

VALHALLA UNLEASHED
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VALHALLA UNLEASHED

THIS MORNING

“You gotta be fucking joking?” Michael Jenkins shook his head in disbelief.

“Someone’s pulling your leg.”

Michael listened as Brandon ranted at the other end of the line, his voice reaching an excited pitch as he explained the find wasn’t a joke in any way, shape or form.

“OK, I’ll go with you but it’s just not possible.” Michael had never heard of such a discovery in all his time as an archaeologist.

“Well, can you explain how a Viking long boat would be found in a coal mine so far inland?” He paused and waited for an answer. “I didn’t think so.” Brandon cut in and Michael scribbled down notes as he listened.

“Just send me the fax over and I’ll meet you there in about three hours.” Michael hung up before Brandon could argue.

Michael stared at the scrawled, short hand notes he’d made and, once again, shook his head. It was supposed to be his weekend away from work, time to catch up with Suzy and show her he was serious about their relationship. She wasn’t going to take the news of a cancelled dinner date lightly. Michael decided to ring her later. He hoped to prove the claim as a fake before then and try and keep the date. No point in causing himself grief until he had to. His thoughts of dating and romance were broken by the shrill warble of the fax machine.

Michael spun the seat around and faced the fax, tapping his pen against the desk top impatiently. The warble was replaced by the whirring of mechanisms and the first of ten

printed sheets began to feed into the out-tray. Michael's tapping grew faster, matching the irritation that was building in his mind and his gut.

The very idea of finding a Viking long boat in a UK coal mine over sixty miles from the coast was ridiculous. It beggared belief that Brandon had even bothered to involve Michael. It had to be a hoax.

Michael leaned forward and watched more intently as hi-res photos were printed out in quick succession.

"Jesus Christ." He scooped them up and flicked through them one at a time. "A Viking longboat." He whistled, throwing the photos down and grabbing his coat. "I still can't believe it." If it was a hoax it was a fucking good one.

12 HOURS AGO

Dan Hardwick hated his job, always had and always would. But it was the family tradition. His grandfather had worked down the mines, so had his father and his uncles. Now it was his turn to serve a life sentence of breathing in dust. Not that it was the dust that bothered him, nor the unbearable heat and the stale air. Dan's main problem was the feeling of being smothered in the close confines of the coal face.

It felt like he'd spent an eternity crouched over at the waist, marching up and down with the cutting machine churning its way through metres upon metres of coal. Dan knew that if there was a hell it wouldn't be far different from how he'd spent the last fifteen years of his life.

He'd promised himself, more than once, that he was going to get out of the mining industry and take a job that would keep him out in the open. He dreamed every night of working under a cloudless sky, breathing fresh air as the sun tickled his skin.

It was a promise he would never keep. He knew he could never earn the same money elsewhere and that kept him doing what he did best, cutting coal day in and day out.

With his mind on other matters he absent mindedly manoeuvred the cutting boom up into the ceiling of the face line and then brought it back down. The repetitiveness of the job had made each action second nature and required little, if any attention from Dan. You know what they say about familiarity breeding contempt.

As Dan prepared to move forward once again he was deafened by the sound of creaking coal and splitting rock. At first he ignored the sound, so used to the earth shattering noises of the gob collapsing behind them that he showed little concern. It was just another reason to

hate his job. If Dan had been taking more notice he would've seen the roof above the coal face moving, falling in a solid slab of black.

The shock wave of the falling ceiling was enough to knock Dan onto his back. He hit the back of the hydraulic roof support and stars danced before his eyes, stars mixed with a blinding cloud of thick, choking coal dust.

Dan heard the shouts of his workmates, but remained still as the dust settled around him. He looked around; rubbing his eyes, and could see the flicker of cap lamps further along the face line.

"Dan. Are you OK?" He recognised Sid Gyler, but couldn't make him out.

"I'm fine," he yelled back, his throat raw and dry.

"We can't see a fucking thing."

"Just wait until its safe," Dan coughed. "I'm ..." the sentence was left hanging as he saw the object tilting from the upper half of the coal face.

"Dan?"

"I'm fine; just give me a fucking minute." Dan stared at the wooden structure as it came into view through the settling dust.

He pulled himself from the back of the roof support and clambered onto the cutting rig, running his gaze across the thing that had no right to be there.

"The papers are gonna pay good for my story." Dan knew an opportunity when he saw one.

"Dan!"

"Stay back," Dan shouted. "Let me check it's secure." He needed to move fast.

He stood upright on top of the cutting machine and stretched up, gazing over the side of the wooden boat. He was sure it was a boat. What else could it be?

"Fuck me," he gasped as his cap lamp illuminated the interior.

Dan swept the beam of the lamp from left to right and counted at least twelve corpses, the decayed forms clad in rotted fur. The deck of the vessel was littered with rusted weapons. But it wasn't the weapons that interested Dan. He was more concerned with the scattered coins that reflected back yellow in the dim light.

"I'm gonna be rich." Without thinking he pulled himself up and over the side of the boat. "Rich."

Dan was half in, half out when he heard the throaty groan and turned to his left. The last thing he saw was the skeletal face moving towards him. Then he felt the blinding pain of teeth tearing through his throat and sinking into his windpipe.

Dan Hardwick tried to scream, but the sound was no more than a wet gurgle as he drowned in his own blood.

NINE HOURS AGO

“What do you mean close down the face?” Chris Harper, the mine manager slammed his fist against the desk. “We’ve already lost thousands in production.” He looked at the faces in the room and realised his mistake. “We’ve also lost a man and that is a terrible thing.” Harper tried to salvage the situation. “Hardwick came from a long line of miners and he’d have wanted us to carry on.”

“What about the boat?” Someone asked.

“Fuck it.” Harper snapped.

“You can’t do that,” Simon Fletcher stood up and made his presence known.

“And who the hell are you?” Harper glared at the stranger. “And what are you doing in my office?”

“My name is Simon Fletcher and I’m from the University.” Fletcher stepped forward, his hand outstretched in greeting.

“That’s all good and fine,” Harper growled. “But it doesn’t explain your presence here.”

“I think it explains everything, Mr Harper,” Fletcher cut in. “If this is a Viking longboat then some very important questions need to be asked.” Everyone in the room was now looking at Fletcher.

“The only question I need answering is when can production start?” Harper’s face was red, his cheeks flushed with anger.

“It could be months before investigations are finished,” Fletcher answered coolly. He hated these management types who only saw everything as another pound sign. Monetary gain was all that interested them. Fletcher had seen Harper’s type so many times before that he bored of them.

“Months!? You must be out of your fucking mind.” Harper almost choked on his tongue.

“Shouldn’t you be showing more concern to your dead employee and his family?” Fletcher kept his voice level.

Harper sneered at the University interloper, knowing he'd lost. As far as Harper was concerned the dead man's family could go piss into the wind, but he couldn't admit that in front of so many people. He was trapped between a rock and a hard place.

"I'll deal with the family," Harper said. "What do you need to start your investigation?" The word investigation was coated with sarcasm.

Fletcher smiled knowingly.

NOW

"Yes, I saw the photos but I still don't believe it's what you think it is." Michael had arrived at the Westow Colliery site in not the best of moods.

"What else could it be?" Fletcher looked at the pictures again.

"I won't be able to answer that until I get down there," Michael replied dryly.

"Team One has already started work and are waiting for you." Fletcher glanced up from the pictures to gauge Michael's response.

"Team One?"

"Yeah. Brandon and his group went down after he spoke to you on the phone earlier." Fletcher took no pleasure from the pained look on Michael's face.

"He was already here?" Michael asked.

"One of the first to arrive and down there when he rang you." Fletcher knew Michael would be pissed. "Who do you think took the photos?"

"But why send him down?" Michael stammered. "He's a rough handed bastard and you know it."

"I needed a team on site asap and he was here." Fletcher defended his decision. "You weren't."

"What are they doing?" Michael asked.

"We're not sure."

"What do you mean? Not sure?" Michael frowned.

"We lost contact with them about an hour ago."

"How soon can I go down?" Michael was already throwing paperwork into his bag.

"They're ready for you now."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Michael stormed out of the room, eager to put a halt to the damage Brandon would already be causing.

ONE HOUR AGO

Brandon had hoped that Michael wouldn't come, but he'd sent one of the team and a member of the mine staff back to the main shaft to greet him. They were on orders from Fletcher to touch nothing else until Michael was on site to supervise.

Now the rest of the team were, having retreated to the fresh air of the intake roadway, taking a break. The mine workers sent to assist had wasted little time in finding comfort on the stalled conveyor belts, snoring and farting as they took advantage of the situation.

Brandon's five person team had chosen to sit and were discussing what they'd seen already.

"It's definitely Viking," Amanda Golden stated.

"But what's it doing down here?" Eric Jackson was still sceptical. "It's probably a hoax put on by the mine.

"And they just happened to behead one of their workmates to make it look authentic." Amanda argued.

"Dan was a good man." One of the miners looked up from his place of rest. "Don't be bad mouthing him, sweetness." He gave Amanda a wink.

"God, you'd think they'd never seen a woman before."

"We won't know anything solid until we get the samples topside," added Ged, the youngest of the team.

"From what I've seen I'd agree with Amanda." Nicholas gave her a smile.

Jeff reminded silent. He was here to do a job and then go home. He had no time for petty arguments. No point stressing over anything until they knew more. Until then it was a case of take samples and report findings. No more, no less.

Brandon left them to it and squeezed his way back onto the face line. He wanted to get a closer look before Michael took over and there was no time like the present. He made his way carefully, head lowered to avoid the intestine-like loops of hydraulic hoses that hampered progress. It also made him feel more secure to have the beam of his cap lamp illuminating the ground around his feet. The terrain wasn't made for regular traffic and filled with ankle deep divots just waiting for him to stumble.

Brandon glanced up and stopped in his tracks, the longboat spread out above him in all its glory. He knew that Michael would now get the head line naming on any paper, but to be involved in such a strange find would move them both onto a new academic plateau. He moved the light across the side of the vessel and frowned.

“What the hell?”

Brandon picked up his pace, approaching the longboat with less caution than he should have. He began checking the supports they had installed earlier before returning the light to the source of concern.

Three of the corpses were leaning over the side. The heads, once covered in long hair, were mainly bald with the odd patch of matted hair still clinging to the parchment like skin stretched over the skulls. Their arms dangled loosely, tatters of leathery flesh hanging from the ancient bone beneath.

Brandon rechecked the supports. If the boat had shifted once it could do so again and he couldn't afford for it to be lost until they'd finished with it. He had high hopes of shipping it to the surface in sections, but that didn't mean he wanted it in shattered pieces. He worked quickly but found nothing wrong. He could only conclude that the ground may have shifted. He made a note to post sentries in future. No point in taking unnecessary risks.

Once finished with the checks Brandon scurried up the scaffold they had erected and carefully stepped onto the longboat, pulling his notebook from his jacket pocket. He jotted down the time and began to list the items on the deck, making sketches to aid in later identification.

Before venturing underground they had been told about the noises they would encounter and which ones could be ignored. With this in mind Brandon took little heed of the soft creaking from behind him, only looking up when the hand rested on his shoulder.

“Don't be sneaking up on...” he turned, expecting to see Amanda or one of the others.

The Viking corpse looked down at him through hollow eye sockets, the dried flesh of its face cracking as its mouth opened wide. Brandon tried to turn away only to come face to face with another member of the longboat crew. They pushed him to the deck and began to tear at his clothes, joined by others awakened by the smell of fear. Once the clothes were removed they didn't stop, ripping at Brandon's flesh and feeding with a hunger that would never be quenched.

Brandon suffered an agony he'd never known existed. Burning pain as fingers probed his internal organs and then pulled them out through the widening hole in his stomach. He

prayed for death just so he didn't have to witness himself being eaten. The prayer was answered as one of the Vikings plucked out his eyeballs with bony fingers.

Brandon never saw himself eaten alive, but he felt every bite.

Amanda was getting pissed off. Why was it always the woman who gained the unwanted attention? The group of miners had not slept for long and they were now sat in a small group. She could tell from the furtive glances and the dirty laughter that they were talking about her. She'd already heard mention of making her cum and what one lucky man could do for her arse.

"I'm going to talk to Brandon." She stood up and turned towards the face line.

"Hey love, you going for a piss?" shouted one of the mine workers. "Want me to come and dab it dry for you?"

"Fuck off," Amanda yelled and the laughter doubled.

"Your loss, sweetness."

She was thankful for the distance she quickly put between herself and the sexist arseholes. The darkness had the strange ability of swallowing sound and soon she could no longer hear their juvenile taunts.

"Bastards," she hissed. One because they just were and secondly because they were right. She desperately needed to urinate.

She'd been alright sitting with the others but, now she'd moved, she couldn't deny the weight in her bladder. Amanda had almost reached the face line and looked around for somewhere private to relieve herself without unexpectedly being seen. She'd heard the mouthy mine worker talking about taking a shit in the gob and had figured out it was the space behind the roof supports. It couldn't be the safest area to use as a toilet but she had no other choice.

Amanda could see the old roadway running behind the supports, the space gradually getting lower and lower as it collapsed behind the workings. The idea of entering filled her with an uncertain dread, but the option of wetting herself was not attractive either. She took a deep breath and ducked under the low hanging rock and into the shadows.

Amanda wasted no time in shrugging off the mine issue overalls and letting them drop around her ankles. She unbuttoned the khaki shorts she was wearing underneath and pulled them down along with her panties. Before Amanda squat she flicked off her cap lamp to aid

the privacy of the manoeuvre. The darkness was like nothing she had ever experienced before, so black it defied description. Not even the light from the face penetrated the thick shadows.

Amanda bent her legs, reaching down and pulling her clothes from between her ankles. She'd made that mistake before and had no wish to piss on everything. She cautiously released the hold on the bladder stretching urine, nervous of making any noise that might attract unwanted attention.

Once she started it was no longer a problem and she allowed the warm stream to leave her body.

The soft moan to her rear caused her heart to skip a beat and the act of urinating terminated itself. Amanda held her breath and remained squat in the darkness, waiting for the sound again. The silence seemed to go on forever, finally broken by another groan from off to her left.

“You dirty bastard,” Amanda snapped, standing upright and flicking on her cap lamp. “I’ll get you sacked for this.” Anger had taken over and she was no longer bothered about a perverted mine worker seeing her semi naked. “You should have your balls cu...” The light passed over the figure stood in the shadows and Amanda’s voice was cut off.

She moved her head back, pointing the lamp where the figure had been standing, but found nothing. Panic began to set in and she frantically spun her head from side to side in search of what she thought she’d seen.

“Bastards,” Amanda cursed, finally pulling herself together.

She convinced herself that the dark was playing tricks on her mind and turned her attention to getting her bottom half covered up. She bent down, grasping the shorts and panties.

“Arseholes,” Amanda cursed as she yanked the clothing upwards and came face to face with one of the longboat passengers.

For a split second she thought it was all part of a prank, but any hope of playful humour was lost when the corpse reached out and gripped her around the throat. Amanda released the hold on her shorts and tried hitting out at the undead creature. The blows landed uselessly on its decayed forearms, splitting the leathery skin and sending up plumes of dust.

Amanda attempted to scream but the grip on her throat had cut off the ability to breath. This time she truly began to panic. As her vision started to blur she looked down for any sign of escape and was confronted with a new terror.

From between the rotten fur at the Vikings waist protruded a discoloured length of flesh, the shaft covered in dried up tumours and withered skin. Amanda tried to kick out, but her legs were held captive by the clothing bundled at her ankles.

The Viking corpse lowered her to the floor and fell upon her with a savage force. Amanda's helmet fell from her head and the cap lamp revealed his fellow passengers, twelve putrefied corpses all lumbering towards the prize.

Amanda's mind thankfully shut down and she never felt the monstrous member penetrate her. She didn't feel the skin peel away from the dead penis or the tumours burst inside her. And she never felt the teeth of many tearing at her flesh.

NOW

Michael had travelled down the main shaft with Harper. The mine manager had insisted on being taken along. He'd also wanted Fletcher present, but the University man had made his excuses and remained on the surface.

Upon disembarking the huge steel cage that had transferred them down the shaft at thirty three feet a second they had been welcomed by Paul Adams. Michael had met the intern many times before and he showed real promise. If he could be pried from under Brandon's wing he could have a bright future as an archaeologist. Michael didn't recognise the other face and guessed he was one of Harper's men.

"Good to see you made it." Paul gave a genuine smile, pleased to have a real expert on site.

"Yeah, I just wish everyone was as happy about my presence." Michael shook Paul's hand.

"Brandon's an arsehole." Paul grinned. "But he knows you're in charge."

"Brandon's the least of my worries," Michael explained. "I had to cancel my weekend plans."

"How is Suzy?"

"Pissed off."

"Well, if you've got the pleasantries out of the way could we get a move on?" Harper snarled, interested only in getting production back on schedule.

"He's right," Michael added. "I've gotta see this for myself."

Harper nodded at the nameless employee and the order to lead the way was followed without question.

Michael had never ridden on a conveyor belt before and had hesitated before following Harper's example. He'd waited until both Paul and the mine worker, who he'd discovered was named Egger, had jumped on first. With his back-pack held firmly to his chest he stepped onto the moving belt, almost losing his footing. For a moment he feared he was going to fall and dropped to his knees and then his stomach, doing as the others had and laying flat.

Michael soon realised the reason for the prone position. As they moved deeper into the roadway the roof lowered dramatically, flashing above Michael's head closer than he felt comfortable with. He hugged the conveyor below him, pressing himself into the rubber as it undulated over the rollers.

The conveyor had quickly taken Michael and the others away from the harsh lighting of the mine shaft area and the only light was now from the orange glow of the cap lamps. Michael could see the other four lamps ahead of him if he tilted his head upwards, glowing beacons that proved he wasn't alone.

When the conveyor unexpectedly began to slow down Michael didn't know whether to be relieved or worried. As it came to a smooth halt he made no attempt to climb down, choosing to wait and see what the others did first. He watched as the lamp at the very front moved from its place on the conveyor and out into the open roadway.

"Egger, come with me," Harper's voice crackled out over a tannoy next to Michael's head. "You two give us five and we'll get you moving again."

Michael checked the head room and decided to sit up, the roof having sloped upwards and leaving plenty of space. He watched as a second lamp joined the first and began walking deeper into the darkness.

The underground environment wasn't what Michael had expected. He'd been caving on numerous occasions, but these man made tunnels creeped him out. The structures of steel girders and mesh that held the roadway in position had distorted over the years and he couldn't help but picture all that earth above his head ready to come down and envelope him.

Then there was the wind, air being drawn through the mine system by huge fans. It smelt stale, almost dead and Michael would have sworn he could taste the decay as it blew passed him. Something else came on the warm breeze and Michael cocked his head to one side and tried to listen closely. He was sure it was only the air moving through the tunnels, but every now and then it sounded like a moaning, a pained symphony played out of tune.

Harper ran for his life. He'd seen what had become of Egger and he had no immediate plans to fall foul of the same destiny.

They had hardly spoken during the short walk to the drive end of the conveyer, checking the emergency switches installed for the rider's safety. Everything had appeared to be in working order until Egger shouted. "Boss, you should see this."

The day had started badly for Harper and he didn't need this. What he needed was for things to move along swiftly. Delays were something he couldn't allow and it was eating away at what little good nature he had left.

"What now?" Harper snapped, his eyes bulging with frustration.

Egger's eyes were also bulging, but for an entirely different reason. Harper froze, his throat clenching as he witness the blood soaked figures ripping Egger's stomach wide open and feeding on the loops of intestine. Harper's stomach rebelled and a breakfast of coffee and bacon spewed down his front.

He stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over his own feet, hoping to be unseen by the small yet frenzied crowd. His mind tried to take in what he saw, but it was an impossible sight. They looked human, but how could they be alive? Some were rotted to the point of being no more than walking skeletons and the rest had no right to be part of the real world.

He recognised the woman, Amanda, from earlier in the day. At the time he'd thought about how nice it would have been to fuck her. Now, seeing her naked, the thought revolted him. Her face was torn and covered in bite marks, but it was the rest of her torso that filled him with terror.

Her breasts were gone, leaving two glistening holes that wept blood and pus. The damage didn't end there; a trail of devastation that led down her stomach and to the area between her legs. Her vagina was no longer anything to lust over and Harper could only imagine that someone had pulled it inside out, a dust covered tube like sack dangling between her knees as she crouched to feed.

Harper vomited again, the force of the retching bringing tears to his eyes. This time the undead paused from stuffing their faces with fresh gruel and looked up, a light of hunger filling their emotionless stares.

Harper ran; puke trailing from his chin in thick strands.

Paul had thought about moving back and joining Michael, but the silence had helped him decide to stay put. It gave him time to think about what he was involved with. He was only an intern and to be included in the first team on such a project was going to be of benefit to him in the long run. Just being attached would open a few doors others would have to wait years to get through. He couldn't imagine how life could get any better.

He was torn away from his dreams of the future by the ragged panting of Harper. He looked down from his place on the conveyor and saw the mine manager bent double and gasping for breath.

"Are you OK?" Paul asked, rather stupidly.

"Do I look OK?" Harper stood up and revealed his vomit soaked front.

"Jesus Christ," Paul stammered.

"We gotta move," Harper gasped. "Now."

Paul was already climbing down when he heard the groaning from the darkness.

"What is that?"

"You don't want to know." Harper looked over his shoulder. "Just move."

Paul let himself hang from the conveyor structure and dropped awkwardly to the floor, his ankle twisting on the uneven floor. He cried out, but Harper dragged him upright and took his weight just as two ancient arms encircled him around the neck. Without thinking he released his hold on Paul and began to struggle in an attempt to get free.

The arms clawed at his chest and Harper thrust his head backwards with all the strength he could muster. He connected with solid bone and heard a satisfying crack as the arms loosened their grip.

Harper yanked himself free and searched the ground for Paul, only to find the young intern coughing up blood as a corpse in matted fur clothing tore his throat out with its teeth. Paul's face begged for help and he reached out a feeble hand.

"Sorry." Harper span away and, once again, he ran.

Michael had convinced himself that the moaning sound being carried on the ripe breeze was growing louder. The more he concentrated on it the more it appeared to intensify in volume.

'How do miners ever get used to this crap?' he thought, surprised to find that he was sweating.

He lifted the uncomfortable helmet from his head and mopped at the heavy sheen of perspiration with the sleeve of the bright orange overalls the mine had issued him. He breathed deeply and noticed, not for the first time, that the dank smell had also worsened.

“What’s taking them so long?” Michael vocalised, his voice dulled by the subterranean environment.

Looking up he saw a light returning, the orange dot bobbing up and down frantically. Michael replaced the helmet and began climbing down from the elevated conveyor, swaying dangerously as he swung his legs over the edge. As he clumsily descended he tried to keep one eye on the approaching light.

Once on the ground he stood and watched the cap lamp come to a stop and a second lamp joined it.

“Must be Paul.” Michael found the deadened sound of his own voice disturbing, the words almost nullified by the air around him.

Disturbed quickly turned to panic when that same air and its sing-song moaning was filled with an ear piercing scream. Michael witnessed one of the lamps fall to the floor, the beam dancing its light across the ceiling as it turned from orange to a sickly red.

Michael’s mind screamed at him to run back the way they’d come but, for some unexplainable reason, he ignored all logic and ran towards the unknown.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Harper yelled at Michael as he came into view. He didn’t stop to talk; sprinting straight passed the stunned archaeologist.

Michael, on the other hand, stopped mid-stride, his head swivelling between the retreating Harper and the sounds of wet slurping coming from up ahead.

“Harper!” Michael shouted.

The mine manager made no attempt to reply, his feet kicking up a dust storm as he pounded onwards.

“Harper!” This time the name was screamed and Harper stopped, turned around and replied.

“Do you want to die?”

“What?” The question caught Michael off guard.

“Do you want to die?” Harper repeated.

“No.”

“Then run.” With that Harper was gone.

“What about the others?” Michael turned back and found his answer.

In the dim beam he saw them, a mass of clawing bodies filling the roadway. Michael’s mind threatened to spiral into madness at the sight of the seething undead. He saw what was left of Brandon and the rest of his team, half eaten torsos caked in gore and coming at him with a lust for fresh meat. Amongst his work colleagues he saw faces he had never met and would never get to know, the features ripped from their skulls to reveal glistening muscle and smooth bone.

This waking nightmare embedded itself in Michael’s mind, but it was the half dozen corpses leading the group that made it all the worse. The bodies were decayed beyond recognition, but from the tattered remnants of clothing Michael knew where they originated.

“Run, you daft bastard.” Harper’s yell hit him hard, but not as hard as the slap across his face. “Run!”

Harper grabbed Michael’s arm and dragged him away from the advancing undead. Michael sheepishly allowed himself to be led, his legs working on their own accord as shock began to set in. All he could do was focus on the bright lights ahead in an attempt to forget the horror snapping at his heels.

The doors to the shaft cage were still open and Harper pushed Michael in harshly, the archaeologist falling to his knees and sobbing. Harper paid no attention, fumbling madly with the clasp to lower the door between them and the horde of the undead creeping slowly nearer.

“Fuck!” he cursed, the clasp slipping from his fingers and the flexible chain door falling sharply, the metal edge slicing a clean line across his palm. “Shit.” Harper clenched his fist tight, blood already oozing between his fingers.

Harper stepped over the quivering Michael and headed straight for the control box mounted on the far wall of the cage. He depressed the ‘speak’ button with a shaking hand. “Send us up now!” he yelled, panic now giving his usual tone a weak warble.

“That you, Boss?” Came the static filled reply.

“Just get us moving.” Harper ordered.

“Everything OK down there?”

“Just get us moving or you’re looking for a new fucking job.” Harper glanced through the mesh side of the cage and his stomach turned at the sight of the walking corpses.

“Just give me five minutes.”

“We haven’t go...” Harper stopped talking as the sound of tearing chain filled the shaft.

“Oh please, God,” Michael whimpered as the door fell under the weight of the undead attack.

They flowed in like water, filling the cage with the stench of death. The Vikings fell upon Michael, tearing at him with bony fingers in their search for warm sustenance. Michael's lips moved silently as he said a prayer, his tears of sadness and fear turned to tears of blood as the undead fed on his flesh.

Harper backed himself into a corner and watched as the archaeologist was reduced to not much more than a tattered leather throw rug. He pushed himself into the shadows and hoped beyond hope that they wouldn't see him. That they would finish feeding and then return to the darkened depths of the mine.

He saw the young woman again and she returned his stare with a blind lust. She left her feeding companions and ran at Harper. A tiny squeal of fear escaped his throat and Harper felt his bladder and bowel release into his shorts.

The thing that had once been named Amanda dragged him to the floor and pinned him down with her own body weight, her inside out genitals smothering his face as she tore at his overalls.

Harper couldn't breathe, the damp flesh of her womb suffocating him. He beat at her sides in a vain attempt at survival, but it was too late.

The last thing he felt were her cold hands pulling out his intestine and her rough tongue lapping at the fresh blood leaking from his dying stomach.

"Right Boss, up you come." The voice came over the speaker and the cage began its ascent.

Fletcher stood at the shaft side with the news crews, an ear to ear grin on his face. He had waited years for something like this to come along and he was going to milk it for all he was worth.

He'd already held a press conference and ensured that everyone knew that whatever the team brought back with them was down to him, Simon Fletcher.

He was the man in charge and this remarkable discovery was all his doing. Despite the foetid aroma that had begun to taint the air Fletcher's grin widened. This was going to make the national headlines and his name would be remembered forever.

UNDEAD JOURNALS

The following is a section of journal found in a burned out house. Only the final pages survived...

I'm sat here looking at the gun and - Lord please forgive me for this – wishing that I'd not used that final bullet to put a hole in Tobey's head. I know how selfish that must sound and I fully understand that you (whoever you are) will want to judge me for my actions.

I couldn't blame you for hating me.

But now I have a choice to make and the options scare me. It would have been so much easier to have turned the gun on myself and taken my own life.

God, I cried as I pulled the trigger. The tears are still wet on my cheeks and I feel I have already died inside. I wanted so much to tell my little boy that I loved him, that I would keep him safe and protect him from a world gone mad. Instead I pointed the barrel between his milky, lifeless eyes, the same eyes that now stare at me from the floor, and squeezed the trigger.

Shit... I can't do this... not with his body still here... I promise I'll be back... I have to ease the guilt before I make my final choice.

LATER

OK. I've moved Tobey to the basement, laid him down next to his mother. I think she would have wanted that. I should wash his brains from the wallpaper, but I don't have the time or the inclination. I have to put down on paper what has happened here before I move on... call it closure... Hell, call it what you want... It doesn't matter any more.

I'm sorry Tobey. I'd hoped and prayed that you wouldn't change like the others. It wasn't even a bite. It was nothing more than a scratch on your lower arm.

I can still remember him asking me why mommy would want to hurt him. He wanted to know what he'd done wrong. I couldn't answer. How do you tell a kid that his mom wanted to eat him alive?

You can't.

I thought I'd cleaned the wound, even removed the section of broken finger nail stuck in the base of the inch long laceration. That had made Tobey cry out. He was still crying as I'd bandaged his arm and put him to bed. I sat and listened to him for at least an hour, the sobs gradually fading to a whimper as fitful sleep took him over.

I gave it another hour before I ventured downstairs.

I found Carol, Tobey's mom, my wife of fifteen years in the kitchen. She was sat with her legs wide apart and eating her own arm, tearing away the already foetid flesh in large chunks.

I whispered her name and she looked up at me. There was no recognition, no emotion in her eyes. All I could see was a blind hunger, a primal instinct to feed. Carol came at me with a snarl, her arms outstretched for my throat. I raised the gun and fired off a panicked shot. My aim was less than perfect; the bullet ripping through Carol's left shoulder in a spray of decayed skin and off-white bone.

Carol kept coming at me, her dried and cracked lips pulled back to reveal the rotting meat hanging from between her teeth. She was so close I could smell the death that had replaced her usual brand of perfume. I pushed the barrel of the gun against her head and pulled the trigger. Her head snapped backwards, a tiny red hole just below her hairline appearing a split second before the back of her head exploded over the table we had eaten breakfast at only days before.

That was three days ago now yet it seems like an eternity. I have witnessed Tobey's condition grow steadily worse. I've watched the infection spread throughout his eight year old body. It eats away at my insides that I could do nothing for him, rendered useless as a father, unable to heal the illness that pumped through his veins.

All I could do was sit with him, his featherweight frame on my lap, and wait for the last, ragged breath to pass his lips. When the moment came I felt a twinge of relief. I pulled him to me and hugged him tightly to my chest as the tears came.

It was a mistake I won't live to regret.

I felt no warning movement before Tobey's teeth sank into the skin above my left nipple. The pain was like nothing I've ever felt before. I tore Tobey from my chest, his teeth tearing away t-shirt and wet flesh. He glared at me, chewing aimlessly on a mouthful of me.

I screamed, a mixture of fear and anger, and tossed Tobey across the room. He hit the corner of the dresser and I heard the breaking of bone as his dead body twisted backwards.

Tobey hit the floor, still chewing. His bottom half hung loosely behind him but he used his arms to drag himself back towards me.

I took the gun and pointed it at Tobey, tears blurring my vision. I couldn't do it. I turned the gun on myself and pressed it hard against my temple. I was ready to end it all but I couldn't have Tobey as my last image... not like that.

I waited, let him get closer, and then raised the gun. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. The retort was deafening and I waited until the ringing in my ears had ceased before I opened my eyes.

LATER

Sorry, about that, had to take a break. The tears had started again and I couldn't see to write. I'm alright now and not much left to say except for goodbye.

I'm still not sure how to handle this. Like I say, I have options, but they scare the living shit out of me. I realise I don't have long; I can feel the tendrils of infection winding through my organs like a forest fire.

I have to choose.

Maybe I could risk a journey to my place of work in the city. The others show little interest in me now that the infection has spread. I must smell dead already. I could easily head for the top floor, prise open the elevator doors and just step into the empty shaft. Hopefully there wouldn't be enough of me left to get back up.

Or maybe I'll just head down to the garage and siphon the gas from the car, douse myself in it and then have that cigarette I've been saving.

Would the heat be enough to destroy everything I am?

I hope so...

The following file was salvaged from a battered laptop on the Upper East Side. The remaining survivor of the apartment block attacked the rescue team and was handled with extreme prejudice.

Tonight I sat down with friends and we ate my neighbour... does that make us as bad as those things out on the streets?

I hope not.

Those things... the zombies... God, I hate that word... they don't think about eating the flesh of the living. They're dead, they don't think at all. They feel no guilt... they get no pleasure from what they do... They just eat.

We, on the other hand, thought it through... talked about the best choice... discussed how we'd do it. I'd like to think that hunger was the only thing that pushed us to such a despicable choice, it makes me feel better.

But I worry about Brad. I think... no, I know he enjoyed it. He was too eager to volunteer to be upfront. Jesus, he just knocked on her apartment door with a smile on his face, said hello and then shot her in the head.

Don't get me wrong, it was good to finally eat a real meal. We've lasted this long on cereal, chocolate and stale bread, but despite now feeling full I also feel sick.

I have human flesh digesting in my gut and it disgusts me.

Poor Mrs Shawshank. She was old and alone, she had no one to care for her and now... what's left of her... is laid in our makeshift cold store. Brad says she'll feed us for three days at least.

But what do we do when she is used up and we're still hungry? Brad has already suggested working our way through the older tenants; he claims they're a drag on our resources.

Who becomes the judge? Who chooses the name that is next on the menu? I don't think I can do this... Shit, there are children here; will we start on them once the old folk are nothing but bones?

Where will it end?

I envy those things outside... at least they don't have to choose.

Research Team Omega had been working towards perfecting SF 765 – the only chance at what the Government called a cure. When all communication was lost a Military Team was sent to secure the location. The following is the final logged entry from Dr Eugene Lazarus – Head of Research.

They're all dead and I – Dr Eugene Lazarus take full responsibility for what has happened here. It was I who made the choice to authorise the first human test on the latest strain of the vaccine – SF-812.

I am making this statement whilst still of sound mind and body, clearly stating that none of my team should be held accountable. All authorisation forms (signed and dated) have been logged, as per procedure. Upon investigation I can verify now that all signatures are mine and were given with only the best intentions.

I had no other option and I offer no excuses for my actions. I was sure that our progress had brought us an answer. All animal tests – across all available species – proved positive.

SF-812 not only acted as a vaccine against the virus but it also successfully reversed the effects if administered at an early stage of infection.

I hoped that this was the light at the end of the tunnel we had been looking for.

Dr Julia Hensall was the first volunteer (at my request) for human testing. She was purposefully infected with the virus, delivered via intravenous drip at 16.00 hours. She began to show signs of illness within the first half an hour.

I personally administered a 100 cc dose of SF-812 but it was to no avail. Dr Hensall died at 23.00 hours. All vital signs were lost yet – like all the others – she returned. Dr Hensall was terminated at 23.10 hours, a single bullet to the cranium.

Video footage of this test subject and those since has been saved and is stored on the main frame. I can only hope that you find it useful. Progress has continued at a steady pace and I am now ready to test SF-820.

All strains of the vaccine and details of all my test subjects have been logged in date order. The bodies have been incinerated for reasons of Health and Safety.

The time is now 14.00 hours and the virus has been in my system for over an hour. I can feel it moving throughout my internal organs. My body temperature has dropped, pulse is weakening and my heart rate is erratic.

I will administer 150 cc's of SF-820 and monitor my own progress.

If successful we may be able to stop the virus before it wipes out the entire population... if I fail... then God be with you.

Dr Eugene Lazarus was terminated three weeks later, single bullet to the cranium. His research is still ongoing. Latest progress reports from Research Team Beta suggest that SF- 950 may hold an answer.