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PART ONE

*We never know the true worth of water
until the well is dry*

Thomas Fuller, Gnomologia 1732





CHAPTER 1

Snow was ripping away his senses, one by one. The horizon had disappeared and all Sim Atkins could do was focus on the back of the person in front of him. His fingers and toes had gone numb. Thin air and thick snowflakes fought for priority in his nose and throat. Stumbling through knee-high snow drifts, urged on by the muffled cries of a guide, Sim was gasping for oxygen. Big gulps merely delivered a mouthful of snowflakes that melted on his tongue. A welcome sip of water trickled down his throat. *Ahh, a drink of water.* The source of all his troubles, the source of everybody's troubles these days. He tried to control his breathing, deep inhalations through his nose, like a yoga exercise. But the situation was not helping his inner peace, not one jot.

Sim was clipped onto a rope, part of a chain of people trying to get down the mountain as quickly as possible. Gopal, the Ghurka who was leading the line, kept turning around to urge them onwards. The sound of distant explosions echoed off the sides of the mountains, sometimes accompanied by a flurry of movement as dislodged snow cascaded down.

The clouds were starting to part when there was a cry from the back of the human chain. The bald Rabten, who had provided Sim with warm clothes only a few minutes ago, pointed skywards with his pick-axe. “Chopper.”

Gopal looked around and spotted a small overhang of rock off to their left up a short, steep incline. “Head for the cover,” he shouted.

The helicopter flew closer and a pair of auto cannons opened fire. Bullets bit into the snow around Sim, hissing like hot iron on flesh. Sim’s partner, Freda, was lagging behind until Gopal threw her over his shoulder and carried her up the slope. All five of the team made it under the rocky out-crop by the time the helicopter had banked and started coming around for a second attack. The man who hadn’t spoken since Sim and Freda had been rescued unslung his sniper rifle and knelt down, using his left knee to steady his aim. He waited while the helicopter flew closer and then squeezed the trigger. The glass on the side of the cabin shattered and the aircraft began to spin out of control. It lost altitude and as it approached the ground swirls of snow gathered around the helicopter until its tail clipped one of the rocks. The aircraft folded in on itself as if it had been made of paper all along. A spark ignited the fuel tank and an orange fireball lit up the snowy scene for a moment.

Sim turned to the marksman to offer his congratulations when he heard a rumble like thunder just above the rocks they were cowering under. He stood up to see what was happening but Rabten grabbed hold of his clothes and hauled him down to the ground. Tonnes of snow swept around and over the outcrop for several seconds and then stopped just as quickly as it had started. For a moment the mountainside was quiet and still.

Gopal rose to his feet first. “Come on, there could be more *Black Whirlwinds* around. We need to make the treeline by dusk.”

Still clipped together, the group made its way further down the pass. They settled into a steady pace. The delays between distant explosions became longer and longer.

Don't suppose there's much left to destroy now, thought Sim.

They paused as the route down traversed a valley. Some of the snow drifts went up to Sim's waist and the surface ahead was no longer smooth but jagged.

The leader turned to the others. "Probably a glacial tongue under this snow. There may be crevasses, so stick close together."

Walking slowly forward, the group started to edge across the valley. Sim kept his eyes fixed on Freda in front of him, watching carefully where she trod, ready to grab the line in case she started to fall. After twenty minutes, his arms were getting tired from the continuous tension and he was beginning to think that Gopal had mis-diagnosed the lie of the land. His mind began to wander back to that prison cell. With a jolt on the rope, Freda flew out of sight. Not down into a yawning chasm but upwards. How was that possible? Then he realised why - he was the one falling, bumping down a face of rough ice. He thrashed his pick-axe in front of him, trying to grab a purchase on anything. At last it bit into the ice and his shoulder was nearly pulled from its socket as the arm took his full weight. Looking down he could see nothing but a dark gap that went further than he cared to imagine. Looking up he saw a thin slither of light and Freda wedged sideways a few metres above him, still clipped to the line, trying to right herself. He had to hold on so that Freda wasn't dragged down with him.

A voice from the surface shouted. "Don't try to move. Just hang on, we'll get you out."

Sim managed to grab the handle of the pick axe with his other hand and hung there staring at the rough, pale blue ice inches from his face. A reflection looked back at him in those moments

of terror. A distorted visage: the result of imperfections in the ice; or all that happened to him these past few weeks? Clinging on for his life, in a glacial crevasse on the far side of the world, he was an international OFWAT agent on a mission to save the world. That sounded crazy. Two months ago, the nearest he would have come to a scenario like this would have been one of his beloved virtual reality games.

Was it really only April when I received that phone call?



“Take that, you green lump of shite! Not so tough now are you?” The noise of blood gurgling from the orc’s throat was interrupted by a ring tone. Sim took off his game helm, blinked as his eyes adjusted to the real world and picked up the buzzing phone. “Hello?”

“Finally you pick up, Sim. It’s Charlie. I’ve been trying to get hold of you for the last ten minutes, what’ve you been up to?”

“Just bustin’ orc heads.”

“On a Friday night? Listen, loser, you need to come look at these readings.”

“Can’t it wait until Monday?”

“Do you think I would be phoning at this hour if it wasn’t urgent?”

“Well if it’s urgent, why don’t you send the data to my eye patch, man?”

“Ha ha, very funny. Last time I checked there were only 18 people in the UK with a mobile that worked, and neither of us is on that list. Get yourself down to the base. Another satellite’s just disappeared.”

Sim Atkins put down the phone and walked from his living room to his bedroom in two strides. The pair of round windows

either side of the front door – eyes that stared, unblinking, at the Sutherland mountains beyond – cast pools of moonlight onto the hall carpet.

He put on his biking leathers and went into the garage where he kept his blue Triumph Sprint. The ride from his house took him down the A9 across the Dornoch Firth. His headlight picked out an old stone post at the side of road, still claiming north was towards John O’Groats. He smiled; they’d never get round to correcting that one. Past the Glen Morangie distillery, through the back of Tain and out towards the OFWAT satellite tracking office next to the lighthouse at Wilkhaven.

The office was a squat building, with several large radar dishes on the flat roof. Only a couple of hundred metres away, the red and white stripes of Tarbat Ness lighthouse towered above the office as it flashed its warning. As he approached, Sim saw who was on guard duty: Rusty Jimmy. Grey-red hair and a spikey nose always reminded Sim of the old barbed wire running atop the perimeter fence. He doubted either provided much security to the OFWAT base.

“Evening to you Sim, it’ll be a late night for you calling in at this hour,” said Jimmy in his thick Glaswegian accent as the bike pulled up at the gate and Sim took off his helmet.

“Aye. Charlie’s got his knickers in a twist again. Probably having trouble getting the toaster to work.”

Jimmy managed a weak grin and lifted the barrier. Sim parked the bike and looked up in the sky on the off-chance he could see any signs of the lost satellite burning up on re-entry. He remembered the first satellite shower he saw seven years ago. A powerful solar flare had disrupted a dozen satellites at once and Sim had caught the news on an astronomy Twitter feed. He had raced outside with his dad to crane his neck at the Scottish night sky just in time to

see a series of improbably bright streaks of fire arcing overhead. By the time Sim had finished school there were not many satellites left to fall.

“So Charles, what’s so important that you drag me in at this time on a Friday night?” Sim asked as he entered the main room. His colleague was seated at a long desk adorned with a bank of screens and control pads. There were cups of half-drunk coffee strewn about, piles of boxes containing several weeks’ worth of cold pizzas and a practice putting hole at the far end of the room.

“It’s one of the *Drop Of Water* low-level cameras. We lost contact with it about 25 minutes ago, somewhere over Iceland,” said Charlie.

“The ‘A’ series has always been a bit flaky. Two to five year lifespan at best. What’s unusual about that?”

“This one was only launched last year. And there have been no reports of heat expansion in the upper atmosphere or any recent solar activity to account for the loss.”

“OK, better take a look at the last communication we had with it.”

Charlie pointed at the screen furthest from Sim, who walked past and sat down to browse the rows of code that represented DOW 149A’s last set of transmissions.

“This says the temperature went from normal to fatal in less than a second. I always thought re-entry burn-up took 30 seconds minimum. Weird.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” replied Charlie.

“A fry job then? Tracking data should still be able to see it but this trace just stops. You sure the dish is working?”

“Yep, I ran a full diagnostic just before you arrived.”

“But satellites can’t just vanish... unless... bloody hell.” Sim dragged his fingers through his hair. “An act of war? At the least, extremely sophisticated terrorism. This is not cool, not cool at all.”

He reached for the nearest pizza box, opened the lid and examined its contents. Something glistened at him and he re-closed the box. Sim wrote up his findings and zipped them to Birmingham HQ.

“So, any details of your love life you’d like to share?” asked Charlie as they waited to see if HQ responded to Sim’s report.

“Some country, or some group of nut-jobs, might’ve just declared war on us. How can you think about women at a time like this?”

Charlie shrugged his shoulders. “Why not? It’s not as if we can do anything about it stuck in this poxy out-post.”

“I guess. Hey, I got pretty frisky with this hot elven sorceress the other night. Sadly she turned out to be from Germany – and only 16 – so I don’t think there’s a future in that relationship.”

“I meant a real woman, not some pixellated fantasy.”

“Oh, one of those. The barmaid at the Castle Hotel smiled at me last Friday...though that could’ve been because I gave her a £10 tip by accident.”

Charlie grinned. “Hopeless... hang on, that’s Rosie, isn’t it? You’ve been soft on her for months. Accidental tip, my arse. When are you going to ask her out?”

Sim raised his hand to object and then looked away, remembering. Rosie had let him walk her home that night. The smell of the pub on her clothes mixed with vanilla perfume. And then a goodnight kiss – just a peck on the cheek – but he could still recall the warm gossamer touch of her lips. He reached for the putter and started practising as he cogitated some more. He was just about to go home for some sleep when the reply came through: report to Overseas Division, Centre City Tower immediately.

Oh crap, somebody actually believed my theory.

He rode home, quickly loaded the bike's top box with some spare clothes, downed a can of Bluebird to fight off his tiredness, and set off on the journey 500 miles north.

CHAPTER 2

**Six years earlier. Ethiopian Army Observation Post Guba,
5 kilometres from the Sudan border.**

'Praise God for this beautiful morning,' thought Jember Abdi as he watched the sun rise over the low mountain range to his right. The blackened, battered coffee pot on the stove was running low after Abdi's four hours of duty. He shook it disconsolately. Turning back towards the border he had been observing for three years, he raised the binoculars to his eyes once more and noticed a dust cloud had appeared while he'd been watching the dawn break in the opposite direction. That was odd for this time of year. He didn't recall any storm warnings. He turned on the radio.

'And scientists are now saying that the rapid spread of the South Atlantic Anomaly is behind the recent spate of satellite losses. The weakening of the geomagnetic field, which some are calling the Great Flux, is leaving our upper atmosphere vulnerable to solar flares. If you've just sent your friend a text, I'm afraid it might not arrive for the next few years. Over to Makeda for the weather.'

'Thank you Dawit. Well I don't know about delayed text messages, but the rains are certainly late to arrive this year. The forecast is clear blue skies for the rest of the week.'

He clicked off the radio and moved over to the tripod-mounted scope. The dust cloud was much closer now. Forty M1A3 main battle tanks trundled across the border. These were far superior to anything his own army, or the Sudanese, possessed.

Egyptian. How could these abominations be invading from Sudan?

He reached for the phone to alert HQ to the attack. The line was dead. He gulped; he couldn't remember what he was supposed to do if the phone wasn't working.

Abdi looked back through the scope – the invaders were now only two kilometres away. The sweep of tanks formed a crescent as they scythed through the countryside. The third vehicle from the left started to rotate its turret and raise its cannon. Abdi saw a blast of flame and smoke erupt from the end of its barrel.

“Oh my Lord.” He turned and sprinted for the door. He was halfway out when two dozen tungsten balls slammed into the building and ripped through the flimsy breeze blocks as if they weren't there. The roof collapsed instantly. The door blew outwards and smashed into the back of Abdi's head, knocking him unconscious as the over-sized shotgun pellets whistled past.

When he woke up everything looked fuzzy and his mouth was full of dust. He wracked his lungs and looked around for his canteen of water. The movement made him wince and he put his hand up to the back of his head. It was sticky, and when he brought his fingers back in front of him they were red. His vision started to focus but the severe headache would not go away. He retrieved his binoculars from the wreckage of the observation post and watched as more vehicles, carrying Egyptian troops, crossed the border. They were following the path gouged through the countryside by the tanks, like a colony of ants following the trail to some distant source of food.

He balled his hands into tight fists. He started to run towards the invaders; he would arm himself with any stick or stone he could find on the way.

If they think they can get away with this...

And then he stopped. He was being stupid. He was unarmed, on foot and the gash at the back of his head needed medical treatment. Getting himself killed was not going to help anybody, especially his... family. They needed to be warned.

It was two or three hours to the nearest town, away from the invasion. He reached it just after sunset. He had emptied his canteen some time ago, his vision was starting to blur again and his stomach refused to let him forget that his last food had been 24 hours ago. He passed many residents who were leaving the town in a hurry. People carrying their elderly relations, a man trying to carry a goat on his back, a girl with a headless, dirty doll in her hands. He smiled at her but she just stared back, a frozen mask. Eventually Abdi found the main hospital where one of the nurses bandaged his head and, fearing concussion, ordered him to stay overnight for observation.

The next morning, he woke up expecting to see the hospital full of casualties and refugees from the war. But as he paced the building doctors and nurses busied themselves as though it were just an ordinary day. There were no patients lying in the corridor, no crowds outside the front door hoping to get in. He caught a news bulletin on one of the hospital's mega-boards.

At least we are still in control of the TV stations, he thought.

The news revealed that the Egyptians had advanced no further than the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Abdi's stomach dropped. Hadn't his cousin gone to work on the dam last year?

Attempts to repulse the invasion had failed. Some military experts had been asked onto the news programme and were

discussing the likely next development in this invasion. They concluded that the Egyptians simply wanted to prevent phase three of the dam's project, when the Blue Nile would be diverted to the reservoir.

How could they sit there, all dressed up in suits and ties, discussing technical things like 'phase three'? Our homeland has been violated. People are dying. This isn't a game of chess. Why have you let this happen, Lord?

The days ticked by. He couldn't get through to his family or his regiment. Was his cousin alright? Abdi feigned ongoing concussion and stayed in hospital watching the news, hoping for an international response to his country's plight. A big fancy building on the other side of the world flashed up on the screen – the UN headquarters. Politicians discussed the fate of his country like they were haggling over a piece of furniture. The reporter said that the Egyptians had drawn on all their political allies to state their case as powerfully as possible: the 1959 Nile Agreement, the army's use of minimal force, Egypt's desperate need for an uninterrupted flow of the river. The United Nations were divided – the Chinese refused to condemn the Egyptians' transgression – and so the international response was ineffective and half-hearted.

Three days later, as Abdi travelled back towards his home town, the ground shook beneath his feet and then reverberated. At that same moment, the shock wave travelling through the air arrived, squeezed all hope from his chest and silenced his hearing. He knew instantly what it meant: the Egyptians had destroyed the dam. His country's biggest ever construction project – a source of pride throughout the land, their hope for cheap, plentiful electricity for the next one hundred years – had been pulverised.

This was no act of terrorism, this was war.

CHAPTER 3

If the battle for economic and military control of black gold – oil – was a dominant feature of the second half of the twentieth century, the control of blue gold – water – will be the key to the first half of the 21st century. OFWAT Overseas Division was established in 2022 to work alongside MI6 in monitoring and countering water-related terrorism and acts of war.

Serve, Protect, Quench, Ration.

OFWAT Overseas Division Training Manual Introduction

April 27th, 2028. A38(M) Aston Expressway.

After a short stop for fuel and some strong coffee on the M6 near Carlisle, Sim Atkins entered the outskirts of the Birmingham conurbation at dawn. The streets were still quiet – the buzz of a lively spring Saturday was at least three hours away. Sim was glad to be making this trip so early in the morning. Cities intimidated him and the thought of trying to navigate through the maze of roads around Birmingham during rush hour positively scared him.

Security at Centre City Tower was nothing like Wilkhaven. Card and finger print ID checks were overseen by two armed guards. Sim could not even remember having his prints taken during induction week a few years ago, but they were on the system sure enough. The metal roller gate retracted up into the ceiling. Leaving his bike in the basement car park, he took the elevator up to the sixth floor – Overseas Division. He was tired but excited at the prospect of finally getting to see the area where he had wanted to work when he first applied for a career at OFWAT.

There was a young female receptionist waiting for him. His biking leathers squeaked slightly as he approached.

“Hi, I’m the agent they sent for, from Wilkhaven. Urgent business.”

She started to say something and then her nostrils flared and her eyebrows lifted. She consulted her terminal. “Follow me please.”

Sim followed in silence and was shown into a small conference room where he was offered coffee and biscuits. There was a copy of the Overseas Division training manual on a unit in the corner of the room, which he started to flick through. He managed to complete the introduction before a tall, thin man entered. Sim guessed he was in his early 50s; his hair was peppery grey, matching his crisp suit. The knot on his green silk tie was loose and low and he wore small rimless spectacles which failed to hide the large bags under his eyes.

“Morning Atkins, thank you for coming so promptly. My name is Wardle, head of O.D.” The man’s nostrils twitched. “Long drive? You’ll have a chance to freshen up soon.”

“Pleasure to be here, Sir,” said Sim as he rose, recollecting similar encounters with officers from the Para regiment. He wished he had had time to at least put on a clean shirt.

“We read your report on the lost DOW satellite. Seemed like a sound piece of analysis, so we dug some more into it. It turns out that several European agencies have reported similar strange losses of polar-orbit satellites in recent weeks. I am assigning one of my Agents to lead the investigation into this. I seem to remember you applied for O.D. work when you joined OFWAT. How do you fancy tagging along and trying to help?”

“Too right! Well, if you think I can help, Sir.”

“Brightwell will be along in a moment, she’s one of our best.”

They sat and waited. Sim tried to make polite conversation but they had little in common, except extreme tiredness. After a few minutes, he heard a strange tip-tap noise coming from the corridor

outside and then the door opened. Whatever preconceptions Sim had about OD Agents, the person who limped into the room was quite different.

Freda Brightwell appeared to be in her late thirties, smartly dressed and with strawberry blonde hair. Usually her striking colour would have caught Sim's attention but all he really noticed was the walking stick she clutched in her right hand. It was black, telescopic and had a carved silver handle. Freda's eyes followed Sim's gaze to her stick. As she started to say something, Wardle interrupted.

"So what security clearance have you got, Atkins?"

Sim pulled his focus back to his new boss. "Level 3, Sir, standard for my line of work in Sat Dep."

"And what about that background check I asked for last night, Brightwell?"

Freda sat down next to her boss and opened a slim file. "Born March 2003 to Florence and William Atkins. Raised in Edinburgh. Standard schooling followed by university at St Andrews, graduated with a First in Satellite Communications. Internet activity shows he has an unhealthy obsession with online gaming as well as a monthly subscription to Hustler. Other than that seems pretty clean, no sign of political activity or affiliations. Three years part-time military service in the T.A. Commanding officers reviewed him as bright but cocky. Excellent fitness, strength good for his size."

Sim blushed. He thought about protesting that the Hustler subscription was an administrative error but before he could say anything, Wardle had continued:

"OK, let's raise that security clearance to level 2 and issue him a sidearm. First port of call for you two is Biggin Hill. MI6 have picked up intelligence: a possible terrorist attack on an airship

landing there soon. It's all a bit vague but lucky we got anything at all to go on. We have checked the manifests. Day after tomorrow there is one landing with a cargo of military-grade satellite components. I doubt it's a coincidence."

Freda's eyebrows pinched together. "Sir, are you sure this is a good idea?"

Wardle stood up. "When you become head of the division, you can choose which missions to send your agents on. Until then I expect you to follow orders."

"I meant sending Atkins with me."

"You know most of our agents are busy with the Svalbard incident. Besides, Atkins has experience in the army and expertise in satellites."

Freda lowered her voice, almost whispering. "You know why I'm asking, Sir."

"We don't have any choice," Wardle said.

Sim blinked as his brown eyes started to feel too dry. He was ten years old again, left standing on the side of a football pitch as neither captain wanted him on their team. As they rose to leave, Sim offered his hand to help Freda up.

She ignored him and heaved herself out of the chair. "Come on, you'll need a wash and some rest before we start your induction."