

TGC Eesti 2008

Lee Gent

7 – 14 February, 2008

Chapter 1

Wednesday, February 6: Chippenham – London Stansted

As usual, my journey starts in the ass-end of Britain, Chippenham. I'd frantically washed every pair of boxer shorts I own the night before but, naturally, on the day I leave they're still soaking wet so I head on over to my office wearing filthy but dry clothes and hope that no-one notices.

They don't, and after a few hours of tidying my desk I head home again to finish packing. Clothes are almost dry now so I stuff half into my gigantu-suitcase and wear the other, still slightly moist, half. I may be damp but DAMN, I look good.

Starbucks woman wishes me well on my journey (but still charges me full price for some rubbish tea, damn her) and I head off to the coach stop. In a deviation from tradition, I'm heading to the airport via my lady's house in London for a few hours of watching Sex in the City on DVD, which means I need to switch coach at London's Victoria coach station – possibly the only place in the galaxy where you can find people with beards that look worse than mine; the very archetype of smelly travellers.

I'm wearing my new black felt fedora, long black coat and a white shirt which, alas, has the unfortunately side-effect of making me look like a Hasidic Jew, compounded by the fact that my girlfriend lives in

the ‘Jewish Quarter’ of London. I always worry that the people living there think I’m taking the piss out of them but, thankfully, more often than not my inadvertent disguise is foolproof, as demonstrated by the driver of the coach to Stansted who, upon my boarding, greets me with “So! Off to Tel Aviv, are you?”. I’m caught off guard so all I can do is emit a long “...uuuuuuuuuuuh, no...”, followed by a hurried “...Eastern Europe”, thinking that it’s probably a better idea to say that than to try and explain exactly the awesome mystery of Estonia.

She makes smalltalk for an hour while I pretend to listen through my impenetrable iPod earphones.

I arrive at the airport around half-past midnight on Thursday morning. Flouting tradition once more, the bulk of Team UK will arrive around five AM instead of rendezvousing at midnight – which means I have many hours to kill on my own. Thankfully, I’m well equipped for the task, with my laptop and Nintendo DS fully charged.

Indeed, I’m so stocked with things to do that I immediately can’t decide on a course of action, and decide to spend four hours developing a recent idea I had about creating a learning tool for teaching fledgling C++ programmers about the wonder of object-oriented programming using a framework not altogether dissimilar to Robot Wars – the idea being that you ‘build’ a robot out of C++ code, write its artificial intelligence, then pit them against other people’s creations. Whoever has the most skill has the best robot and wins the war.

This entertains me way more than it would any normal person and the hours fly by before the mighty Farken, known to humans as Ryan, arrives at the exact location I told everyone to meet at but then promptly forgot to go myself. I’m super-excited because most of us have known him for years but this would be the first time he’d come along on a guild-trip. Indeed many of us had believed him to be a super-powerful sentient computer program up until this point but lo! There he was, in the flesh. I felt privileged.

Team Midlands arrive soon after; Mook, Mantooth, Sorezic and Mrs Mook (who of course all have human names as well) join our entourage and we decide to head straight through security check-in and grab some awful breakfast at the jam-packed Weatherspoons

before spending hard-earned cash on shitty electronics that we would never ever use even if they didn't break after a week. Ahh well, it was tax-free after all.

Chapter 2

Thursday, February 7: London – Tallinn

The flight is utterly full as usual and frightfully dull; some of us sleep fitfully for the first hour and a half before we decide to have an epic four-person Mario Kart tournament, which I lose embarrassingly at. Most of the team pass the time by occasionally putting my hat on me and then calling me a Jew, something that would get very old very quickly.

We land without incident and meet up with Team Belgium, the ever-delicious Dreya and Skulker who had arrived the previous evening, and our wonderful hosts, Team Estonia themselves, Sorrowhorn and Sile. Naturally, actual human names are used throughout.

We share hugs and perhaps the occasional illicit grope before heading over to pick up our hire cars, a simple action which seemed to take the woman behind the counter approximately ten thousand years of checking and typing and questions and credit-card charges, during which she made it painfully clear that I'd have to pay a crippling amount of money if the car was in any way damaged while in my care, a fact that gave me actual nightmares for many days afterwards.

Eventually we're ready to hit the cold air and pick up said cars and head over to our hotel to check in and get tidied up; naturally everyone was expecting me to have an epic shower session (and they

were right because that's exactly what I wanted). Only I (of course) got lost on the way to the hotel and ended up taking a 'scenic' route while constantly reassuring everyone that I did, in fact, know my way around Tallinn as well as I know my way around any of my home cities – Newcastle, Bristol, Swindon – in fact undoubtedly more so since I don't spend any time in those cities any more.

Thanks to some skilled navigation by my co-pilot we made it and tried our damndest to check in to our hotel, again a simple activity that took forever as we had to first wait for (a) a rowdy group of British tourists on a stag-weekend (I hate them because they colour everyone's impression of British tourists), (b) a pair of angry Norwegians and (c) a couple of queue-jumping Estonians before finally, (d) the woman at the desk having absolutely no clue who we were or where our reservation was. In the end I had to boot up my laptop and SHOW her my confirmation e-mail, which thankfully wasn't too difficult since the hotel provided free wireless Internet access which to me more than made up for the bland breakfasts and teeny tiny beds.

After an age we got to our rooms, stowed our stuff away and immediately headed out for beer and refreshments in our home-away-from-home, the ever-dependable Hell Hunt, whose menu and prices are committed to the memories of old TGC hands like myself. I followed the vanguard of our team ten minutes or so later since, of course, I had to have an epic shower – but then I *had* been wearing the same clothes for over twenty-four hours straight.

So it happened that I had to navigate around some parts of Tallinn completely without chaperone by a native. Although it was a very short journey and so pant-wettingly easy that even Mook could navigate it on his own, it still gave me immense pleasure to 'show off' my local knowledge by managing it with aplomb and (in my own mind at least) redeeming myself for getting lost on the way to the hotel earlier.

There's not a lot to say about the evening other than we caught up with one another and indoctrinated the newbies into the joys of Estonian beer and that most awesome invention, Beer Snacks. Our ranks swelled with an ever-growing number of new and old faces, friends of our hosts and therefore friends of ours and time passed

all too quickly. Sven and Ellen hit us with the we're-having-a-baby bombshell and there was much cooing and hugging in a fashion not unlike a giant group of GIRLS, but we were all genuinely happy with the situation – I can't imagine any better combination of genes. We spent the remainder of the night trying to convince the proud parents-to-be to name their progeny after one of us, without success.

Unfortunately for me, I ran out of energy embarrassingly early and decided to head back home to catch up on sleep, which I did – and it was awesome.

Chapter 3

Friday, February 8: Castle Sile

After a late start, we learned of the day's plan. We were going to start out easy; today was tourist-type shopping followed by barbecue and booze in Kris' legendary garden outhouse.

Again wallowing in the opportunity to show off my wayfinding wonders, a small group of us hit the shopping mall to find some boots and swimming clothes and, if we were lucky, a copy of *Fallout* and *Fallout 2* for the PC which I'd recently become obsessed with obtaining.

We stopped for a pleasant coffee and Panini, which gave Alex and I a chance to exercise our Estonian language skills which, although perhaps better than your average meat-headed tourist, I later realised did not extend beyond the description and ordering of food products. Between us we knew a dozen ways to ask for cheese, ham, bacon and chicken but couldn't actually count to five.

After acting distinctly odd in and around a toy shop and coming dangerously close to being thrown out, we sourced the items we needed and found the computer game shop, which was reasonably well-stocked but cripplingly expensive (although they DID have a copy of *Guitar Hero 3* for the PC, something I'd almost given up looking for). They didn't have *Fallout* or *Fallout 2*. I left, unfulfilled.

From there, we headed back to the hotel to prepare for the evening's entertainment. Usually these sessions involve large stocks

of communal beer, small amounts of slightly more personalised poison, shared meats and vegetables for dinner and assorted sweet-treats for oneself – sounds like an ideal recipe (and it most certainly is), but the logistics of obtaining said smorgasbord of snacks have been known to destroy lesser minds, and so it was with a mild amount of dread on my part that we headed out to the supermarket en route to the fabled domain of our most precious tall handsome beard-wielder.

Offering to buy and calculate everyone's share of the night's bill gave more ammunition to the vaguely racist Abrahamitic mockery from some members of our party who shall remain nameless (but let it be known that the party in question later chose the handle 'Adolf Hitler' for a game of laser tag – I'll let you join the dots yourself), but thankfully I rose above it and we were soon all enjoying various beers, vodkas, alco-pops and... milk (I was driving).

We'd charged our DSes and had a pleasingly diverse library of games to choose from; indeed Kris spent most of the evening playing Puzzle Quest while Dave and I tried to unlock the goodies locked away on my Mario Kart profile – although once again I failed miserably to get anywhere. Charena tried his best to beat the official hardest game in the galaxy, the 'fake' version of Super Mario Brothers which kills you for utterly arbitrary reasons whenever it damn well wants to, spending one hundred lives and about an hour getting precisely nowhere, a feat somewhat repeated a little later by me, trying to convince everyone that the recent album from Saul Williams, the applauded urban/rap artist/poet guy, is actually really good and sounds just like Nine Inch Nails 'doing urban'.

No-one was convinced and instead we had to listen to theme music from various animé and computer games. Philistines!

Our midnight barbeque in the total absence of any light or heat was a great success and we ate heartily of the meat and cheesy-bread, as well as my new favourite food – fresh mozzarella and crusty bread – and the beer drinking quickly separated the men from the boys as one-by-one our eyelids started to droop southwards, and we headed home.

Chapter 4

Saturday, February 9: All-Terrain Action

Another late rise. Our plan today is to drive south-west to Parnu and drive gigantic quad-bike behemoths around and in mud, rubble, shallow water, small animals and other such inhospitable environs. We'd done the same thing almost exactly two years previously, only then my wrist had been broken and in plaster and I'd not been able to take part; thankfully I was now as healed as I would ever get and was therefore looking forwards to driving stupidly fast in vehicles would could chew through anything – when do you ever get a chance to actually aim FOR the potholes and mud when you're driving?

Before setting off, though, someone observed that Bad Things happen to our community when many of us are away on guild trips, most famously the Great Schism of February 2006 when three-quarters of the guild ran away in a big girly tantrum because we weren't hardcore enough for them. Thankfully, so far, things 'at home' had been quiet – so for a giant bit of comedy we all decided to leave the guild and form GREYSTORM or GRAYSTORM or GRAYSTROM depending on how good your English and typing skills are. Despite defacing the website front page with Graystrom propaganda, nobody fell for it and Graystrom quickly became another in-joke, to be daubed on each others' cars in dust to show off our baffling credentials to the whole world as we drove around.

And drive around we did – Parnu is about a two hour journey

from Tallinn. Ostensibly it's actually a one-and-a-half hour's drive but after hilariously forgetting our lead car had GPS navigation, we spent a good half an hour driving in circles and accidentally driving into strange, genuinely eerie, almost-abandoned hamlets in the middle of forests – the kind of villages where you wish you had five REVERSE gears (for fast escapes) as well as forward gears.

Once where we were supposed to be, we were forced to dress in tight-ass jumpsuits (or at least they were tight on MY ass, but of course my ass is a special case), don helmets, gloves and ninja masks before being whisked away on a magical mystery journey on small-car sized all-terrain vehicles through the lush vegetation (and mud) of our Baltic republic. There were pools of water, patches of grass, mud, lakes, trees, mud, hills, mud, streams, roads, mud, bridges over majestic rivers and then – some mud. I really can't do it justice with mere words; it was breathtaking and I genuinely whooped with delight like an idiot man-child every time we got to open the throttle to full, or every time we flew into the air while navigating undulating paths, or every time we narrowly avoided colliding with harder things (including, for me, Mark – with whom I kept slightly less than the minimum ten-metre separation and who on more than one occasion heard me scream 'GOOOOOO' as I almost powered into his rear (as it were)).

We were in the first group of seven, electing to do the 'easy' course first since I didn't really know what to expect. The supervisor leading us assured us that everything would be peachy and, if we got into difficulty we would only need to raise a hand and he'd come cannonballing back to save us, something we had to test out twice as Alex's engine cut out after three minutes and, most hilariously, Ellen tried her best to drive over a cliff. Our entire column of vehicles stopped and those who weren't desperately trying to claw her vehicle back from the edge had raised their hands although, comically, our supervisor had sped off and was now some distance away around a blind bend. He probably thought we had tried to all simultaneously steal his ridiculously expensive toys before zooming back to find us in pandemonium.

Kayla does get a special mention for trying to drive her ATV up a tree. She failed, but kept her head and rejoined ranks with nary a

raised hand or eyebrow.

As for me? I was *spectacular*.

It was dark when we returned to base camp and relinquished our now utterly filthy vehicles for the second group to try the 'hard' course, which is where we learned that our supervisor had taken Team Easy on it already. We were officially badassess, and most of us were secretly jealous of the second team who must now navigate the difficult course without the benefit of natural light.

While they did so, we chewed our way through some beer and competitive Mario Kart – but it just wasn't the same.

After rendezvousing once more, we loaded up into our (now utterly unsatisfying) regular cars and headed back into Parnu proper for some tasty fodder. It was tremendously cold and we walked for many tens of metres (gasp!) before discovering our desired destination was deserted. Relying only on a keen sense of smell, we eventually found somewhere that was open and willing to serve us hot goodies; I gorged myself on cheese schnitzel which is as tasty as it is hilariously named.

On the long, dark drive back to Tallinn, I had a little difficulty keeping focused and/or awake, so my erstwhile co-pilot Dave (who is every bit as hairy and cool as the co-pilot of co-pilots, Chewbacca – and yes, I did just compare myself to Han Solo) kept me awake with tales and discussion of my recent embarkation on a well-known Vampire: The Masquerade campaign and his years-long experience of the game, its setting and lore – so much so that, by the time we were safely stowed in our hotel, I was pumped-up and decided to buy Bloodlines – the well-received VtM PC game – from Steam (for the crazy-low price of £12), download it immediately and play it until around five AM. Oops.

After pretty much getting the entirety of Santa Monica under my bloodsucking dominion, I retired.

Chapter 5

Sunday, February 10: Monkeying About

Another late morning. We'd all heard a little about what was on our agenda for the day today, but nobody had a real or solid idea of what to expect – we were going to an assault course, some said, the kind you see in training montages of war films – and so with this in mind, we set off for destinations unknown.

The course we eventually arrived at was certainly an assault on the senses – it was essentially five obstacle courses, each suspended high in the air, each reached by a ladder or rope netting or some such, each composed of a string of platforms built around the trunks of trees and connected by a series of rope swings, jumps, zip-lines and various precarious pieces of wood. Each course got progressively more difficult to navigate, and each course was more difficult than the previous course. It was exciting to look at from the ground but dizzying to survey while suspended from the heights.

The drama started immediately for me. Thinking that we were going to be issued with jumpsuits like the day before, I was wearing only my long coat with a t-shirt underneath – there were no jumpsuits and long coats were thoroughly unsuitable for climbing; thankfully the people running the place were very nice and loaned me an anorak.

We were issued professional hardcore climbing safety harnesses, which of course were something of a tight fit around my corpulent

and corrupt flesh; so with infinite patience the instructors set to work suiting me up in a special Chunk-O-Harness in a scene which in my mind was exactly the same as that bit in *The Two Towers* where the King of Rohan is suited up in his armour by his chief lackey just before the Last Charge of the Rohirrim, except a thousand times more embarrassing.

After the safety briefing (mantra: always always have at least one of your two safety clips firmly attached to the safety cables), we were away on the first course. Climb up, navigate from tree to tree, then take the zip line to terra firma - no problem. The second course was dispatched with equal fervour; all of us working hard but having fun.

Things started to get a little more challenging on the third course; halfway there was a leap-of-faith of sorts. You'd clip your zip-line thing to the safety cable and launch yourself from the tree, ideally arriving at the other end of the zip-line on the platform on the further tree. Easy, nes pas? Well, yes, it would have been if it wasn't for Newton – you see, when a massive object (such as a Lee) is subject to gravity and then entrusts said mass to a single cable, said cable will sag. With a regular human, this is cool; you leap from the tree and arrive safely at the level of the far platform. With a massive object, the cable sags... massively, and you arrive about a metre *underneath* the chuffing platform.

You are then stuck, and must wriggle and squirm embarrassingly, like the fat bastard you are, to get onto the platform.

This lesson was not lost on me, and I immediately concluded that it took me a million years to evolve DOWN from the fucking trees, so surely going BACK is for idiots (and creationists)?

But go back I did. There was no way I was going to chicken out after already being so emasculatingly embarrassed – I had to redeem myself. I had to beat the fourth course, which involved another leap of faith and a pant-wettingly scary rope-swing-of-faith.

On the zip-line down from the third course, one of my harness straps (which were all a bit loose after the chaos of getting the damn thing on in the first place) came undone. Sven very kindly did it up again, and we thought no more of it.

I got past the fourth course's leap-of-faith without begging for

help (unlike the third course), eventually managing to spasm my way onto my colossal stomach before facing the Scary Rope Swing of Death – and it's here that I genuinely feared out.

Let me tell you a little story. When I was ten or eleven, my family and I were out for a walk in the countryside. We found a giant rope swing over a river and my younger brother whooped and swang gaily from it like he was BORN to the damn trees while my family watched and clapped with glee. When it was my turn, I took hold of the rope, climbed high up the riverbank for maximum swing, shouted 'geronimo', jumped from the ground... and promptly fainted. I woke up an hour later, in hospital, with blood pouring from an enormous hole in my head, the scar of which I bear to this day.

Facing my nemesis, the SRSoD, it was all I could do to keep conscious. My peers, of course, shouted encouragement and assured me it was easy and all I had to do was hold on (and in any case my harness would save me from experiencing actual free flight, followed by death), but again – physics was their downfall (an in any case, that's more embarrassing than not). You see, when you leap from the platform holding the rope, you fly for the briefest of seconds before your weight pulls the rope taut in your hands. If your fingers can take it, you keep your grip and stay upright; otherwise the force of the rope springing tight flicks you the fuck off the rope and hurls you to your doom.

Which is, of course, exactly what happened.

I came off the rope, my harness took the strain of the fall before transferring the energy to my spongy flesh and blood vessels, which immediately ruptured, and careened into the rope netting I was aiming for a fraction of a second before the heavy foot stand on the bottom of the rope smacked into my head, destroying many useful brain cells that will never ever grow back.

Despite being in great pain, I remained composed and devilishly handsome and carried on with the remainder of the course, vowing to stuff Course Number Five up its own ass before going to drink beer. It was difficult but I knew that, with no more leaping from trees required except for the final one back to the ground, success was well within my grasp.

That was, until my grasp failed on the second-last obstacle; my

foot slipped off one of a series of free-swinging beams and I plummeted again.

My harness caught me and transferred half of the energy into my soft yielding thigh, destroying the flesh there. The other half went into unravelling itself, and as time slowed down I heard the webbing whizz through the buckle holding it in place and ping free like an empty clip of an M1 Garand rifle, before realising that my harness was about to release its chunky cargo twenty metres up a fucking tree.

I felt the other half of my webbing slip slightly, decided to throw dignity to the wind and began screaming and begging for help. I had wrapped my arms around the wooden beam that had so casually thrown me off a half-second before but knew for a certainty that there's no way I could hold myself up if my harness exploded – so instead I just sort of feebly rested them on it and dedicated myself to becoming limp and relaxed because of course everyone knows that if you hit the ground from a great height while limp and relaxed, you don't get hurt.

Having done so, I tried some meditation. I meditated on how this kind of shit always happens to me, and how typical and embarrassing it would be if I fell, and whether it would hurt much or if I'd black out halfway down, and if my travel insurance would cover it, and what the medical care was like in Estonia, and if it meant I'd have to stay for another week or something, and would my girlfriend come and visit me, and how on Earth would they save me anyway, get a giant inflatable mat or something, and exactly how long it would be before my harness came undone totally, and how embarrassing it was to have everyone down below staring up at my comically exposed stomach, and how nice my friends were to care so much.

Like some sort of ninja, the instructor-supervisor (who had actually given up supervising us twenty minutes ago) leapt from branch to branch (so I'm told, obviously I was busy staring into the clouds and trying to not die) and arrived at the unfortunate scene. I wondered what tricks he would have up his sleeve to save me - clipping onto my harness was no good since it would vomit me out at any moment, so what would happen?

The answer came quickly – he, ably assisted by Mark, would

further compound my embarrassment by trying to PULL me back across the obstacle and onto the platform. Deeply ashamed, I did everything I could to help and get my centre of epic mass back to safety which, after some amount of heaving, we managed.

After figuring out that my harness hadn't actually broken but simply come undone, he tightened me up and (with no small amount of help and guidance) sent me on my way and slowly but surely I beat the living shit out of the errant obstacle, crossed the chasm and fully confident in my pleasingly tight harness, leapt onto the final zip-line taking me to Mother Earth.

With half of our team already stuck somewhere in the midst of the fifth course, the other half (including myself) decided to head someplace warm and close to the ground – the café – where we relaxed over some coffees and beers. I learned that Ryan also had wiped out on an obstacle close to my disaster area while I was still frozen in fear at the rope swing, but he had managed to claw his way back upright onto the obstacle with consummate skill, little drama and a fully tightened harness. He, me and indeed all of us had acquired battle damage, however; some with amazing bruises but all with at least aching joints and muscles – so much so that the very smallest of movements caused an avalanche of groaning and grunting never before heard this side of a specialist German movie.

After regrouping (and with no small amount of pain on all of our parts), we stuffed ourselves back into the cars and limped home for long, hot showers and fresh clothes, before shuffling to that warm, comfortable Mecca of good food, booze and company – The Hell Hunt - for dinner, conversation and (critically) ice cream. With a whole platoon of us present there was always entertainment to be had and, if conversation wasn't your thing, we had four DSEs to spread around – but time wore on and eventually I and a few others headed home for sleep and not a little bit of playing Vampire: The Masquerade which thankfully ran very well on my laptop.

Chapter 6

Monday, February 11: The Finer Things

Again, a late (and more importantly, slow) start. Every single one of us ached from head to toe, bruises had developed during the night and all eight of us in the hotel felt broken and in dire need of repair. Thankfully our agenda for the day was light – indeed, it was empty but for a single ‘tourism’ item.

With this in mind, we planned a slow comfortable walk around Tallinn’s Old Town - that scenic and magical area full of history and character - that would take in all of the important bits: the town wall and gate, the town square and Hall, the Beer House (not really historic but certainly a tradition for us), the Eastern Orthodox cathedral, the public toilet that cost a million dollars to build, the parliament building and all the vantage points in between – including a trip along the battlements and turrets of the aged walls themselves.

What was fascinating for me was just how visibly Tallinn was changing; you can look in any direction from any point in the city and see building and renovation works and this is nowhere more obvious than at some of the vantage viewpoints offering vistas over the city to the Baltic itself, or over the city to the Soviet-built suburbs surrounding it. I’ve looked out from this viewpoint five times in two years and every time there’s a new gleaming spire of metal piercing the sky. Indeed, we were told that from the sea, the Tallinn skyline – which is so famous and immediately recognisable

it's almost a trademark for the city and is embossed on goods and exports all over - is now no longer recognisable. While I've nothing against what some might call 'progress', I dearly hope the city doesn't lose the soul and atmosphere I've come to love under the tide of uncouth tourists and corporate and commercial expansion.

After circling the city, our already aching limbs were begging for a respite – and so it was that we caught a tram to the celebrated purveyor of American-style food that lurks beneath Kris's place of work, Mack's, which celebrated gaudy Americana like any good Diner should but with a wonderfully Estonian twist (like including mounds of fantastic-tasting vegetables with all of the meals since any self-respecting Estonian wouldn't touch it otherwise – even the ice cream is more fruit than ice cream).

I gorged myself on a lardburger and immediately regretted not ordering pizza before drowning the disquiet with poison. My attention lapsed for a moment and I ordered a vodka-based cocktail before remembering that I couldn't stand vodka (and it frankly worries me that I keep forgetting such an important fact), so I swapped it for a beer – by which time Dave and Kris were already locked in an unspoken manly drinking contest, a competition that only a FOOL would enter.

I'm no fool and so after a while, when some of us started getting 'high-spirited', there was a mutiny and a few of us headed home early, secretly smirking with smugness and self-righteous knowledge that we'd be refreshed in the morning while some of our number would be running slightly less than optimum.

We'd later learn that the people we left behind would stumble home terrifically late - by means unknown - and would command hotel staff to show them to their room – at the wrong hotel. My room-mate would later wake me at two AM by repeatedly stabbing at my laptop's power key and complaining loudly that it wouldn't turn on; desperately trying to convince Firefox that googol.mail.com is a valid URL before forgetting how to use a mouse entirely.

I felt smug when he started to snore since, as usual with guild trips, my own alleged weakness in that department had been a point of contention – touché indeed.

Chapter 7

Tuesday, February 12: Shoot 'Em Up

Another late rise. Dave and Ryan refused our invitation to leave bed and come to breakfast – indeed Dave refused any invitation to wake up until ten of us stormed his actual bed five minutes before we were due to leave. Between breakfast and that point, though, Alex and I – having little to do and very short attention spans – played on our DSEs and twiddled our thumbs. Somewhere, in the distance, a dog barked.

Eventually we bundled our team into the cars and headed just out of the city – today we were shooting actual live ammunition out of actual live firearms.

We'd arrived a mite too early, though, and it was punishingly cold. A stone's throw away from the car park was a lake, frozen and topped with thick ice, which we (of course) threw stones at. Alex and Sven defied reason and dared one another to walk out onto the ice, and the rest of us resisted the temptation to throw stones at *them*. It was certainly no weather to wear rubber boating clogs and white clothing in, but I did it anyway, because I wanted to look badass. With guns.

Eventually we're shown through an industrial-looking complex of corridors to our shooting 'range', which in reality is little more than some cardboard targets stapled to some scrap wooden stakes against a sand bank. I am pleased at the lack of 'formality'.

Our instructor, who plays the role of a gun-crazy psychopath perfectly, talks us through the weapons and, occasionally, furnishes us with tips on how to efficiently murder people and get away with it. We have a few rounds each with one weapon, pass it to the next person, and when we've all had a go, we 'upgrade' to the next one; starting with a Glock 19, a .357 Magnum, a tactical shotgun, a semi-automatic AK-47, a Colt .45, a Desert Eagle and finally a .44 Magnum.

Each weapon has its quirks and histories recounted to us; the Glock features a laser sight and a hexagonal, rifling-less barrel (so the rounds were untraceable), the tactical shotgun would have a single Magnum ('shoulder dislocator') cartridge thrown in for fun, unless you were (like me) a giant girl and opted out - although my excuse was that I was crazy-scared of destroying my delicate and still-painful-after-two-years wrist. The Kalashikov would be wielded from the hip instead of the shoulder (for extra fun), the Colt was the instructor's own personal firearm used for competitions, the Desert Eagle was the size of Mark's head and shot out a metre-long flame from the barrel and, of course, the .44 is typically used to kill large animals in the wild.

There's not a great deal to say about the actual experience of shooting except that many of us actually felt genuine fear at the thought of handling these tools for killing. We've all been indoctrinated in violence and firearms through many years of Hollywood and video games, but when push came to shove, handling these implements felt very alien and frankly daunting, not to mention the fact that most of them had recoil enough to physically hurt us (and the AK-47's wooden grips would, despite being made of wood, get so hot it would burn).

The Glock was nice and easy and brought back many fond memories of playing Half Life; the .357 I found strangely lacking (only six rounds and, although the rounds were of course much larger, the difference was barely noticeable on our targets); the shotgun was probably many people's 'favourite' - it was easy to aim and use, made a pleasing amount of damage and noise and of course we had all, at some point in our youth, wanted to reload a pump-action shotgun at speed and made the 'chu-chuck' gesture with our hands wrapped

around an invisible boomstick.

Although semi-automatic, it was very easy to blast through all 30 of our AK rounds in a disappointingly short amount of time and, although it was fun to scream, fire wildly and hurl hot lead in every direction, it was over too soon and by the end of it, I'd hit absolutely nothing – despite taking slow, careful aim with my last few shots.

The Colt was almost toy-like in its size and construction; it was small, light, and professional-looking and felt more like a surgical instrument than a semi-automatic pistol. It was apparently hand-crafted and it certainly felt a cut above the other tools we'd handled. The rounds went exactly where you aimed with the minimum of fuss and recoil. For its sheer class, it was my favourite pistol.

The Desert Eagle is a monster. It is huge and heavy and dangerous and has a bore that embarrasses the London Underground. When you fire it, you not only get a huge amount of flame, recoil and aching wrists, but it actually (for the most part) ejects the hot, empty shell casing into your FACE, just to show you that it means business. There was a reason he gave us the eye protection for this one. It was fun to finally use this most popular and well-depicted Hand Cannon, but it certainly felt like a blunt instrument next to the smooth sleekness of the Colt.

Last of all, there were three rounds with the .44 Magnum. Although technically more powerful than the Desert Eagle, wielding it was a little disappointing since it really offered nothing new (besides a much heftier kick) over the .357 from earlier.

After the actual shooting, our man removed all of the ammunition and let us pose with them - even going so far as to letting me touch his prized (and pant-wettingly expensive) Colt, which he kept on his person in his own personal holster. The shotgun, Desert Eagle and AK made the rounds and, as we all posed grinning, pretending to be gangsters and badasses, I have to confess feeling a little odd about glorifying these tools or, more specifically, more odd about how much I WANTED to glorify them.

I'd seen these devices (or at least Hollywood or digital versions of them) a thousand times before and I badly wanted to touch and pose with them, but still I couldn't shake the voice in my head that told me I'm playing right into the idiot media and Middle America's

hands – here were a group of grown-up, responsible, intelligent people reduced to gibbering children with guns. Even worse than that, I realised only too late that I was not only an idiot but totally unoriginal; most of my ‘poses’ appeared to come right out of *The Matrix*, right down to the trench coat and sunglasses – thankfully my stupid hole-ridden rubber boating clogs stopped me from looking like a *total gimp*.

At the end of it all, we came away having concluded that marksmanship and lunacy appear to be genetically encoded into all Belgian DNA and that when Kayla fires a semi-automatic rifle, you really want to stay *BEHIND* her – about a mile behind, in fact.

From the shooting range we hit the supermarket, we had no agenda for dinner that night and so we’d decided to just grab whatever we liked and gorge ourselves in the hotel before heading out to the sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi lurking in the basement of the famed Barons Hotel in the centre of town which, through some incredible palm-greasing, we were able to rent for a much reduced fee.

After scoffing our pizzas and assorted sundries, many of our number essentially chickened out and so it was that only a handful of us made it to the sauna, a little late since I’d had to drive around in circles taxiing our venerable host back to his house to pick up booze a couple of times – an opportunity I’d actually relished because the roads were clear and I knew the route, the two things that had until then never happened at the same time. I was able to drive at (safe!) speed and enjoy the ride instead of constantly panicking and occasionally raging out at myself and other drivers.

There’s not a great deal to say about the sauna; I’d gotten horribly drunk by drinking about a litre of liqueur (actually mixing it in my mouth for lack of a cup) and tried to show everyone the bruises I’d collected from our climb-pocalypse before falling asleep fully clothed, on top of my covers, with my iPod earphones stuffed in my ears but not actually plugged in to anything.

Chapter 8

Wednesday, February 13: Light Entertainment

Another late rise. By now, those of us who weren't still aching were hung over and we longed for a nice, easy day.

We rendezvoused with our guides and saviours in the Hell Hunt, but it being desperately cold and we being desperately lazy, we decided to drive the comically short distance and risk our cars by parking without ticket or permit behind some police cars. We scoffed breakfast and coffees and discussed our next move – some of us desperately needed to hit a supermarket to get assorted goodies to bring back home since it would be cheaper than duty-free from the airport, so we agreed to have some fun before hitting the shops and, finally, a spa.

We decided to make our fun mini-bowling which we duly drove to before someone casually mentioned that there was laser tag close at hand – and immediately all talk of bowling was vetoed.

It was laser tag, or NOTHING.

The walls of the place were daubed with Soviet paraphernalia and replica (or so we assumed) World War II-era submachine guns and it was complete with a couple of classic arcade games, none of which were turned on, alas. What *was* working perfectly, however, was the large television set beaming pop music videos into the eager antennae of the peroxide-blonde girl behind the desk; indeed the thing was so enticing that even when dealing with us – doing *business*

with us – she kept her eyes on the television the whole time.

I can't complain, I suppose, it didn't really cost the Earth – but still, what's more important? Me, or MTV?

...don't answer that.

For our first game, we were split into two teams and each of us had to pick up the sensor-laden vest of our choice – each vest had a different alias on it for scorekeeping (easier than making us type our own handles in, I suppose). I chose to be George W. Bush, for comedy reasons, and ironically I turned out to be just as effective in warfare as my namesake.

Each person essentially decided to go Lone Commando; ignoring his or her teammates and running stealthily through the dark and obstacle-ridden event space (which, incidentally, was ace and complete with its own burned-out car as a centrepiece). I realised early that, despite being an incredible marksman* (*may be lies), I couldn't get my enemies to light up no matter how many laser beams I landed on their sensors – so I decided to move from sniper mode into semi-automatic mode, my Kalashikov practice from the previous day serving me well. I rattled the trigger a hundred times a second, in all directions, but managed to hit pretty much nothing. Indeed, it would have been a great disappointment had it not been so much fun.

I came third last in the leaderboard, and then only because Mark's rifle had stopped working thirty seconds after we started so his score wasn't recorded at all. Indeed, he spent his entire game wandering around aimlessly, resembling either a shell-shocked zombie or Colonel Kilgore striding up the beach in Viet Nam, defying the mortars and hot lead. Poor guy.

After my total failure to kill anything, I was desperate for a rematch – which we duly got, minus two or three players who lacked the energy to go again. This time I was determined to try different tactics – running around by myself got me nowhere, so instead I took a lesson from my years of Counter-Strike playing and took command of my 'team', instructing them to stay together no matter the cost while we stalk around the battlefield wolf-pack style – although of course, by 'taking command' I really mean 'screaming "regroup!" at the top of my voice whenever I felt lonely'.

Trying to use teamwork was a lot of fun, but it got us no-where – in fact we made it a lot easier for the opposing team to rack up the kills with their guerrilla tactics since, of course, when they spring their traps on us, they have six neatly arranged fish in their barrel whereas we'd spend ages fruitlessly chasing them down one at a time.

The game was over and once again, I came out on the wrong side of 'bottom' – but it didn't matter. We were dripping with sweat and aching and bruised but that didn't matter either; it was great fun and we were exhausted.

We drove back to our hotel and prepared ourselves for our last major excursion – an evening in a spa, something we'd all earned and were looking forwards to. After gathering our shorts and bags, we limped around the corner from the hotel to the giant, gleaming, modern building we didn't even know existed and checked ourselves in.

They've got a good system there – when you check in, you're issued with bracelets presumably containing RFID chips, and you use them to open and close your locker, buy drinks – any number of things. When you're finished, your bracelet is scanned and you're charged the correct amount. If you try and escape, it explodes and takes your arm off, Running Man-style.

Or so we surmised.

I wrapped my ruined flesh in my swimming shorts and we hit the pool, first heading to the outdoor part which, under any other circumstances, I'd call a romantic spot – you can float, totally relaxed, and look up at the infinite stars, totally quiet. In February, though, I'd call it COLD. REALLY cold. We had manliness competitions for a while – 'see how long you can expose your skin to the toe-curling freezing wind' before heading back indoors to take over the hot Jacuzzi pool thing.

We bought drinks from the poolside bar – and by poolside I mean you can actually swim up to it and buy drinks before taking them to your floating table – and explored the saunas and steam rooms and, interestingly, a room which contains nothing but a large circular piece of heated stone which, of course, we all lay on and moaned.

The sauna was a good deal more comfortable than the previous

night – probably owing to a lower temperature and more space – so we were all able to sit in it and enjoy it for a while, before partaking in that most peculiar of Nordic tradition: dousing yourself in ridiculously icy water immediately after being in a hot-ass room. It felt great, and we repeated the cycle a few times in a manner not unlike a sword being forged and tempered.

Alas it was over all too soon, and we departed – but not after having so much fun that we'd all planned on returning to stay in the hotel that formed the major part of the building and spending a week simply swimming and... Tempering ourselves.

We changed into civilian clothes back at our own hotel and headed to town for our dinner. We'd been alternately suggesting a Chinese restaurant (yes, we realise the ridiculousness of flying to the other side of the continent just to eat Chinese food) and a pancake joint but, after meeting with protests, we compromised and decided on hitting a Texan-style cantina.

Cue much humming of the Star Wars cantina theme.

Personally, I love Tex-Mex and so fully planned on gorging myself on nachos and chilli, which I did. Eventually. After our waitress remembered we existed.

During the meal, the occasional group of our friends would turn up, say their goodbyes and disappear – thankfully I've long since given up being sad at these partings since I know it'll only be a few months before I'm back in town.

Dave ordered the hot chilli, Ryan ordered the mild chilli. Ryan complained that his was too hot and Dave complained that his was too mild. No-one thought to switch. Much like the child's porridge in the fairy tale, my chilli was *just right*.

We packed and hit the sack – Dave and I staying up to watch *Soylent Green* on the television, which I'd never seen before (but of course knew everything about). I'll pause for a moment while you all say the famous quote to yourselves.

Done it? Good.

Chapter 9

Thursday, February 14: Jet Snag

We'd, by this time, still utterly failed to visit a supermarket for cheap booze and chocolates and so we'd planned on getting up extra early in the morning, taking the cars for petrol and finding a shop before check-in opens.

I would have to navigate the roads to meet up with our hosts – without assistance – and for the first time I was genuinely scared of failing because, if I did, we'd miss the 'plane – a nightmare scenario for me. The Fear almost destroyed me when I pulled into the rendezvous point and realised that our hosts weren't there – it was the wrong rendezvous point.

As it happens, they were waiting at the next stop and, after pausing to broadcast loudly that it wasn't my fault I got mixed up (and pausing to make sure everyone believed it – I have a reputation to maintain, after all) – we filled up with petrol and hit the supermarket.

My own hitting was fairly light – I didn't need booze, so I bought as much chocolate as I could afford and made good my escape. Alex, on the other hand, bought as much chocolate as he could *carry* – twenty-five Tupla bars, which he is hopelessly, deliciously addicted to.

We made it to the airport with the minimum of drama and I hurled the car keys back at the woman behind the rental desk, who

reminded me in a rather ominous fashion that if they found a DENT in the car, they'd take a ridiculous amount of money from my credit card.

With our baggage checked in, we said our final goodbyes to our wonderful hosts and the always-enchanting Team Belgium – who would be flying home later that day - and headed to the departure lounge to secretly cry like girls at having to leave, before heading off to duty free to buy more booze, which we fully intended to sell to other people. Eat it, Customs Officers.

Our flight back was strangely akin to having teeth pulled out for two and a half hours; we'd ascertained the maximum wireless range of a pair of DS's (the entire length of an Airbus A319) and played Mario Kart until my batteries ran dry. From then there was nothing to do but grit our teeth as the loud, rude family behind us pulled our seats, kicked us in the back and let their urchin children run free up and down the gangway, much to the annoyance of everyone else in the (utterly full) aeroplane, before comically earning one hundred and twenty loud 'tuts' as their repellent matriarch ignored the flight attendants and decided to rummage around for their stuff in the overheard lockers the moment the wheels touched tarmac.

I prayed for an emergency stop.

We landed at Stansted and embarrassingly said our goodbyes before it was time to part ways, except for Ryan who actually physically ran away from us as fast as he could go, and we skulked through Customs and Immigration together looking for all the world like a troupe of hobos. Finally, with alarming speed, just as quickly as they'd arrived – everyone had gone, and I was left alone to reflect what an awesome week we'd had.

There was nothing left for me to do but navigate my way through London to spend the remainder of this Valentine's day with my lady – but that's another story.