling out a shocked 'O!' on his scalp.

'Is that you, Orlov you old bastard?' War asked, a smile in his voice.

'Good to see you again, Mr Waugh. How long has it been?'

'Budapest, '63. State banquet. We had lobster, and you assassinated the Deputy Chairman of the Hungarian Communist Party.'

'Ah, yes. I remember now. It was, indeed, excellent lobster. Now, please do me a favour and place your hands on your head and take two steps back from the professor, please?'

Orlov reached around and snatched the envelope away. War slowly raised his arms, lacing his fingers in his hair, and paced backwards, matching Orlov's steps, until they were stood in the middle of the bathroom. Professor Schmidt turned back around to face them.

Still not looking behind, War asked, 'What are you doing here, Orlov? Still working for the KGB?'

'No, I went freelance a year ago. Choose my own hours, my own targets, spend more time with the kids. It's terrible when you miss the first time they ride a bike because you're too busy strangling the Peruvian cultural attaché with piano wire.'

War nodded in agreement. 'You've got to get that work/life balance right.'

'If you're done catching up, can we please finish this and go?' Schmidt asked impatiently.

'What did they offer you to betray the free world, Schmidt?' War asked him.

Schmidt offered a smile War wanted to punch clean off his face. 'Enough to buy and sell men like you on a whim.' Schmidt looked over War's shoulder.

'Now, Mr Orlov.'

War felt the pressure of the barrel lighten on his head as he heard the metallic shuffle of the gun being cocked. His head drooped in defeat. 'I'm so bad at this,' he muttered.

Orlov patted him on the shoulder. 'It happens to the best of us.'

This was the moment. War dropped his right shoulder, unbalancing his would-be executioner. He kicked back wildly, the back of his shoe connecting sharply with Orlov's shin. With a crack, a bullet whistled past his ear and buried itself in the wall opposite. Before Orlov could aim again, War had spun round, grasping the gun. For a second, he registered the familiar blotchy face and the shock in heavy-lidded eyes before bringing his forehead down on the nose just beneath. There was the satisfying sound of bone crunching and the gun flew from Orlov's hand, skittering across the tiled floor. As the Russian staggered backwards, War grabbed a handful of his sweat-matted hair and cracked the back of his head against the side of a washbasin. Orlov fell to the floor unconscious. War picked up the dropped envelope and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Schmidt was already sprinting across the bathroom towards the gun that rested in a corner. As he got a hand to it, War tackled him to the ground. They fought scrappily, rolling around on the floor, wrestling for control of the weapon. With a swift punch to the chin, War gained the upper hand, pinning Schmidt beneath him. Filled with rage, he placed the barrel of the gun against Schmidt's forehead. Schmidt closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

What are you doing?

A simple question that popped into War's head unbidden. The anger washed away as he remembered he was a professional with a job to carry out. He'd take Professor Schmidt in for interrogation and --

Schmidt's knee swiftly buried itself in War's groin. Instinctively, he curled up into a foetal position. The professor pushed War's weight off and scurried out of the room. War slowly staggered to his feet, his head spinning, nausea flipping his stomach over and over. Even though his body told him to have a little lie down and maybe a quick nap, War loped out of the bathroom.

Back on the casino floor, War looked carefully between each table but Schmidt had disappeared. Swearing under his breath, he quickened his step and headed towards the entrance where a handful of men and women sheltered from the cool Parisian night as they waited for their cars. War barged through, bowling them over like skittles, and practically leapt down the stone steps onto the street below. He paced along the boulevard, scanning the shadows, until he heard the splutter of an exhaust and a Citroën sprang from an alleyway and onto the wide road, scattering the oncoming traffic as cars swerved to avoid a

collision. War could see the thin figure of Schmidt in the backseat, flanked by two thickset fellow passengers, as the black car skidded around the corner.

He remembered Orlov passed out in the bathroom and, hoping he could salvage something from the evening, headed back into the casino.

'Can I help you, monsieur?' the doorman asked, but War waved him aside and returned to the bathroom.

Orlov was gone.

Whatever cleanup squad had been in there had been efficient and professional. They'd scrubbed all the blood splattered in the sink, and even extracted the bullet from the wall, a small hole in the tile the only evidence of something untoward taking place. With a shrug, War turned and left the bathroom. His drink and snacks were waiting for him at the roulette table. He threw the martini down his throat with one big slug and ate chunks of cheese and pineapple, a small consolation.

'Monsieur has a little something on his face,' the croupier told him, helpfully. War picked up a serviette and wiped Orlov's blood from his forehead.

'Merci.'

He took the envelope from his pocket and tore it open. It contained a single piece of paper. War unfolded it and read the single line of text.

"Montgomery-Burgess, Elizabeth. New York."

War groaned. Looks like he'd be saving the world again.

After he'd burned the envelope and its contents, War took a cab from the casino to MI6's Parisian base of operations, located around the corner from the British Embassy on the Place de la Concorde. Masquerading as the office of an international shipping company, it sat amongst a row of what seemed to be international shipping company offices, only one of which was any use if you wanted to ship something internationally.

Nodding to a Dutch field agent wandering up and down the street trying to remember which building belonged to the Buitenlandse Inlichtingendienst, he punched in the security code on a keypad fixed to the wall next to the heavy wooden door leading to Transoceanic Tanker Services. The door unlocked with a buzz and, looking over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't been followed, War let himself into the building. He signed in with the security guard sat at a desk in reception and climbed the stairs covered in threadbare carpet. War knew for a fact that the CIA offices down the road had a lift that took you down into a

fortified underground headquarters and he didn't think it would do the British secret service any harm to splash a little cash every now and then. On the next floor, he headed straight for the office at the end of the corridor and knocked on the door.

'Come in!' a voice barked from the other side. War did as the voice told him. The Station Chief sat behind a heavy desk opposite the doorway. He hid in the shadows, the only light a desk lamp pointed towards an empty chair. War couldn't help but think the room looked like they had arranged it for an interrogation.

'Sit down, please, Waugh.'

'Thank you, sir,' War replied, the wooden chair's thin frame creaking beneath him.

'You're a whisky man, right?'

'Yes, I am.' The Station Chief pulled a bottle from the bottom drawer of the desk and poured large measures into two heavy crystal glasses. War leaned forward to take one, but the Station Chief slid it away from his reach.

'What have you got for me?'

War sat back, squinting in the harsh light pointed at him like an accusation. 'Well, I discovered Orlov was responsible for the Peruvian cultural attaché.'

'Very good. I'll let the boys upstairs know.' The Station Chief leant forward, elbows on the table and his fingers steepled. The lighting reduced him to a mere silhouette. 'But I can't help but notice you're on your own. You owe me one professor.'

War squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. 'Funny story, sir.'

'Where's Schmidt?'

'It was a trap. Orlov was there.'

The Station Chief sat back, disappearing into the darkness again. 'Orlov's a hack. You should be able to handle the likes of him. You came away empty-handed?'

'They escaped before I could get anything useful out of them.'

'How could this happen, Waugh?'

'I hesitated. I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry? How long have you been with the agency?'

'Longer than I care to remember.'

'Then you should know that hesitation costs lives.'

'I understand, it's just--'

'What is it?'

War shifted his weight from one buttock to the other as he weighed up how to articulate what he was feeling. 'I'm thinking the lines are getting blurred. If

we're the heroes, why does it seem we're acting like villains?'

The Station Chief stood up and walked around the desk. For the first time, War could see his face, creased like a relief map guiding you to places you didn't want to go. He placed a hand on War's shoulder; a concerned boss. 'You're not the first person to think like that, but you're forgetting one thing.'

'What's that?'

'You are a tool, Waugh.'

'That's a bit harsh.'

'No, I mean a tool like a hammer, or screwdriver, to use as we see fit. Does a hammer care if it's being used to build an orphanage or construct a neutron bomb? No. It simply *is*. Moral philosophising isn't in your job description. If we ask you to do something, it's for the greater good and you must trust in that. You see?'

War wasn't sure he did. 'Yes, I understand,' he lied.

The Station Chief slapped his hands on his thighs. 'Can I be frank, Waugh?'

'Yes.'

'I've seen this before. I don't want you heading for a burn-out. That's the quickest way to getting a bullet in the back of your head. So here's my advice; you've got plenty of annual leave. Take it. Book a flight home, go to the beach, relax, drink margaritas, and come back when you're feeling refreshed. How does that sound?'

'I'd appreciate that.' War got to his feet. 'If it's all right with you, I'd like to get a head start.'

The Station Chief nodded and extended his hand. 'Of course, Waugh. Good luck.'

War accepted the handshake, looking the Station Chief directly in the eye. 'Thank you, sir.'

When War had left the room, the Station Chief returned to his chair on the other side of the desk. He quickly dialled a number on the phone in front of him, impatiently drumming his fingers on the desktop while it rang.

'Orlov!' he said when the line was answered. 'It's Jeremy in the Paris office ... I'm good, thanks. How are the wife and kids?' The Station Chief picked up a pencil and doodled on a piece of paper while Orlov talked. 'That's great to hear,' he replied when Orlov had finally finished. 'I was just calling to ask you how your diary was looking... Yeah, I understand you've got Vladimir's swimming gala next week... Well, if you have time can you do me a favour? Can you kill John Waugh?'

War cursed under his breath as he hurried back to his hotel, fighting the urge to break into a sprint. He'd been living on borrowed time since what was politely known in members' clubs around the world as the Vienna Incident and now, after tonight, he only had a short amount of time to get out of the country. Why did he say those things to the Station Chief? Even though he'd meant every word, it had been a stupid, childish moment of weakness.

It had been difficult for the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse after the Second World War. They'd watched humanity nearly tear itself apart and now stood on the sidelines as it tried to piece itself together again. Death had enough, told the others the meat puppets had gone too far and they should stay out of things now. Let them fight their own battles. He went solo. But this was the only life War knew. So he'd stayed in the thick of things; travelling the world, meeting interesting people and killing them in interesting ways.

This was a new conflict, though. One he didn't particularly like. You knew where you stood with an enemy holding a spear in front of you. Now, it was all back channels and misinformation, misdirection, brinkmanship. And the advances in new ways to wipe themselves out? If they started World War III, it could all be over in less than half an hour. That was barely time for him to get his sword arm warmed up in the old days.

Now a name from the past had resurfaced. A name he'd spent a long time trying to forget for her safety as well as his sanity. After centuries of protecting mankind from itself, here he was on a midnight Parisian street, not knowing who the enemy was anymore. It could all change so quickly. All because he'd voiced a concern with the mission. There was no room for doubt with these people, only blind loyalty and an unwavering faith in the system. When War was younger, it was very easy to distinguish between right and wrong and where you were in relation to it. The world then was black and white, but now everything was shades of grey.

He tensed when he rounded a corner and saw two well-dressed men loitering on the other side of the street. He realised they wouldn't be there for him. There'd be a window of time before anyone came after him. Partly as a professional courtesy and partly because a freelancer would be used and they'd want double-time to come out at this time of night.

When War arrived back at his hotel, he kept his head low. The foyer's lights were dim, and he remained in the shadows. Who could tell whose pockets the reception staff were in? Ignoring the lift operator, he took the stairs, treading quietly on the balls of his feet. He didn't expect anyone to be waiting for him, but if they were, he didn't want the lift's bell announcing his arrival and handing the advantage to them.

Reaching the second floor, War turned off the stairs into the corridor and walked softly to the door of his room. He tried the knob; locked. With a quick glance down the corridor in both directions, War slid a lock pick from his inside jacket pocket and worked the door with the thin wire. He understood the ridiculousness of trying to break into his own hotel room. Not asking the concierge for the key had been a deliberate ploy. Nobody could tell when he had returned to his room, or if he had at all. While he teased the lock's tumblers into place, he mentally worked through the next steps in his plan. His packed kitbag was sat ready at the bottom of the wardrobe. A passport and travel documents in the name of Raymond Waters (after several thousand years, he was running out of puns on his name) were sealed in plastic and hidden in the toilet cistern. He would be in and out in thirty seconds flat, he thought to himself as the lock gave way with a satisfying click. In one fluid motion, War opened the door, switched on the light and had his gun in his hand. The room was empty. He quickly grabbed the kitbag and passport. If he hurried, he'd make the first flight to New York from Paris-Orly airport. He didn't know how many people were aware of the contents of Schmidt's note, or how they found Elizabeth's location, but he hoped he would be able to beat them there. He was back down in the hotel's foyer in fewer than two minutes and slipped out into the night.

If humans had meant to fly, they would've been born with rockets up their arses, War thought as the plane touched down at Idlewild Airport. He still regarded how these heavy hunks of metal hung in the air as some kind of witchcraft, even after Conquest had drawn several explanatory diagrams. Just sixty years ago, humanity had started out with wooden aircraft tied together with string. Now guys in Florida were strapping themselves to steel tubes filled with explosives and firing them willy-nilly into space. War was all for progress, but he sometimes wondered if they were getting ahead of themselves.

Releasing his grip on the seat's armrests, he dismantled the small fort he'd built out of pillows and blankets over the last few hours. The plane came to rest outside the terminal and, sighing with relief, War unbuckled the seat belt with fumbling fingers. He straightened his tie and smoothed his beard. By the time he'd reached the plane's exit he'd regained his composure. He doffed his trilby to the stewardess who suggested that he have a nice day and descended the metal stairs. He marched across the hot tarmac with the other passengers towards the new terminal building. With its curved lines and modern materials, it looked as if the architect had hoped the rocket ships of the future would soon stop here before flying to the moon and beyond.

Once he'd negotiated passport control ('Welcome to the United States of America, Mr Waters.'), War found a row of telephone booths. He thumbed through the directory attached to the wall by a thin cable and, when he'd reached the correct page, ran a finger down the smudged list of names until he found what he was after. War sighed. She was in the damn phonebook. He tore the page from the directory, folded it and stuffed it in his jacket pocket.

When he walked back to the main concourse, a silver-haired driver stood at the arrivals gate holding a sign with 'MR WATERS' written on it in marker pen.

'That's me,' War said, pointing to his name. The driver tipped his peaked cap.

'Good afternoon, sir. My name's Argyll.' A thick New York accent. He'd already grabbed War's suitcase when he asked, 'Take that for you?'

Argyll led the way, gliding between the bodies that crowded around the arrivals hall. 'You a Brit? What brings you to the States? Business or pleasure?'

'I'm visiting an old friend.'

'This your first time?'

'Oh, I've often been here,' War replied. He'd hung out with Sir Walter Raleigh in Virginia. Witnessed the Salem Witch Trials. Fought in the Revolution and the Civil War (won one, lost one). And he was sure he'd won Rhode Island in a card game at some point.

In the car park, Argyll placed the luggage in the boot of a long black town car as War slid into the backseat. Argyll climbed behind the steering wheel.

'Where are we going to?' War pulled the torn page from his suit pocket and stabbed at an address with a thick finger. 'This is in the 'burbs. You sure you wanna go here? I can show you some sights first?'

'I told you. I'm visiting an old friend.'

'You're the boss,' Argyll said, steering the car towards the exit and onwards to the freeway. He looked at War in the rear-view mirror. 'Who's this friend, if you don't mind me asking? Old war buddy?'

War smiled to himself. 'We were in a few scrapes together.'

'I was in the Pacific. Man, the things I saw. But I reckon I don't need to tell you.'

War shook his head. 'You don't.'

'Where were you in Dubya Dubya Two?'

A sigh. 'Everywhere.'

War picked up a copy of the New York Times from a selection of newspapers arranged in a pocket on the back of the driver's seat and thumbed through it until he grew bored.

War watched the city swell and rise in front of him. A new empire on the horizon. Scrubbed, shiny and brimming with optimism. That always made War

uneasy. He was more comfortable with empires on the slide. He usually caused their crumbling, and he regarded it as a job well done. That's why London felt like home. He wondered how optimistic this country would be if it knew the dark arts powering its rise.

The car skirted the edges of the city and soon, buildings shrank down from skyscrapers, to apartment blocks, through brownstones until they plateaued into suburban homes. Grey and silver gave way to greens and browns. Two car driveways, climbing frames and kids on bicycles replaced the gridlock, offices and frazzled advertising executives. Argyll had taken a few wrong turns ('Sorry, Mr Waters. This ain't my usual parish.') but soon they arrived at the address War had given him. It was a two-storey house with a porch, at the end of a tarmac driveway. Well maintained, freshly painted and complete with trimmed lawns.

War hunched over his knees in the backseat. He looked pale and nervous.

'You okay, sir?' Argyll asked.

'I'll be fine. It's just been a while.'

'You didn't shoot the guy in the foot or anything did ya?'

War chuckled and straightened up. 'No, nothing like that. Argyll, will you do me a favour?'

'Yeah?'

'This won't take long. Will you wait for me?'

'Certainly, sir. Take as long as you need. I get paid the same whether I'm movin' or stayin' still. I just need to make a quick phone call.'

'That's not a problem.' War leaned forward. 'Then, when we're both finished, we're getting very drunk.'

Argyll laughed, 'Yep, that I sure can do.' War patted him on the shoulder and stepped out of the car.

Demonic possession had got a bad press as far as Beelzebub was concerned. There was a lot less head-spinning and bodily fluids than film and television would have the public believe. All the possessor had to do was bury themselves into the soul of the possessed when they weren't looking and, boom, you were the owner of a brand new body through which you could do your bidding. No ectoplasm, no priests and no fuss.

Take, for example, the body of Argyll who he inhabited. He'd sidled up, given him a metaphysical tap on the shoulder and slipped his way in. Simple. True, it wasn't the most comfortable mode of transportation; the right knee was painful and Beelzebub was sure human necks shouldn't make that kind of noise when they turned, but it was getting the job done.

If the United States and Soviet Union knew of his ability, he'd be the most sought-after spy in the world. Who wouldn't want the Prince of Darkness battling for them, no matter in who the US said they put their trust? Beelzebub had bigger plans than that, though. He'd been playing the two superpowers off against each other since the Second World War and as their arsenals grew so did the possibility of mutually assured destruction. And who would be there to swoop in and pick up the pieces?

Beelzebub had been following War for a while now, after one of his many worshippers working in the Secret Service tipped him off that he was up to something. He'd been the waiter in the casino, a man loitering with a friend on the Parisian streets, and spent the transatlantic flight inside a rather spacious gentleman who offered plenty of legroom. War's inability to deal with the concept of the internal combustion engine meant the driver literally sign-posted his next move. When War gave him the address he'd been after for the best part of a century it was all Beelzebub could do to not laugh in his face. Elizabeth Burgess. And where Elizabeth was, the bauble trapping an ancient god would be close by.

When War left the car, Beelzebub drove round the block until he found a payphone. He pulled up to the kerb, helped himself to the change in the car's cupholder and shut himself in the booth. He called the operator and waited while they routed his call to an international shipping company based in Washington D.C.

'Dmitri! How the devil are you?' he asked when Dmitri answered the phone. He didn't wait for a reply. 'It's Mr Zebub. I have a proposition for you.'

'What is it?' the Russian voice on the line asked, its tone doubtful.

'A little bird has told me of a weapon of immense energy's location, which I'm more than happy to pass onto you.'

'I'm not interested.'

'This could tip the balance of power in your favour, Dmitri, I assure you. I haven't let you down before, have I?'

'Like the time you assured me nobody would notice those missiles in Cuba?'

'That wasn't my fault.'

A sigh. 'Tell me what you've got.'

'Does the code name "Esuries" mean anything to you?'

A long pause. The phone line crackled. 'You found it? What's your price?' the voice finally asked.

'My usual fee wired to the Swiss account.'

'It's done. Where can I send someone to pick it up?' Beelzebub gave the address. 'What's the situation on the ground?'

'It'll be easy. There's only an old lady and an idiot.'

'Names?'

'An Elizabeth Montgomery-Burgess and a Mr Waters.'

'Okay. I've got someone I can send down there.'

'Excellent. Lovely to talk to you.'

Beelzebub dialled off, picked up the receiver again and dialled another number. 'Dwight! How's the family?'

'What do you want, Zebub?' an American voice replied.

'Nothing, but there's something I can do for you.'

'Usual terms?' Dwight asked wearily.

'Usual terms.'

'What is it?'

'I heard Dmitri might have a breakthrough in the search for Esuries.'

'Really? I thought that was a myth. What's the quality of the source?'

'Impeccable. His New York agents should be scrambling about now.'

'I've got two guys around the block from their office. I'll get them to look.'

'Very good. Will we see you at the company barbecue next weekend?'

'Of course. I'll bring the whisky, you bring the cigars.'

Beelzebub placed the handset back on its cradle. He'd let them fight it out like starving pack animals squabbling over scraps. He slid open the booth's door when he had a thought. Turning back, he picked up the telephone's receiver and unscrewed the cap covering mouthpiece. Lifting out the transmitter, he snapped off a tiny piece of metal sat behind it. Beelzebub chuckled to himself as he reassembled the pieces. Nobody who received a call from this phone would hear the caller and it would take them forever to figure out why. He was putting a tiny bit more anger and frustration into the world. He just couldn't help himself.

There she was.

Elizabeth, sat in a rocking chair on the porch. Though she was over ninety years old, the little girl she used to be still in lived her smile. He crossed the front yard and climbed the handful of steps, his legs heavy as if he'd walked to the top of the Empire State Building. His head swam. None of this appeared real. So many conflicting emotions, with his head and heart seeming as if they would simultaneously implode and burst out of his body. War didn't understand how humans handled feeling like this all the bloody time.

He sat silently in the chair next to her. Between them, a small table with a jug of homemade lemonade and two empty glasses.

I've been expecting you, she said without moving her lips. War scratched the

back of his head. It always made his brain itch when she did that.

'You look well,' he replied.

Elizabeth gazed out the corner of her eye. 'I look old, War. You, however, haven't aged a day.'

Her accent was unfamiliar. Distant. American. War realised a lifetime had passed between this moment and when he'd last heard her speak. Back then, her voice had been full of dropped aitches and missing tees.

'How have you been?' he asked.

'Fine. Would you like a drink?'

War was suddenly aware how dry his throat was. 'Please.' Elizabeth poured them each a glass of lemonade. He watched her delicate movements; the almost imperceptible strain of old muscles as she held the jug.

'Are your friends all right?' she asked.

'You know us. We never change.'

'Oh, I think you do. I take it you're here because there's trouble?'

'Yes. Someone's found out where you are.'

'How did that happen?'

'I don't know, but it probably doesn't help being in the phone book.'

'It's been so long. I didn't think anybody would still be looking for me and, even if they were, they had no idea where I'd gone.'

'You're carrying an ancient god around your neck. That's not the sort of thing that slips people's minds. Still, hopefully I've nipped that in the bud.'

Elizabeth took her hand back and pulled out a long, silver necklace hidden under her floral dress. A small red, green and silver Christmas bauble dangled from it. Unable to help himself, War reached over and took it in his fingers. It was so fragile. One swift squeeze and it would shatter. And that would be a terrible thing. She slipped the necklace over her head and passed it to War.

'I think it's time you had it, anyway. You should keep it safe. I won't be able to for much longer.' War nodded. He wrapped the chain around the delicate glass globe and placed it carefully in his pocket. They sat in respectful silence, as if they had completed an ancient, sacred ritual. War looked down at his hands folded on his lap, unsure how to form his next words.

'I often wonder if I made the right choice,' he blurted out. 'Were they good to you?'

Elizabeth leaned across and placed her hand in his. Her skin was dry and paper thin against his warm, fleshy palm. 'Mother and father were lovely. I met a fine man. We had a hell of a time time, with many adventures, and produced wonderful children and grandchildren before he passed.'

War smiled. 'That's good to know.'

Then, he waved his glass. 'I don't suppose you have anything stronger?'

Elizabeth let out a laugh so huge, War was surprised her small body had been able to contain it.

'I thought you'd never ask.'

Orlov killed the headlights on the black sedan as it approached the Montgomery-Burgess residence. He swore under his breath when he remembered he was missing Sasha's school play. He'd caught the red-eye from Paris as soon as US Customs flagged War's suspicious passport at Idlewild. When the name on that passport turned up in some fresh intelligence passed to one of his Russian clients, he drove out to the suburbs. His passenger, a young double agent named Gregory, squirmed in the passenger seat next to him.

'I don't know about interrogating an old lady,' he said thumbing through the paperwork in a folder on his lap. 'What is she? Ninety-five, ninety-six? It says here she's a great-grandmother.'

Orlov pulled up to the driveway and put the car in neutral. He turned to Gregory and smiled. 'It's not an interrogation. We're just going to have a friendly conversation with her about the whereabouts of some jewellery.'

He reached over to the glove compartment and pulled out an automatic pistol which he tucked into the shoulder-holster under his jacket.

'Then why do you need that?' Gregory asked.

'If she's anything like my great-grandmother, it'll be for self-defence.'

The two men exited the car and walked up the steps to the front porch. 'I'm guessing I'm doing the talking?' Gregory asked as he knocked on the front door. Orlov shrugged.

'I do a good American accent. Beef *boiger*. There's been a *moider*.' Gregory shook his head.

'I'll be doing the talking. Grandmothers love me.'

The door opened slightly and, through the crack, Gregory could see a little old lady staring back at him. 'Elizabeth Montgomery-Burgess?' he asked in his best lovely-young-man voice.

'What do you want?'

Gregory flashed a badge he'd pulled from his jacket pocket. 'Detective Gregory, ma'am. We're investigating a series of dog-nappings in the local area and wondered if we could have a word?'

'Well, goodness. If it's about some poor puppies, you'd better come in.'

Gregory smiled at the sound of the security chain sliding in its bracket. The door swung open and Mrs Montgomery-Burgess stood aside to let the two men into

her home.

'What did you say your names were?' she asked in a voice as fragile as cut glass.

'Detective Gregory,' Gregory replied. He turned to Orlov. 'And this is my colleague... Detective Smith.' Orlov smiled and nodded.

'Can I get you boys something to drink? Lemonade, perhaps?'

'That would be lovely, thank you.'

'I have some in the kitchen. I'll be two shakes of a lamb's tail. You boys take a seat.'

Gregory and Orlov did as Elizabeth told them, sitting down on a floral two-seat sofa beneath a large bay window. The old lady, hunched over, shuffled towards the door that led to the kitchen.

'Would you like some help?' Gregory asked, but Mrs Montgomery-Burgess waved away his offer as she went through the door. Gregory looked around the living room. Photographs lined the walls telling the story of a long life well-lived. He realised the beautiful young woman in many exotic locations was the fragile old dear. As he followed the pictures around the room, a young man joined her. They grew older together. Children and grandchildren appeared alongside them. Then, the man disappeared. Finally, Elizabeth Montgomery-Burgess as the old lady she was now.

Elizabeth came back into the room carrying a tray. 'I found some cookies in the pantry.' She carefully placed the tray and its contents on the coffee table in front of her visitors and, after pouring them a glass of lemonade each, took a seat in an armchair opposite them. 'Now, what did you boys want to know?'

Gregory sat forward in his seat, his elbows on knees and hands clasped in front of him. Elizabeth felt the atmosphere in the room shift towards the chillier end of the thermometer. 'I apologise for the subterfuge, ma'am, but I need to talk to you about a matter of national security. I understand you're in possession of an artefact that's of interest to several government agencies.'

Elizabeth smiled sweetly. 'I don't understand what you're talking about, young man.' Gregory nodded to Orlov, who lifted the lapel of his jacket to reveal the revolver strapped to his side.

'Obviously, we don't want to inconvenience you any more than we have to,' Gregory replied, imitating Elizabeth's smile. 'If you could just let us have it. It's a necklace with a pendant about yay big.' He held his finger and thumb about an inch apart.

Elizabeth looked at the gun and then shook her head. 'Oh, I don't have any use for anything like that anymore. Any jewellery I had of any worth I've long given to my daughter.'

Gregory chuckled. 'I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation, Mrs Montgomery-Burgess.'

'If the lady says she doesn't have it, then the lady doesn't have it,' War said as he walked down the stairs, his pistol trained on the two men sat on the sofa. 'Now, I believe it's traditional for you to raise your hands above your head at this point.' Gregory and Orlov did as War ordered them to. War nodded to Orlov. 'We must stop meeting like this.'

Gregory turned to Orlov. 'This guy a friend of yours?'

Orlov shrugged as effectively as someone could with their hands in the air. 'More of a business acquaintance.'

'If you two leave now, we'll say no more about it.' War waved the barrel of the gun in the general direction of the front door. 'I think Mrs Montgomery-Burgess would be--'

The sound of splintering wood cut War off as the front door swung open and crashed heavily into the wall. One man in a black suit and tie jumped through the doorway, a gun drawn on the occupants of the living room, while another burst in from the kitchen. The distraction gave Orlov and Gregory enough time to draw their weapons and jump to their feet.

'FREEZE, YOU MOTHERS!' the man at the door yelled. The Americans had arrived.

War sighed. 'You can't do anything with any class or subtlety, can you, Chad?'

Chad, who'd burst through the front door, pointed his gun at War. 'Sir, as a representative of the United States Government, I must insist on my previous requestification that you remain -- Oh, it's you, Waugh.'

'Chad.' War nodded to the agent who'd burst through the back. 'Brad.' Brad nodded back, but nobody lowered their weapons.

'What are you doing here, Waugh?' Chad asked. 'No need for the Limeys to get involved in this.'

'As I keep telling people, I'm just visiting an old friend.'

'Funny how your old friends seem to attract the attention of the Secret Service.'

War shrugged. 'I know interesting people.'

Orlov was bored now. He'd determined the angles, done the maths and calculated that he'd be able to get out of the house alive. And, if not, at least shooting someone would stop everyone talking. With one smooth motion, he swept his gun across the room, pulling the trigger three times. The bullets travelled halfway across the room when they came to a complete stop, hanging in the air in the exact way bullets shouldn't.

Elizabeth rose from her chair. She waved a hand, and the projectiles dropped to the carpet. 'That's enough,' she said, her voice thick with authority. An unseen force wrenched the guns from all the men's hands and the weapons gently floated over to Elizabeth, settling on the coffee table in front of her. 'You're not getting these back until you can learn to use them properly.'

'But that's not--' Brad started to say before one look from Elizabeth made him realise this would be a bad approach. She turned to Orlov.

'I want you to apologise for trying to shoot everyone, and I want you to mean it.'

'I'm very sorry for trying to shoot you,' Orlov mumbled, staring at the floor like a scalded child.

'I want you all to apologise to each other for being such beastly boys. That goes for you too, War.'

That wiped the smirk from his face. 'But what have I done--?'

'Shh! Apologise. Now,' Elizabeth ordered. War joined in the chorus of apology, his bottom lip sticking out like he was a sulking schoolboy.

'That's better,' she said when the murmur of atonement stopped. 'Now, what am I going to do with you lot?'

Argyll the driver had disappeared, much to War's annoyance, so Elizabeth called him a cab. They waited on the porch for it to arrive, watching the sun bleed into the sky as it dipped behind the uniform rows of houses.

'Will they be okay?' War asked, concern for his fellow soldiers always at the forefront of his mind no matter whose side they were on. Elizabeth patted his hand.

'They'll be fine in a while.'

'How did you learn stuff like that? Your powers are much stronger than I remember.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'I'll tell you all about it the next time you visit. You're not the only one who's been saving the world, you know.'

'I'd be interested to hear about that,' War said, his curiosity piqued. 'Do you think it's safe for me to do so?'

'Nobody'll be troubling me for a while.'

A yellow cab pulled up in front of the white picket fence and honked its horn.

'That'll be me,' War said, and he stood up.

'Have you got everything you came for?' asked Elizabeth. War patted his suit pocket.

'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

War smiled. 'Yes, I'm sure.'

'Are you sure you don't want to take anything to eat? I've got plenty of cookies.'

'I'm good, thank you.' War bent down and kissed Elizabeth gently on the cheek. 'Goodbye, Elizabeth.'

Orlov took a bite of the cookie. It was good and crumbly with a generous amount of chocolate chips and huge chunks of macadamia. He looked around the picnic table at his three new friends Brad, Chad and Gregory and smiled to himself. He wasn't sure who they were, where they came from or how they'd all met, but they seemed nice enough. When you sat in a park on a warm spring evening, it seemed like everybody was your buddy. There'd been an old lady too, hadn't there? She'd been the one who gave them the cookies. She'd been lovely, reminded Orlov of his babushka back home in Moscow.

Orlov took a swig from a glass of milk and wiped the trace of a white moustache from his top lip. A thought fluttered at the back of his mind like an itch he couldn't scratch. The last thing he remembered reliably was catching a flight from Paris, but he didn't understand why. Whenever he tried to think about it, his mind's eye went out of focus. 'Isn't there something we had to do?' he asked the other three. Brad shrugged his shoulders.

'I dunno, man, but I can't think of anything better than drinking an ice cold glass of milk and eating homemade cookies right now.'

Orlov nodded, squinting against the last lingering remains of the sun's rays. Brad was right. Whatever it was would wait until tomorrow. It couldn't be that important.

The Station Chief eyed War with suspicion.

'What brings you back here so soon? I thought you were taking a break?'

War smiled warmly. 'I just can't resist Paris at this time of the year.'

War had flown out of the United States the same night as he'd said goodbye to Elizabeth. There'd been no need to hang around and it was best to keep moving when you were carrying an angry god in your pocket. Now he was back in the Station Chief's office.

'Rumour has it you were over in the States. What were you doing there?'

'Just visiting an old friend.'

The Chief examined War's face carefully, looking for a telltale sign of dishonesty, but he realised that he was too well trained to give anything away. The creature he knew as John Waugh was the best agent he'd ever come across in his career. No other asset had walked back into this office after the Chief had ordered they be neutralised. He just needed to find out the reason while the assault team organised themselves on the floor below. He let out a long sigh.

'Have you heard about Orlov?'

War raised an eyebrow. 'What's he up to?'

'He's retiring from the assassination game and defecting. He wants to open a bakery in the suburbs. Said something about cookies.'

'You've got to have a dream. What about his family?'

'The Yanks are working on smuggling them out of the country as we speak. Has he said anything to you since we last talked?'

'Why would Orlov say anything to me? I was in New York and he was here in Paris as far as I'm aware.'

The Chief remained poker-faced. 'Of course, Waugh. I don't know what I was thinking. So, what are you doing back here?'

War caught the Chief glancing at the door. 'Don't worry, sir. You can call off your attack dogs. I bring you good news,' he said, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out the bauble Elizabeth gave him. He leaned forward and dropped it onto the desk, the chain coiling around the green and red sphere like a mythical snake guarding a treasure. The Chief stared at it with hungry eyes.

'Is that what I think it is?'

War nodded. 'Project Esuries.'

'Where did you get it?' asked the Chief, his gaze not moving from the desktop.

'An old friend. I'd like some reassurance that you'll leave her alone. She's of no concern to you now.'

The Chief nodded. 'She's already forgotten about.'

'I assume I can return to my old duties?'

'Yes. You've shown your loyalty. Thank you.'

War nodded towards the bauble. 'What are you going to do with it?'

The Chief opened a desk drawer and swept the necklace into it. 'Not that it's of any concern of yours, I'll send it down to Research and Development. We'll get the boffins on it as soon as possible. Now, how about that glass of whisky?'

Once War was back in London - back home - he was more relaxed. This was his city, and he knew every danger that lurked around every corner. He headed

straight for home and, as soon as he'd closed the front door, he poured himself a large drink and collapsed into his favourite leather armchair. It was, in fact, his only chair. The chic bare floorboards weren't a design choice ahead of its time, but down to the fact that he'd bought no carpets. When they'd lived together, Conquest had always been the interior decorator and the stacks of carpet samples and wallpaper books offered far too much choice for a mind as one-tracked as War's. The only nod to decoration was his sword (currently non-flaming) mounted on the wall.

When he'd finished his drink, War stood up and crossed to the corner of the room where a large wooden desk sat. He fished around in his jacket pocket and pulled out the bauble Elizabeth gave him. It spun on its chain, seeming to glow in the half-light of dusk. War smiled to himself. He opened one of the desk's drawers, carefully placed the bauble in and slid it shut.

On the flight back to Europe, War strongly felt that nobody on either side of this damned conflict should have Esuries but the only way they'd stop looking is if they thought one of them already had it. Double-crossing his own side didn't seem fair, but they hadn't been fair to him he reasoned. It had been a pain to find a Parisian shop selling Christmas decorations that time of the year, but War had finally made the owner of a small hardware shop go through the stock in his backroom until they found something appropriate. It had fooled the Station Chief well enough. Now the scientists would study the fake bauble for years, throwing every available piece of technology at it, while the true one sat in a desk drawer miles away.

War poured himself another drink. What would he do now? He knew the answer. He needed to stay where he was. For Elizabeth and the rest of humanity. He would make sure those that governed them would not be responsible for their destruction. He toasted his sword hanging above the desk and whispered three small words.

'I am War.'

About The Author

Dave Turner is an award-winning writer whose work has featured on the websites of BBC News, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Times and The Huffington Post.

He won the Best Screenplay Award at London Screenwriters' Festival with his short film script 'Everything You Need'. After selling various screenplays which you will note you have not seen as films at your local multiplex, he created Aim For The Head books to publish his work. He lives in the south of England with his wife, three children and a crippling addiction to biscuits.

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