

War Games

The day was young. The rising sun shone brilliantly, its rays dancing through a labyrinth of corrugated iron blocks, chasing the shadows of the night into the recesses of the disused industrial estate. The chilling mist, which lingered as a signal of the threat of winter, was slowly conquered by the crusading sunlight. The rain of the previous day had relented, leaving the concrete lying battered and defeated underfoot. Thomas shielded his weary eyes, dazzled by the sun as it gleefully skimmed across the puddles entrenched all around. Silhouetted against a foreboding mass of iron and concrete, he scanned the battlefield, pensively considering the day ahead. Before him stood low, crumbling granite blocks and wire fences, peppered with holes; beyond these again there rose the high chimneys of grey weathered stone. He crouched, constantly wary of the enemy threat. A distant cry signaled the start of the madness, and the familiar crack of rifles was instantly omnipresent. Bullets and voices screamed through the morning air, slicing through the terrible chill which shrouded the surroundings. A quick glance and Thomas waved his men into action, and the dangerous game of war was underway...

As the adrenaline coursed through his veins, he sprinted across the tarmac, his black boots mercilessly pounding the sea of asphalt below. He lunged for cover behind a pile of rubble, as three others followed suit. He turned to Joseph, and with a nod of his head, sent him scurrying to the corner of a small building ahead. He frantically scanned in search of enemy life, and was instantly alerted by two heads which bobbed in the distance behind a slab of concrete. Bringing his weapon to his shoulder, he took careful aim, firing. He saw the bullet fizz across the hundred metres between himself and his enemy, only to see the targets ducking hurriedly, escaping his wrath. Their heads were no longer in sight, but their erratic puffs of breath clung to the cold air like steam escaping from a funnel. Whispering an exasperated curse Thomas seized the opportunity to join his comrade up ahead. Snaking his way across to his companion, he became suddenly aware of the cries which rang out behind him. He turned his focus to his former position, and a terrible fear slowly grew inside like a paralysis creeping through his limbs: he had realised his folly. There, huddled together, were the two lads that he had been supervising. They were rookies, they did not know how to play the game. Cringing behind the rubble they whimpered and whined, their cries slowly drowned out by the sound of gunfire which pounded the ground around them. Thomas winced as he felt a sweaty palm seize his shoulder, and Joseph dragged him to the relative safety of the corner.

"Poor bastards," he whispered, "look at the them! What the hell are we going to do?" Thomas replied with a stern glance, his silence screaming for Joseph to calm. Sweat slowly gathered in Joseph's furrowed brow, before trickling agonisingly down his anguished face. The tormented screams of his trapped comrades, pierced Thomas' conscience - fragments of guilt tearing into his worried mind like shrapnel relentlessly slicing at unprotected flesh. In a state of utter confusion, he failed to act with conviction, and Joseph, realising his comrade's indecision, took matters into his own hands. Breezing past, Joseph flew toward his beleaguered comrades, in a rash attempt to curb their distress. Thomas panicked, and fearing his own safety ran for cover into a nearby doorway. He could not see the position, but only a few feet from the pile of unforgiving rubble, he listened attentively, his ear twitching as the warm flesh embraced the cold damp door which he had slammed shut in his mad rush for survival. He heard the sounds of his friend's frantic footsteps, beating the ground outside. A single shot. Then a soft, messy thump. A suffering silence settled, replacing the cacophony of war, which had gone before. A single, salty tear rolled down his young face, a prelude for the coming emotions. He dropped to his knees: it was all his fault. Before he had seen it all as a game, but a sudden realisation of the horrors of war came flooding to the surface with his wave of tears. His fingers ripped at the cold, flaking handle, as he mustered strength and courage, and hauled open the door.

A sudden pang of guilt shot through his body, and he could not bear to look at the innocent face of the friend he had deserted. He closed his eyes, his tears sliding imperceptibly to the corner of his eyelids, escaping the gaze of any onlookers. In the darkness, he found solace for a heartbeat, but his overactive imagination suddenly painted a dreadful picture, which sent the chilling reality of his failure screaming deep into his soul: his friend lay there, his haunted eyes staring deep into Thomas'; a stream of crimson slowly gurgling down his side, gathering in a pool of blood, which the rainwater slowly diluted into a sickly cerise. The guilt gathered in Thomas' gut, and his stomach rumbled the distant warning cry of a dormant volcano, ready to send its ghastly contents spilling to the surface...

Crack. Thomas forced his eyes open, and like a startled rabbit, searched for his hunters. His gaze rested on the two heads bobbing in the distance, their weapons pointing accusingly in his direction. He had been hit. Staggering, he clasped at his breast, burning in the glory of his assassins which radiated from across the tarmac. Like any 'good' soldier, he threw himself to the ground with dramatic aplomb. He lay there, speechless, the fibres of his clothes eagerly snatching at the ragged terrain below. With an exaggerated last breath, he brought the drama to a close as he drew his eyes shut with an invisible cord. He pictured the blood spilling onto the ground below, and imagined himself and his friend, after their honorable soldiers' deaths, together again in that great 'battlefield' in the sky.

One. He cherished his imagination. Two. It allowed him to explore the world through his eyes. Three. He counted slowly; he never cheated. Four, five, six...ten. His eyes flashed open. A sudden surge of energy brought him scampering to his feet. Dusting himself down as he ran, he hurried across to Joseph, who stood gallantly by the corner, a true veteran. This game was not over yet, not by a long way...