

The League of Terminal Altruists

By Tim Macauley

Chapter 1

I look through the 30x binoculars at the power plant below, some 3 km away. It looks the same as it normally would...no plume of steam or smoke, no fire, no fountain of electrical sparks. I glance back to my left at the others, Tomolo and Süud, both hunched over a laptop resting on the hood of the jeep. They both look unreasonably calm. From where I'm standing, I can just make out Drisdal's video feed from his helmet-cam streaming live on the laptop's screen. A heart rate monitor jogs alongside the video feed, and several bars measure other metrics of health. But no one is concerned about his heart. I shift incessantly between squinting into the binoculars and glancing at his vitals on the laptop, back and forth. Tomolo notices my skittishness and gives me a look of tranquil resignation, as if to say, 'all is as it should be, kid'. I look quickly away, determined to keep my emotions on this first mission to myself.

We're all dressed in normal civilian clothes, with the exception of one extra accessory. Each of us has a small Geiger counter badge clipped to our shirt lapels, to measure the dosage of radioactivity we are being exposed to at this very moment. The digital display on mine reads "160", which I am assured is within the acceptable threshold. Each of the others is wearing one as well. Each except for Drisdal. He doesn't need it. The thought makes me cringe.

Tomolo removes the headphones from his ears and unplugs its cable, letting the audio feed spill out of the laptop's pitiful speakers. All I can hear is Drisdal's laborious breathing. When he speaks, it's as though he's annotating a step-by-step process.

"OK, from this perspective, I can confirm that my earlier observation is correct. Control Rods #7 & #8 both appear to be fully retracted, and rod #...15...yes, 15 is a partial. The automated diagnostics were correct. 3 rods were indeed absent from the cooling pool and that must have permitted a," the mic is suddenly overcome by distortion as Drisdal suffers a rack of coughing. There is a slight pause and the sound of something shifting. "Excuse me. The unsubmerged rods must have permitted a sufficient number of neutrons to continue their fission process unabated, causing unmanageable heat which melted the eastside of the tank." He wheezes again. "Cause of the control rod failure remains unknown. I cannot access the push-pull pneumatics at this time. Hopefully I can download the log from the console and the timeline can be sifted through later." Another slight pause. "Feeling tired now. I'd best pick up the pace, I guess."

I'm horrified upon hearing this, but I keep my eyes glued to the binoculars, just staring at the nondescript building in the distance. I feel as if I, too, am just an automaton, with my own nonresponsive push-pull pneumatic limbs and lacking any kind of a soul as I listen to a man in his final hour. As I listen to my first death.

"I'll head eastward now to Turbine Room 5. Expecting greater intensity of heat. I'll try and get you some footage of the exterior where the...where the integrity of the tank failed." Eastward. Into the lion's den. What would he find? A mostly sterile, unexciting room except for what? One....maybe two feet of normal-looking water on the floor? I think of how cartoons always portray radioactive leaks as

pulsating, glow-in-the-dark blobs of neon green magma. But the reality of heavy water is far more subtle. There is nothing visually about it that would suggest its lethality. Its radioactivity was already bombarding Drisdal with a fatal dose of ionized particles. He was already a dead man walking. I purse my lips together tightly. It's important that I not lose track of this. He was *already* a dead man walking. We all are.

Drisdal enters the adjacent room and films the nine-foot wide rift in the wall. It almost resembles the side profile of a Hershey kiss in shape. He measures the top of the crack; he measures the bottom. He measures the temperature, and the gamma particles, and the depth of the heavy water. All the while, his breathing becomes more laborious and his speech becomes even more perfunctory. He stops the usage of all adjectives and adverbs. This I can handle. But its hearing his vital signs rise—the monotonous, rhythmic blips of his pulse as his heart rate quickens—that make my blood curdle. I can hear the strain that his activities are placing on his system, interspersed with a constant fusillade of alarms ringing out on the laptop, beckoning our attention as if we weren't already standing vigil, as if we didn't already know death was imminent! The League must have purchased this software off the shelf. It clearly wasn't developed for our purposes, unless the bells & whistles tied to vital signs were another way of saying, 'Don't miss the main attraction! The climax is moments away!' It's more than I can handle now, and I place the binoculars down on the hood and walk briskly away on the rocky ridge. I pull my sweatshirt hood up and tug hard on the drawstrings so only a very narrow porthole connects me to the world. I walk a long time, letting my gaze aimlessly list at the desolate plain all around. After awhile, I finally notice the tiniest plant, a weed really, that has fought its way up from the stony ground, to eek its living in this hostile environment. Hostile even before man arrived. I sit and think on life, and for some reason, gently stroke the weed's blades.

Forty minutes or so later, tired from sitting on the hard ground, I look back at the jeep far in the distance and see Süud midway on his way to collect me. He waves me to return, to which I acknowledge with my own. When I reach the jeep again, they have already packed up the gear and are waiting patiently in their seats. Neither of them put me into a position where I must make eye contact, and it is as if dialogue is unnecessary. They understand the emotions I am feeling. It was expected. And it is not dishonorable. It simply *is*.

"We did save the ritual to do with you. It's important, Pai." Tomolo says, not unkindly. I nod in acquiescence. He withdraws a tiny mesh-wire cage from beneath the jeep's bucket seat. Inside is a heavy-breasted bird, white as snow.

"That's the whitest pigeon I've ever seen," I remark.

"It's a dove actually. Each member gives one. Tell me, do you know the difference between a pigeon and a dove?"

I shake my head softly.

"Only the name. It's symbolism, really. A dove is woven into the fabric of some of our greatest myths, a symbol of peace and hope, whereas pigeons....well, they soil our windowsills." He makes not so much a smile, but more of a comforting grimace.

"It's a symbolic act, but not for the dying member. Rather, it's the departing's final gift to his peers. Today, this dove is Drisdal's gift to us. It reminds us that he is at peace with the circumstances, and that he ended on his terms. Someday, we'll give doves to others."

Tomolo opens one end of the cage and the dove takes flight, flying ignorantly toward the only vegetation around: a tall cypress tree intentionally planted long ago at the reactor's entrance. Both the bird and the tree are certain to be dead by nightfall from the gamma particles bombarding it. Tomolo makes a sad sighing sound, more for the senseless death of the dove than for Drisdal. Süud starts the vehicle and begins driving us back across thirty miles of wasteland to the final checkpoint. When we arrive, it is bursting with activity, filled with hundreds of people: scientists, soldiers, technicians and politicians. Three dozen or so body bags lie in a long row on the west-side of the camp. I count ten enormous green military tents that have been erected since the time we first entered the hot zone. Jeeps zip this way and that, while troops in formation run about the compound, everyone moving with urgency. No....it's more like pandemonium. *Helter skelter*. And everyone....everyone is wearing thick protective radioactive haz-mat suits. It reminds me of a scene from a film where the government was trying to keep everyone in quarantine, doing too little too late, and then overreacting to the extreme. It all seems so silly.

Soldiers lift the barriers, which are more to keep people out from the zone we are leaving rather than to keep people in, and we are quickly ushered to a stop. Five indistinguishable specialists—made androgynous by their shapeless haz-mat suits—approach the jeep. Several are holding clipboards, several holding rifles. One holds his hands out expectantly. Tomolo hands the laptop over. The specialist makes a bowing gesture, several of the armed soldiers salute, and that's it. Our job is over. We have successfully collected critical information that will help the Atomic Energy Commission and Department of Energy regain some control back over this mess. We were faster and more agile than robots because we used a human being. We used Drisdal.

It was a noble—heroic even, honorable, conscionable, premeditated death. It was the greatest gift one can offer one's community, to give the ultimate sacrifice for the safety of others. He knew from the moment we received the call at 0600 hours that this was his mission. He had submitted his paperwork months ago so he could be fast-tracked for just such a scenario. One which required mobility, someone who was tech savvy, and which didn't require interacting with 'innocents', a term we used for anyone outside of the League. Drisdal didn't like working with people, and when it came to one's own mission, the League took requests seriously.

The government called today's event a Faded Giant. I wasn't familiar with the term before. I had heard of a Broken Arrow, where a nuclear weapon goes missing. There were some known cases where both superpowers had made such colossal blunders. But a Faded Giant was code for when a reactor suffered a meltdown. I knew of a couple high profile ones....Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and

more recently, the Russian submarine Kursk. But I had no idea to the extent of just how many Faded Giants had occurred. During the morning's briefing, I was made privy to the fact that there had been over 40 'Faded Giants' in history, the vast majority of which had been kept under wraps. Then I was informed that in 98% of those cases, the League had played a key role in resolving or assisting with the problem. I'm not gonna hide it, that made me damn proud.

No rest for the wicked, I guess, so just moments after delivering the laptop, the DoE or the NSA or some acronymic governmental agency puts us on one of their notorious black helicopters and we ride in silence for the short trip to a nearby airfield, where we transfer to our DC-10 and fly home to Seattle. I spend most of the flight reflecting on my brief memories of Drisdal, looking at several photos of him on my iPhone, resolved to honor the promise he requested that I not cry over his death today. But it's a promise I can't keep.

The League's headquarters are rather bizarre. Years ago, the directors bought up a failed auto-body shop, located smack-dab beneath where I-405 and 520 intersect. They took this rather humble establishment and appear to have spent absolutely *nada* on renovating its interior. Zero. Zilch. The place is a dump. It is the League's attempt at being surreptitious, but to be honest, it feels more to me like a bunch of older, ailing people who—having been raised on Marvel Comics and James Bond—decided they wanted their own Hall of Justice. I couldn't blame them, but it took me weeks not to snicker every time I entered the facility. The League might not wear costumes and tights, but there was definitely a culture of joy taken from operating *aside* the law. Like many philosophical or religious organizations, the League felt it set a standard of behavior far above the bar set by the law, but it was a bar that they defined with fierce independence. The League has a....complicated relationship with the government. Of course, the government hates not having control over our operations, but time and time again, they return to us with requests for various problems in the world. They use us as a private contractor, like Blackwater or Halliburton, only we're a not-for-profit and we're definitely not about arms or petrol.

We walk past the receptionist desk where a young man smiles wanly at us and motions us through. The next room remains still cluttered from its auto body days, perfectly preserved for three decades. Grease rags and power tools lay strewn absently about. A forlorn Pontiac 6000 sits elevated on the lift forks, its carcass abandoned long ago. All of this is intentional. It is intended to serve as a façade to mask our real operations if our facility is ever inspected.

We take turns shimmying down a short steel service ladder that takes us beneath the car, into the pit where servicemen used to work. Little mag lights are strung daisy-chained together along the tunnel down here and the clomping of our boots on the steel catwalk make us sound like a herd. The passage ahead is mostly dark now, except for the faint outline of a slightly-ajar door, thirty meters ahead. We step through the portal and enter the undercroft of the League's headquarters, where the real pulse of our day-to-day operations occurs. Everyone in the facility gathers to receive us, which looks on the order of eighty-five or so members. Most of them wear solemn, but not melancholy, faces. It's an observation that is striking, and I file it away in my mental inbox of 'things that should be well considered later'. Unfortunately, that inbox lies remarkably close to my mental waste bin. I look at the

crowd, most of whom I know, but at the moment, it is just a sea of faces with which I cannot associate a name or anecdote. I know I am safe, there is a sense of familiarity, and yet...the goings-on of the day press down on me and it is as though my central nervous system is suffering from overstimulation.

The crowd I am staring at consists mostly of people late middle-aged and geriatric. It is a sea of bright whites, grays and pale blotched heads. They are mostly all bespectacled. There are maybe only ten who are under forty. And then there is me. I am by far the youngest at 19.

“How was it, Queenie?” Kim asked, a Korean man whose English is still heavily accented by his native tongue. I smile thinly, the cleft of my chin contracting. “Not easy, but I’m ok,” I reply honestly.

Soon after my induction to the League, someone had graced me with the name of ‘Queenie’, an extension of ‘Queenie the Teenie’, being that I am the only teenager in the League. They were affectionately suggesting that I ruled the roost. They were being sweet and I didn’t care what they called me, so ‘Queenie’ stuck. I was told I was special. A teenager had never been accepted before into the League. It is rather ironic that such an esteemed, distinguished organization as the League is one that no teen should ever desire to be in. Not unless of course, the circumstances were just right. And by ‘just right’, I really mean ‘just wrong’.

Someone to our left strikes a small fire station’s bell three times, and all chatter in the room stops. “To Drisdal,” Mason, one of the three directors of the League, says, raising his glass. The rest of the room reciprocates the toast, a woman sings a short Irish dirge, and before I know it a tumber of scotch is pressed into my hand by an old man next to me, his eyes alight with mischief at his having encouraged a teen to take her first drink. The eyes of several members around me sparkle and they chant my name, ‘Quee-nie! Quee-nie!’, helping me over but one more threshold of adulthood. Honestly, every threshold I knock down is a small victory in and of itself given the circumstances. There is a sense of genuine duty and joy that they have in sharing this scotch with me, a celebration that I am even able to cross another threshold. Membership into the League comes at a very steep price.

The League of Terminal Altruists is a very select group, with one extremely narrow requirement. *You must be terminally ill in order to be invited.* And the one caveat of that requirement is that you must have already explored every available option for treatment, have medical records proving such, and be willing to submit oneself to the in-house laboratory for a second opinion. Once having proven that one’s mortality is imminent, only then you can be inducted and put into the rotation for a possible mission.

This isn’t just a community support group designed for members to fraternize with one another because of some awful mutual disease they have in common. I’m not detracting from such organizations, as they certainly provide a network of comfort and love, but we’re more like a group motivated by an intense purpose. Many of us still feel like we haven’t yet given back at the scale that we always imagined giving to society, and we’re rushing now to fulfill that dream. I like to imagine us as the antithesis of suicide bombers: whereas they give their life in an act of violence intent on influencing the world, we give our lives in acts of unbridled generosity for maximum benefit of the welfare of others. Despite most of us having been dealt a lousy card in health—especially at my age—very few of us are devoid of hope. In fact, it’s almost universally the opposite. There is such extraordinary freedom

in knowing that your life cannot be extended....rather than wallowing in self-pity or uncertainty about what the future holds, League members have attained a real driving sense of purpose. We have been presented with the very real opportunity to impact the lives of those we've loved and even those we've never known. We can perform services of such extraordinary value—incalculable really. These are acts that those in good health rarely perform simply because the love of life is writ so deeply within all of us. The work that members do here—the unselfish sacrifice for the betterment of others—feels to me as though it borders on the divine.

The celebration of Drisdal's life and his last heroic act began tonight in the League's conference room, where the walls are festooned by white boards filled with wild and radical ideas. The League functions with egalitarian principles and this is the room where we gather once a week to discuss the merits of various mission proposals. *Do we have adequate resources to support the specialist in their mission? Does the specialist have enough time left to succeed? Should there be a backup plan or an understudy? What is the likely probability of mission success?* We have very serious discussions along these lines.

My eyes run down the nearest list of proposals. There are some terrific suggestions here in this most recent batch. Also a couple duds. I laugh, rolling my eyes unconsciously when I'm reminded of an idea that Connard suggested this past week. He's angry with the insurgency attacks in Afghanistan. He suggested that he have explosives surgically implanted in his stomach cavity, with the idea being that he would intentionally walk around the city of Kabul as live bait *hoping* to be kidnapped. He argued that insurgents would likely take him back to their lair, where he could then detonate himself, hopefully taking out a portion of their infrastructure in addition to the insurgents themselves. Our directors put the smackdown on that idea. We chided him good-naturedly about such thoughts at the time. Still....there would be some poetic justice to giving insurgents a taste of what they dish out.

In general, our missions are constructive in nature, not revenge- or justice-oriented. And it certainly isn't necessary or desired that a mission end with the specialist's death. That is in no way the objective. We have plenty of members, for example, who spend their final days overseas in remote villages, teaching medical or engineering skills, akin to a Peace Corp role. But most missions are high-risk and the specialist's death often occurs.

Since my induction three months ago, I've attended 23 Bon Voyage parties, and 14 Life celebrations. The Bon Voyage parties are genuinely festive occasions, where we try to give the member the best sendoff we can on their mission, showering them with love and joy, with drink and food. It is surreal at first, as it isn't yet a funeral...the guest-of-honor is right there, plain as day in front of you, and often looking fit as a fiddle. I've heard stories of people who are suffering from Alzheimer's throwing a final farewell party, where loved ones can gather and spend one final moment together celebrating the afflicted's life and showering them with love, before the guest-of-honor descends ever further into that awful abyss. At first, these parties felt this way to me. Very bittersweet, almost too tragic for even myself to bear, despite hardly knowing the individual. But I have come to appreciate these parties as a healthy ritual for everyone involved.

The Life celebrations, on the other hand, are to mark the passing of a member's life. They too have a sense of the festivity of *Día de los Muertos*. We celebrate their lives and whatever mission they were undertaking, even if the mission itself failed.

The conference room feels stuffy to me now and I gently navigate through the sea of people toward the large double doors. They are made from heavy oak, and bear a three-foot wide replica of the League's seal: the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dam. It is a reminder that we are all that stands between ordinary civilian life—white picket fence and apple pie life—and a huge deluge of tragedy and suffering. I exit the doors into a long hallway, called the Hall of Heroes.

The walls are covered with portraits and little placards, which feature the member's name, a one-line description of their mission, and the date they were born—not died. We celebrate birthdays each year while we're alive, why shouldn't that tradition be extended after death? I find this space deeply moving, and cannot pass without my eyes paying tribute.

"Shannon Abney, election observation in the Ivory Coast, born 11/2/48", "Tyra Parson, Ebola quarantine care in Uganda, born 3/5/37", "Andy Sherris, hostage swap scenario in LA, born 10/15/39", "Andrew Mozeico, landmine diffusion in Bosnia, born 9/27/52". The frames go on and on and on. One curious placard reads, "Adrian Stromquist, deep-sea submersible research in the Mariana Trench, born 12/13/42". Several others have mission descriptions that read simply, "espionage, location: confidential". Those ones drive me batty with curiosity.

Three in a row are for "accelerated HIV-vaccine clinical trials". Many members choose to help pharmaceutical companies accelerate their trials, often giving the companies the ability to skip testing on the lower primates and to cut straight to humans. In most of these cases, the members are not previously infected, and instead allow themselves to become so under clinical conditions, enabling the companies to follow firsthand the development of the pathogen. *No thanks*, I think, and then I reach the most recent addition to the Hall of Heroes. "Drisdal Wahrgren, environmental crisis management, born 4/24/45". I'd say calling it 'environmental crisis management' was a pretty tame way to present it. I kiss my fingertips and press it gently to his forehead before moving on into the adjoining cavernous room.

This is our main HQ room for mission operations. It's reminiscent of NASA's mission control room during the Apollo Era. There are ten rows of computer workstations, each with their own three LCD screens and a webbed chair. Four large LED displays hang suspended from the ceiling near the front of the room, relaying critical data from whatever mission is currently underway. There are several glass-encased rooms connected adjacently, elevated and in the wings like an opera booth, that are reserved for family members of the mission specialist, tinted to provide privacy for their grief. It's a boundary that also helps the support team focus on their work at hand without being distracted by the grief of loved ones.

At the far back of the room, a tall ladder on wheels rests against a monstrously large white board. This almost feels reminiscent of an even earlier time period, like a WWII command center where they tracked known locations of enemy submarines and ships. On it is an array of information, drawn

out like a surgery schedule board, with the far left column filled with names, such as: “Wes”, “Virginia”, “Jackson”, “Harald”, and “Karsten”. The next columns read, “Mission Type” and “Estimated Date”. The final column bears the rather ghastly, “Expiration Date”, and that is the one we tend to all feel our eyes drawn toward. There are stains from all the names that members have written in its place. “Deadline”, “Kick off Date”, “Launch Date”. Presently it is labeled “Best Before”. “Best Before”...I like it. That is the rough timeframe that each and every League member has been given when their life is likely to expire. That is the date at which their mission will no longer be tenable. And the “Best-Before” Date for Queenie the Teenie reads “12/3” ...just two months from now.

The party crowd has spilled out even into here, and I raise my empty tumbler, gesturing for a refill. Larson, one of the League’s attorneys, fills me up and I do my best to focus on the *now*, listening to a humorous anecdote about Drisdal. He was loved by the League. They finish by focusing on the contribution of his mission. He provided extremely valuable intel on cleaning up the faded giant mess, and he did so only three days before his “best before” date. A truly noble gift to humanity. We raise our scotch in a final toast, and then the ceremony is over. Exhausted from the day’s events, it’s all I can do to get back to my dorm room before collapsing in my bed, still fully dressed and the lights left on. I could have never guessed that in 48 hours, I’d be on the back of a motorbike speeding recklessly through Peshawar, Pakistan.

