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Opening extract from

Jake Highfield: Chaos Unleashed

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Present Day

A WALK IN THE PARK

As usual the intelligence had been accurate. Four armed guards patrolled the perimeter, each covering one side of the fenced industrial site, armed with assault weapons and reporting in at half-hourly intervals.

Chaos' mouth twitched into a smile as the guard on the north fence made a half-hearted report into the radio microphone pinned to his lapel. "Tango one, 23 hundred hours. Situation black, repeat, situation black, over." Lying in wait in the undergrowth he knew he now had thirty minutes to complete his mission.

As he carefully lifted himself from his lying position, a pile of leaves to his side was disturbed. In the still air of the autumn night, the rustling seemed to amplify amongst the trees like a round of applause. The guard spun, his lethal firearm raised at the darkness before him. Chaos froze in his half-crouched pose, unsure if he had been seen or not, but no challenge was issued. The guard continued to scan the wood, trying to pinpoint the location and source of the sound.

Chaos controlled his breathing, forcing it into a slow, steady rhythm. He ignored the tightening grip of pain that pulled at his thigh muscles as he held like a statue.

He knew he could not afford to give the guard's eyes the slightest twitch of movement to catch onto.

A hedgehog appeared from the shadow of a tree, oblivious to the tense situation or its role in it. The noise from its movement brought the guard's attention and gun swinging round in its direction. Chaos mentally swore at the stupid creature as it plodded casually up to the back of his right hand and decided that this would be a great place to stop and sniff around.

The guard let out a throaty chuckle, relaxed and lowered his rifle. "Hello, little fella," he said in an almost sing song voice. "You gave me a bit of a scare."

Chaos watched the guard with the intensity of a tiger watching its prey. Then the guard began to walk towards the hedgehog. 'Just my luck to get Private Tree-hugger,' he thought as the guard carefully crept forwards in an obvious attempt not to scare the small beast away.

As he reached down to scoop the hedgehog up, the guard froze as he realised he was looking into the eyes of another human. For a split second he didn't know what to do. His mind ran through a catalogue of reactions but before he could select one, Chaos saved the guard from having to make a decision with the use of his wrist gun.

The unconscious guard was a dead weight. Too big to drag into cover easily, Chaos decided to leave him where he fell. The unkempt grass would keep him hidden. Besides, he counted on being long gone before the man was discovered or came round from the effects of the tranquilliser dart which was designed to induce

an eight hour sleep. Scrambling over to the fence, Chaos made quick work of the metal lattice with bolt cutters. He was soon through the perimeter, scurrying between the maze of storerooms and offices that littered the site in a random design.

He used the cover offered by walls and shadows to hide him from prying CCTV cameras that swept the grounds; avoiding the glare of security lights that shot pools of light in ineffective directions. It was easy work to move undetected through such sloppy defences and Chaos was soon crouched by a fire door.

From a pocket Chaos pulled out a matt black box the size of a pack of playing cards. It had what looked like a blank credit card attached to it by a flat wire connector. He slipped the card into the card reader by the door handle and flicked a switch on the box. Numbers flickered across a small LCD screen. They blurred too fast for his eyes to follow, so Chaos turned his attention to the immediate area, checking for any sign of movement.

Everything so far was just as he had been told it would be; the lax security, the weakness in the system at the fire-door, but he kept alert nonetheless. He knew from experience he could never be sure of anything. Even in an apparently safe situation there was no knowing when another 'hedgehog' might show up to make things more interesting.

A click and the rattling buzz of a latch being held open by electro-magnets drew his attention back to the door. He snatched the card out of the lock, pulled at the door and slipped inside. With deliberate care,

he picked up a crumpled cigarette end and jammed the door onto it, leaving it slightly open giving him a quick escape route, should he need it. He checked his watch. He knew he had eighteen minutes remaining, before the four patrolling guards would report in again, or at least three of them would. He knew he would have to speed up his progress.

However, speed and haste were two different things, as he had been told numerous times during training. Before he dared venture deeper into the facility he had to check that his box of tricks had taken care of the building's internal security. Chaos looked up at a movement sensor hanging high up on the wall next to the ceiling. He knew, clever as the electronic gadget was, like all equipment, it could go wrong. In the final analysis a crude test was the only way to be 100% sure.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered and waved his arms high above his head. The red light on the sensor blinked on and off rapidly but no alarm was triggered. Beneath his black ski mask, Chaos grinned, giving his pocket where the card reader was stowed again a congratulatory pat.

He'd spent much of the day before the mission memorising the blueprint of the building's layout and the route he would take, so Chaos made no delay in reaching the door of the room he required. The name plate 'Dr Watkinson' confirmed he had the right place and after quickly forcing the inadequate lock, he was inside the office.

The room was sparsely furnished, as Chaos had expected. Other than the small desk, with a solitary phone, and a chair

under the only window, the office was clear of any clutter at all. No pot plants, no filing cabinets, not a single framed photo of a loved one. In contrast to this, each available centimetre of wall space was floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, packed tightly with journals on weighty scientific topics. Chaos remembered from studying Watkinson's file that he was a paranoid technophobe, especially when it came to computers and the absence of one on his desk supported this.

It was this mistrust of computer technology that meant Chaos had been sent into the field. Normally, the Academy Tech Department hackers would gather all the required information remotely, sliding unnoticed into computer files to lift the electronic data that was needed. But Watkinson's mistrust of the internet and his not totally unfounded belief that all computers were easy prey to spyware meant he employed the old ways of pen and paper to back up his own memory. That was what Chaos was here to download, in a similar old fashioned method.

Details for his mission had been exact right down to which carpet tile needed to be lifted to access the floor safe. With time running out, Chaos was more than pleased to be armed with these facts. He located the safe and reached for another piece of kit. Chaos found himself wondering with amusement what Dr Watkinson would make of such advanced computerised wizardry being operated in his office without his permission. No doubt he would be none too pleased – for several reasons.

Placing a small LCD screen on the safe door, he

flicked a switch and was given a high resolution, three dimensional picture of the inside workings of the safe's locking mechanism. Chaos's hands moved deftly over the combination wheel as the screen fed him the diagram of complicated tumblers falling into place. Within a minute the safe was open and Chaos was photographing the information he needed from the papers laid out on the office floor.

Chaos checked his watch; six minutes remained until the perimeter guards would check in by radio again. The papers had been replaced; the safe had been relocked and covered with the carpet tile, which just left him with one job to do. He reached into a pouch on his belt and from it produced a can of spray paint. 'Time to give Dr Watkinson an art attack,' he thought to himself, grinning as he shook the can before spraying across the packed shelves of books.

"See, Dr. Watkinson, even these low-tech back-up files aren't completely safe from corruption," muttered Chaos as he scrawled the three letters of a well known animal rights group in a rough design in day-glow yellow across a large block of book spines.

The cry of, "Stop right there!" from the office doorway genuinely made Chaos jump. Instinctively and without turning, he slowly raised his hands, still holding the condemning evidence of the spray can.

Chaos heard the familiar sound of a weapon being cocked. "Turn around and identify yourself!" barked his unwelcome discoverer.

He did as he was told, checking his watch with a quick

glance as he did so. There were still three minutes before the perimeter guards would report in. If he could get out of this situation quickly enough he could be on his way before things got too hot. Chaos looked at his captor and noted the slight red swelling on the man's neck. He realised this was the perimeter guard he'd knocked out on his way in. Something was wrong. He should have been down for at least eight hours.

The guard kept his gun trained on the intruder as he read the luminous vandalism. "A-L-F. You one of those animal rights freaks?" he barked.

"Is the hedgehog alright?" asked Chaos calmly in a mocking tone.

"You're in it deep, mate," warned the guard. Chaos could see the man was intent on keeping his finger on the assault rifle's trigger as he fumbled with his other hand to reach his radio microphone. "Tango One. Situation Red. Repeat, Situation Red. Intruder, sector seven. Over." The radio replied with a static hiss.

Chaos realised the soldier hadn't reported in until this point. Maybe he was trying to save face? Trying to get the situation under control before anyone found out, avoid the embarrassment of having been taken out on the job... especially by some animal rights activist. Whether this was true or not didn't matter, but it would explain the lack of howling alarms and the absence of running personnel.

"Tango One," tried the soldier again. Then again even louder, as if shouting into the radio would make a difference to the blocked signal.

"Do you want me to have a go?" asked Chaos, purposely

putting more pressure on the already stressed guard. "I'm quite good with electronics."

"Shut it, you!" The man abandoned the radio and gripped the weapon with both hands again. "One move from you and I'll decorate the rest of the office with your guts!"

Chaos nodded slowly to show he understood and that he was 'shutting it', pronto.

"Take your mask off!" ordered the guard. "Slowly!"

Chaos reached down with his right hand and pulled the black ski mask up high enough to reveal his face.

The guard's expression and shoulders dropped simultaneously as he visibly lost the nervous tension in the rest of his body. "Jesus, you're..."

Chaos knew a queue for action when he heard one. Before the armed man could react to his lightning movement, he won the second battle of reflexes that night. His heavy boot collided with the side of the guard's knee forcing the joint against its normal movement axis. The ball snapped through the side of the socket with a sickening crack.

The guard folded to the side as his damaged leg could no longer support his weight. As he gave out a high pitched scream, the pain reflex that etched itself across his face also tightened his trigger finger. Bullets sprayed from his gun, cutting an arc as guard and gun fell toward the floor, first drilling the ceiling then ripping pages from the books they bit into and finally shattering the office window into a rain of silver fragments.

Chaos kicked the fallen soldier's gun across the office floor to keep it out of his grasp. He could see at that

present moment the soldier's hands were only concerned with clamping his shattered leg, as if merely by being there they could heal the damaged limb.

An alarm howled out into the night air and Chaos slid his ski mask back down. Underneath he was grinning like a cat that had been locked in an aquarium. Leaping through the destroyed window he rolled onto the concrete below and into the building's shadow, his heart banging like a hammer.

'At last this mission is getting interesting,' thought Chaos. 'Time for a game of evade and escape.' He laughed to himself and then muttered, "99, 100, here I come, ready or not."

Chaos sprinted forward and melted into the night.

Three Years Earlier

RECRUITMENT DRIVE

Jake sat in the small office and grinned as the man behind the desk wiped the sweat from his bald head with a tatty greyed handkerchief. He flicked through the loose pages of a file. Stress was eating away at the overweight man.

"What are we going to do with you, Jake?" he said slowly without lifting his head from his reading. "I'm really at a loss this time."

"Don't worry about it, Mr Humpty—"

"Humphrey," corrected the bald man, fixing Jake with a stare that was more plea than threat.

"Yeah, right," repeated Jake, his dark brown eyes not wavering from the challenge. "I wouldn't worry about it, Mr Humpty. Something always comes up at the last minute."

Mr Humphrey lost what little control he had left and leapt to his feet. "There is no last minute this time, Jake." He tried to shout but it came out more like a squeak of panic. "We've run out of options! Look, look," he added flicking through the papers in the file. "I've tried everything I can to help you but you always do something—"

"To mess it up?"

Mr Humphrey stood like a statue for a second before

letting out a deep sigh obviously trying to let his years of experience get a grip on his composure. "I know you've had problems, Jake. All the kids here have but you... you seem to wallow in it, revel in it."

Jake stood up from his seat, at eleven years old and five foot four in height he was already two inches taller than his case worker. He knew this made Humpty feel uneasy and he often played on the fact. He pulled a sheet of paper from the file and read from it. "What about Mr and Mrs Rank? Maybe they'd be willing to give me another chance?"

Mr Humphrey snatched the paper from Jake's hand. "Another chance to give them high blood pressure I suppose. Since they fostered you, they have removed their names from the fostering programme."

"Shame," smiled Jake. "They were such nice people."

"Too nice for you—" began Humphrey before he was able to stop himself. "I'm sorry Jake, I didn't mean that. Please sit down."

As Jake retook his seat he could see a flicker of relief on the face of Mr Humphrey as he regained the height advantage. "What now then? Am I doomed to spend the rest of my days here?" Jake said, indifferently.

Mr Humphrey let a rare smile break through his stressed face. "You don't exactly spend most of your days here anyway, do you Jake? Between running away and spending time in police custody, I think you're more familiar with the outside world than I am."

"You should get out of the office more, widen your experience or," added Jake with a smirk, "at least try to

heighten it anyway."

Mr Humphrey ignored Jake's smart comment, occupying himself instead with straightening and closing Jake's file. "The fact of the matter, I'm afraid," he said eventually looking at Jake with what appeared to be genuine sorrow, "is that it's out of my hands now."

"What do you mean?" said Jake sitting up in his seat taking full notice for the first time since he'd been called into the oppressive office.

Mr Humphrey lifted Jake's file and banged the edge of it on the desk a couple of times to tidy the substantial contents before laying it flat on his desk once more. "You are not my problem anymore, Jake. You're being transferred."

"Transferred," said Jake swallowing. "Where to?"

There was short loud knock on the office door.

"Come in," snapped Mr Humphrey loudly.

The door was pushed open by a tall, thin man in a dark suit. Everything about the man said 'tidy and in order', from the tip of the perfectly cut hair to the shine on his black shoes. With two strides the man was in the office and at Jake's side.

"Mr Humphrey?" asked the man, holding out his hand in greeting.

"Yes," replied the bald man shaking the offered hand, "and you must be?"

"Packard. Sorry I'm a bit late. Terrible trouble with the traffic, but speeding only causes accidents, doesn't it?"

"Quite true, Mr Packard," smiled Humphrey, seemingly pleased to be in the presence of someone that didn't reek of trouble, like most of the people he had to deal with.

Jake could sense the unease the short man felt at the other man's six-foot-plus stature.

Mr Packard turned and looked at Jake. "And you must be Jake," he said ruffling his hand through Jake's thick, brown hair.

Jake pulled his head back sneering with disgust. He had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that the last two years spent bending Humpty to his will were about to be thrown away and he was going to have to start all over again on this... this, touchy-feely prat. Jake stared as defiantly as he could directly into Packard's eyes, firing the first shot in the war he had silently declared on this new enemy.

Packard absorbed the hard look and continued to smile without flinching. "I can understand you not trusting me Jake, but soon you and I will be the best of pals. What do you say, hey?"

Jake opened his mouth to voice his opinion on the subject but Mr Humphrey, well aware of Jake's ability to use colourful language, intervened quickly. "Well, here's his file Mr Packard. I've arranged to have his belongings packed and ready for collection on your way out." He thrust the bulging brown card folder into the man's hand. "I hope... I'm sure you'll have better luck getting through to Jake than I did." Humphrey glanced down at his desk unable to hold the look of either of the other two people present in his office.

Jake couldn't help taking pride in Humphrey's genuinely upset look, brought on by his deep feeling of failure. It gave him a sense of confidence for his new job of work,

namely Packard.

"Well," laughed Packard. "I'll try my best." He paused and looked at Jake again. "Actually we'll try our best, won't we, Jakey boy?" he said, ruffling his hair again.

Jake jerked away from the hand so violently he almost fell out of his seat. "My name's Jake," he hissed, vehemently.

"See that?" Packard chortled. "We're already on first name terms."

He held out his hand once again. "Nice to meet you, Mr Humphrey, and sorry about the fleeting visit. I'm running a bit late. Still, you never know, we may meet again, hopefully then we'll have more time to get to know each other better?"

Mr Humphrey smiled vaguely in reply before turning to Jake. "Good luck, Jake," he said almost offering his hand but stopping himself at the last second, realising the futility of the gesture.

Jake's grin returned once more. He thought he owed it a final outing for his old adversary. "You too, Mr Humpty. Avoid any high walls, you don't want a great fall or anything like that."

"Come on, mate," said Mr Packard, nudging Jake toward the door. "I'd like to get you settled into your new home before night fall."

Jake fell forward stubbornly. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, you'll love it," said Mr Packard. "It's perfect for a lad like you."

'We'll see about that,' thought Jake, leaving Humpty's office. The familiar door clicked shut behind him for the

last time. As he walked away Jake couldn't help imagining Humpty indulging in a dance of joy in his tiny office; a wobbly, sweaty jig accompanied by a child-like song something along the lines of 'I've got rid of Highfield. I've got rid of Highfield'. The thought of Humpty being happy did not make Jake feel comfortable at all.