

Death and the Atom Bomb

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Chapter 1 - Johnny

Johnny Jenkinson stood facing the mirror in the school toilets and smiled at himself. It was hard to think that just two years before he had been the new boy at school, the victim of Toby Brown and his gang, nearly killed in a road accident and had actually saved the world with his best friend Eddie, the Death of children. Since then, Toby Brown had been expelled and Johnny had not only made lots of new friends but had become much more confident and was really starting to enjoy his new life in the city. Similarly, at home, although his dad's job as a computer salesman had never really grown in the way that he'd hoped, both of his parents were comfortable with their lives and together they had become a very happy and content family.

Lost in thoughts of his recent past and his adventures with Eddie in Deathville, Johnny didn't hear the door to the toilets softly open and a figure creep up stealthily behind him.

"Boo!" shouted the figure, causing Johnny to jump. "Ha ha! Made you jump, didn't I?"

"Yes, Simon," said Johnny somewhat wearily, "you certainly did." Simon was a bit shorter than Johnny and a lot wider, with an open, friendly face and a big pair of glasses held together with a worn-out piece of sticking plaster. One of Simon's favourite tricks was to creep up behind people and try to scare them, but despite this rather annoying habit, he was one of Johnny's best friends.

"So, what are you going to do for the holidays?" asked Simon and before Johnny could answer he continued: "I think we're going abroad, for a couple of weeks at least. Probably to the beach knowing my mum and dad, as that's where they always go if they get the chance."

"I'm not sure," said Johnny. "I think we'll be staying at home this year, as Dad's always busy with work these days and Mum doesn't like to go too far without him."

"Oh well," said Simon, "I'm sure that you'll have a good time and we should definitely catch up before I go." And with that, he gave Johnny a huge slap across the back and turned to leave. As he reached the door he stopped and called out: "Hey, you should get a

move on. Trudy will be waiting for us at the school gates and you know what she's like... she'll only wait so long before she gets bored and then we'll really be in for it."

Johnny smiled. Trudy was from a different school but was also one of his best friends. She was a bit of a tomboy, with fiery red hair and an equally fiery temper, which often got her into trouble. She often blamed her temper on the fact that she'd been orphaned at an early age when both her parents were killed in a car crash, but deep down she was more sad than angry and both Johnny and Simon knew that once you got past her prickly exterior she was as good a friend as anyone could want.

With one last glance at the mirror, Johnny turned and followed Simon out of the toilets. As he did so, the school bell rang, signalling not only the end of the day but the end of the school year and the beginning of the glorious summer holidays ahead.

Chapter 2 - MalCorp

Far away from Johnny's school, on the other side of the city, was MalCorp; one of the biggest companies in the land and home to the mysterious and reclusive Malthus Devryn. The MalCorp building was the tallest building in the city and towered over everything around it, shining in the sunlight like an icicle made of glass, steel and chrome. And on this particular day, if you had craned your neck and looked up towards the very top of the skyscraper, you might just have seen a tall, shadowy figure looking back down at you.

Malthus Devryn turned slowly away from the window of the boardroom and took his place at the head of a huge wooden table. No one knew how old he was or how long he'd been chairman of the company, but there was no doubt about it that he was both a brilliant and ruthless businessman, who had destroyed countless competitors in order to make MalCorp a success. Steepling his long, thin hands together, his pale, papery skin stretching like parchment across his knuckles, he rested his chin on them and regarded his other company directors through dark, deep-set eyes.

"Gentlemen," he said in a surprisingly rich voice considering his outward appearance. "In the last two years, we have more than doubled our profits and halved our expenses. We are more efficient now than ever before. This is good, but it is not good enough. Not for me, not for you and certainly not for this company. We want global domination, do we not? We want MalCorp to be the biggest company in the world, do we not? We want to go down in history as the greatest businessmen that ever lived, do we not?"

"Yes, yes. Of course, we do. Of course, we do," chorused the other company directors, in agreement and awe at the legendary figure before them.

"In that case, we need to make changes. Sweeping changes. And those changes start with you," said Malthus darkly. "Effective immediately, I will take complete control of this company. Your services are no longer required. You have neither the passion nor dedication to do what needs to be done to make this company truly great. Starting tomorrow, I will begin the next and greatest stage in this company's long and proud history."

The other directors were shocked. Some began to protest; others simply could not speak. One particular director, a little younger than the rest, jumped to his feet and thumped the table, shouting at Malthus: "You can't do this! There are rules."

"You foolish little man," said Malthus. "I just have. Now please, all of you leave at once and without further protest, as I have other, more important business to attend to. You really wouldn't want me to have to call security, would you?"

And with that, Malthus rose from his seat and turned to stare out of the window at the city below, while the now ex-company directors filed out of the boardroom, grumbling bitterly to one another as they went.

Once the last director had left the boardroom and the doors were closed behind him, Malthus turned again from the window and called out a single word: "Sneeds!"

A small door, hidden in the side of the boardroom opened and from it, emerged a man that could only be described as slimy. Everything about him, from the ill-fitting butler's suit he was wearing, to the slicked-down hair on his head seemed greasy. Even his face looked squishy, as if someone had taken a normal face and then squeezed it from top and bottom like a squash ball. His tiny, piggy eyes were so deep-set into his blotchy face that they looked like

raisins and his hook-like nose sat on top of two rubbery, sausage-like lips. He didn't so much walk across the boardroom, as slither.

As he reached Malthus, the chairman said, "Ah, there you are Sneeds."

"Indeed, sir, indeed. Always at your service, sir," replied Sneeds, in a whining, grovelling tone.

"Bring me the Head of the Computing Division immediately, Sneeds. I have something that I wish to discuss with him," commanded Malthus.

"Of course, sir," replied Sneeds. "I will fetch him immediately." And with that, he slithered back out of the room through the little side door.

A few minutes later, the main doors of the boardroom were thrown wide open and the Head of the Computing Division was roughly shoved into the room by Sneeds. The man looked absolutely terrified. He was trembling and sweating, and his eyes continually darted around the room, as if searching for any possible escape route.

"Sit down, man!" barked Malthus, pointing to one of the boardroom chairs. Still standing himself, he continued: "Now tell me. Have you managed to do it yet?"

The terrified man collapsed into the nearest chair and fell forward onto the boardroom table, his head buried in his hands. "Well?" asked Malthus again. "Have you finished it?"

With a groan of despair, the Head of the Computing Division lifted his head from the table and looking at Malthus through wide, fearful eyes, said: "No. I haven't managed to finish it yet. I've got an entire team working on it and we're getting nowhere. It's so much harder than any of us thought. We're working night and day, but to be honest, I don't think what you want can be done; not by us at least. And even if we could complete it, if it got into the wrong hands, then the consequences could be catastrophic."

"Is that so?" said Malthus in a soft, slow voice. "Well normally, I'm not a man that accepts failure, but in this case, I can see that I've been asking too much of you. You've done your best and that's all you can do."

The Head of Computing looked at Malthus, his face both confused and relieved at the same time. "You mean you don't mind..." he started to say, but Malthus cut him off, his voice taking on a sharper, darker edge.

"No! What I mean is that you and your team are not up to the job and so I must find a more motivated individual to take your place and achieve what you cannot."

Turning to Sneeds, he said: "Sneeds, the current Head of the Computing Division appears to be unwell. I fear it may be terminal. Please dispose of him immediately and find me a more suitable individual as his replacement."

"Of course, sir," replied Sneeds, his thick, sausage lips parting to reveal two rows of needle-like teeth. "It would be my pleasure."

Turning to confront the Head of the Computing Division, who was now sobbing uncontrollably on the boardroom table, Sneeds said in an unpleasant hiss: "Don't worry mister computer man. You're obviously not well. Just come with me and I'll take you

somewhere hot to recover... somewhere really hot!” And with a little chuckle, he began dragging the doomed Head of Computing out of the boardroom through the little side door.

Malthus turned once more to look out of the window at the sprawling city below him. At the edge of his hearing, he thought he could hear screams from the soon to be ex-Head of the Computing Division. He wondered what Sneeds was doing to him. The greasy little man was highly unpleasant but a necessary evil for a man like Malthus. It was so difficult doing business these days he reflected, especially when global domination was your aim. I just hope that the new Head of Computing is better than the last one, he thought to himself, as the screams slowly faded away.

Chapter 3 – The Holidays Begin

The following morning Johnny practically bounced out of bed. Hooray! No school and nearly eight weeks of fantastic summer holidays ahead, he thought to himself. Looking out of his bedroom window he could see that the sun was shining, the sky was blue, the birds were singing, and the day ahead was all his. After a quick shower and an even quicker breakfast, Johnny's next task was to get the gang together. A couple of quick phone calls later and there was a knock at the door, announcing the arrival of Trudy and Simon.

Simon was wearing his favourite T-shirt, an old faded thing, which, unfortunately, was far too small for him and showed off a little too much of his wobbly stomach for comfort. To make things worse, his baggy shorts completely failed to hide his pale schoolboy's legs, which glinted in the sun.

Trudy was dressed in her trademark pair of grubby jeans and a ripped T-shirt, which suited her down to the ground. In the summer morning sunlight, her red hair seemed to be on fire and her freckles gave her an even more fearsome appearance than usual.

"Okay guys," said Johnny, "what's the plan for today?"

"Not sure," said Simon, who appeared a bit downcast now that Johnny thought about it. Usually, Simon was full of ideas for things to do and was always quick to share them. Some were a bit silly — like the time he'd wanted the team to try bungee jumping inside the local ice cream factory — but most were fairly good, and the gang usually had a pretty fun time following his suggestions.

"Is everything alright, Simon?" asked Johnny. "You seem a bit quiet this morning. Come to think about it, you didn't sound too happy when I called you earlier."

"Well," said Simon. "It's just that my dad came home about an hour ago and said that he's been told there's no longer a job for him at MalCorp. Mum's really upset and has been crying ever since he came home, and Dad's just gone really quiet. Somehow I don't think we'll be going abroad this year."

"That just sucks!" exclaimed Trudy, going from dead calm to exploding volcano in a fraction of a second. "Your dad has been there for ages and he works really hard from what you've told us. How dare they take his job away. That's so unfair! We should do something right now, like storm in there and hold his boss hostage until they give him his job back."

"There's nothing we can do," said Simon sadly. "He's been given an official letter, as has the rest of his team and been told not to come back... ever."

"That's awful," said Johnny. "Your dad works in the Computing Division, doesn't he? My dad's in computer sales, so I think they might know each other. I'm really sorry to hear about your dad, Simon and I hope that my dad doesn't come home with similar news."

"Anyway, standing around moaning isn't going to do any of us any good and there's a whole day for us to fill up with exciting things, isn't there?" said Trudy, who had calmed back down again. "Simon, it looks like you're stuck with us for the summer, so cheer up," she said, giving him a friendly hug that nearly dislocated his shoulders. "And I've got the perfect idea for where we can go." With that, she jumped on her bike and rode off down the road yelling: "Catch me if you can!" to Johnny and Simon, who set off behind her in hot pursuit.

Trudy led the boys on a glorious chase, hardly slowing down for anything in the way, be it animal, pedestrian, or vehicle. Pretty soon the cramped, terraced houses of the city gave way to the more spacious homes of the suburbs, which in turn gave way to the isolated houses of the countryside, which Johnny was so familiar with.

Once in the countryside proper, the chase intensified. Trudy took the boys down winding country lanes, lined with tall hedges. She took them over rolling hills, rich with farmland, and the glorious smell of wild flowers and crops ripening in the summer sun. She took them past an old, abandoned windmill, its wooden sails and stone walls crumbling with age; startling a family of rabbits that had strayed too close to the road. And finally, after what must have been over two hours of intense cycling she led them into a small wooded area. Huge, ancient trees, overgrown with moss and lichen surrounded them on all sides and the boys were glad to be in the cool shade that their broad leaves gave, after having been in the sun for so long.

“So, what do you think?” said Trudy, panting after the effort of the bike ride. “Was it worth it?”

“Oh yes,” said Johnny and Simon together. “This place is fantastic. How did you ever find it?”

“My parents took me here a few times when I was just a little girl,” said Trudy in a distant voice. “They loved the peace and quiet, and the fact that no-one ever comes here. It was their special place. Well, our special place really, I guess. If you stay really still and quiet, you’ll be amazed at all the animals that will turn up to see what’s going on.”

And sure enough, after only a few minutes in the still of the wooded glade, a family of rabbits turned up (not the same ones that Trudy had previously scared, you’ll be pleased to know), quickly followed by a badger and a fox. Even a young deer appeared and began grazing on the grass not two feet away from Simon, who had to use all of his self-control not to jump up and down in excitement. Overhead, the initially silent glade began to fill up with the sound of birdsong, as first one, then another and another woodland bird began to sing. Finally, Simon couldn’t stay quiet anymore and whispered: “Trudy, it’s amazing,” at which point, all of the animals and birds scurried and flew away back into the safety of the surrounding trees.

“Well, it is if you stay quiet,” said Trudy somewhat sourly, shooting a fierce glare towards Simon, who looked down at his feet in embarrassment at breaking the spell of the magical place.

“Why haven’t you ever taken us here before, Trudy?” asked Johnny. “I mean, Simon is right. This place is amazing.”

“Well, as I said, this was my parents’ special place and I don’t really like to share it with other people. I often come here when I’m sad and it cheers me up. I guess with the news about Simon’s dad earlier today, I thought it might cheer him up too,” she replied.

“It’s certainly done that!” said Simon, with a smile.

“And this isn’t even the best part,” said Trudy mysteriously. “Follow me.” And with that, she led them down a tiny, animal track that neither of the boys had even noticed, so well was it concealed.

After a couple of hundred metres of following the track, dodging overhanging tree branches, spiky thorn bushes and roots that threatened to trip them up at every step, they arrived at a wall of vegetation. At first sight, it looked impenetrable, a solid mass of branches and plants tangled together into a wild vertical mat. Trudy looked at the boys and whispered: “Ready?”

Johnny and Simon both nodded in silence, as Trudy took hold of a handful of the wall of plants and pulled it back, to reveal a lake of the bluest water that Johnny had ever seen. At the far end of the lake, an enormous waterfall churned the water into foam, sending rainbow coloured spray high into the air. From the other side of the plant-wall, not a sound could be heard, but once Trudy had opened it up, the roar of the waterfall was deafening.

“Dare I say it?” shouted Johnny over the noise of the waterfall in the distance. “But this place is even more magnificent than the wooded glade.”

“I told you that it wasn’t the best part, didn’t I?” yelled Trudy over the din and running through the gap she’d made, she jumped into the lake, clothes, shoes, and all. “Come on in!” she shouted as she surfaced. “The water is lovely!”

And she was right. Johnny and Simon both jumped into the lake as Trudy had done and the water was indeed lovely. After the heat of the earlier bike ride, it was both cooling and refreshing, and invigorating too. All three of them spent the next hour diving and splashing around in the lake, laughing and joking, and without a care in the world. Finally, exhausted from all the swimming, they laid on the bank of the lake, their clothes drying in the heat of the sun, each looking up at the summer sky in silence, each lost in their own individual thoughts.

With late afternoon approaching, Johnny finally sat up and said: “We should be getting home, otherwise it’s going to be dark when we get back.”

The others agreed and as silently as they had arrived, they left the magical woodland glade with its hidden waterfall and cycled at a leisurely pace back towards the city. As they made their way home, the sun started to set, turning the sky a rich mixture of gold, orange and red.

Ah, the first day of the summer holidays. It doesn’t get much better than this, Johnny thought to himself.

And unfortunately for him, he was right.