

## Ed and the Mineral Falls

In the bright open-air restaurant, Ed sat as far away from the other customers as the tables would allow.

Large oak pillars held up a pitched roof in front of a large wooden cabin that housed twenty hostel rooms. The tin sheet roofing panels offered welcome protection from the blazing Guatemalan sun as, though it was still early, it was already beating down.

The eating area, with rustic wooden picnic tables, spanned the entire front of the cabin. With the hostel forming the back of the restaurant, the other three sides opened to glorious, landscaped gardens with an expansive river beside the building.

With the cabin wall protecting his back and a river at his side, Ed found a table in the corner at the back, a suitable vantage point to assess proceedings.

*'Normal activities are for the normal,'* Ed heard his late grandfather whisper as he watched a group of teen gap year students having what seemed like so much fun.

The laughing and joking went in waves, periodically cut short by someone demanding that selfies record the fun. The group then spent an age posting to their favourite social media. That at least ensured they spent some time in total silence while they chose just the right words to caption how much fun they were having.

*'They are at least having fun,'* Ed said to the bulbous fly, dive-bombing the orange he had broken neatly into segments.

He watched the group. Another round of social postings had kept them quiet until another pitcher of frothy beer arrived at their table.

At 11 am, the fruit constituted a mid-morning snack for Ed. Always up at 5 am, as his grandfather had taught him, followed by a hard run, callisthenics, and an hour's reading.

*'When you've read all the classics, reread them, and only once you have done that, read them again,'* his grandfather's stern yet fair voice had informed Ed on many occasions growing up. With this in mind, he spent the hour today breezing through his favourite, *'The Count of Monte Cristo'*.

He loved the swordplay and the drama. Weapon's training had started early for Ed. When only barely able to stand, his grandfather placed a wooden training sword in his hand.

And, as much as the young Ed had protested, he really wanted a teddy bear, his grandfather insisted. Harsh at times and never one to miss a training opportunity, a cute blue teddy had still made it into the house shortly afterwards. Then came the enthusiastic occasions when Ed's grandfather set up elaborate survival games for Ed to save the teddy's life.

Behind the gap year students, who were now having a rowdy photoshoot with the sloshing beer pitcher, a mix of solo travellers and smaller groups occupied the remaining tables.

The general itinerary of guests at the hostel started with a hike to capture the sun rising over the nearby mountains. Then, after returning to freshen up and perhaps catch a couple of hours of sleep before an early lunch, they would be off to the area's main attraction – Semuc Champey.

*'First, seek out the natural wonders, those places man will eventually ruin. See them now, while you can.'* At age 85, when his grandfather took ill, these were some of his parting words.

Semuc Champey fell very clearly under the label, 'natural wonder'. A 300m tiered limestone bridge, under which the Cahabón river flows. Most of the river water drops down a huge crack in the ground and comes out at the other end of the tiered. And then just enough water flows over the tiers to create stunning pools perfect for swimming.

Due to mineral formations in the rocks, these pools, ideal for swimming, are coloured the most dazzling turquoise. Or, at least, this is what the enthusiastic writer at the Lonely Planet would have you believe.

Ed was yet to find out for himself. He had taken a run this morning rather than a hike, allowing him to enjoy the sunrise well away from the guided group, most of whom hadn't been to bed the night before.

From the corner of his eye, Ed noticed a battered coach arriving at the hostel. The transport for Semuc Champey, he assumed. He let out a heavy sigh at the coach's arrival and another more audible one when the gap-year group cheered and whooped as they started packing their stuff.

He might be the same age as most of the group, but he was sure his 18 years on the planet hadn't resembled theirs but for the briefest of moments.

The death of his father, a soldier, tragically killed in the Middle East skirmishes, the doctors believed had contributed to his mother's death in childbirth, which left Ed the ward of his grandfather.

Technically, James Rochester was his great grandfather, tragedy having visited their family many times. A fatal car accident had killed both his grandparents.

For many, taking charge of a baby at the age of 67 would be untenable. James, however, a distinguished educational psychologist who had developed methods to teach skill acquisition in the shortest time, relished the challenge of raising the boy.

'He'll be my life's greatest work,' he would tell anyone who would listen, which happened to be many people as a world-renowned professor.

The coach beeped its horn. It was a screeching sound, reminiscent of a morning rooster. The idea of a coach full of giddy teens sent a shiver down Ed's back.

'I can still run there', he mumbled. For a very tall boy with his athletic prowess, the 10k run to the natural wonder would be a breeze. At least it would be if the Guatemalan sun wasn't scorching the air up to a hostile 35 degrees.

The gap-year crowd rushed at the sound of the horn. They didn't want to get places on the coach but to take the necessary pictures in front of the battered beast.

'In no rush to join the hyenas?' A short, rounded lad called over from the nearest table. The moment he had sat down, Ed had assessed him for threats. He noticed that he, too, had chosen a seat away from the crowd. And then, after ordering a table full of food, until now, he had appeared lost in a graphic novel.

'No, I'm more the solitary type,' Ed replied, adding, 'though, that coach *is* the best option to see the sights, so I best move.'

'Oh, cool! I'm Noah. I'll come with you!' the lad declared, 'just give me a minute,' he said as he started loading up his worn backpack with pastries from the table.

Not wanting to seem rude and with his ever-present grandfather's words in his head, '*without manners, we're barely a step up from animals,*' Ed replied, 'Noah, that's nice, I'm Ed, and it's a great idea, but as I say, I am more a solitary type.'

'That's great then,' Noah said as if he had just taken Ed's words as confirmation that they were now travelling together.

Ed didn't argue; he just packed up his things. He knew he could part company with Noah when they arrived at the site, and his presence did at least take care of a seating companion on the coach.

'Wow, you're a big one, aren't you!' Noah said as Ed got up out of his seat. 'And you're eating fruit. Surely you need more than that,' he added, scanning Ed's table and eyeing the skins, peelings, and healthy leftovers.

'Food as fuel,' Ed replied as he now stood looking physically down at Noah. At 6'5 and broad as a barn door, Ed looked down on most people. However, in Noah's case, who barely scraped 5'5, the height difference felt pronounced.

'I totally get it, but look at you, dude! How old are you? Surely, you have to eat an entire cow per sitting to keep up that bulk?'

'I'm 18, and bison only eat grass, and they do okay,' Ed replied as he walked over to the coach. Noah walked at his side, though he jogged to keep up with Ed's enormous strides.

'Well, that's a strange reply and an interesting accent. Where are you from?'

*'Control the narrative, answer what's useful and deflect the rest.'*

Outside James's university teaching, the armed forces and various covert bodies worldwide employed him for his specialist skill set. Suppose you needed an operative trained in the shortest possible time. James knew how. He also leveraged this unique position to secure Ed access to the world's best military and black ops training. This training had meant missing out on socialising with people Ed's age. Still, James felt it was worth it for the incredible opportunities.

'I've travelled around a lot. What about you?' Ed replied.

'Well, that's nicely vague,' Noah laughed, then added, 'I'm from Barnsley, you know, in the north of the UK.'

Accent training is a crucial skill used to help various operatives create profiles of potential targets. An extended stay at a training camp in a remote Canadian forest allowed Ed a working knowledge of the skill. He smiled as Noah told him about his hometown. He knew it was northern English, of course, but it pleased him he had guessed the correct town.

'Do you know Barnsley?' Noah asked.

'Just the accent,' Ed replied as they approached the coach.

'Want selfies before we get on?' Noah asked as they watched the gap years take turns posing in front of the coach sign that read 'Adventure Starts Here.'

'No,' Ed replied, his manner polite, but he didn't feel the question required more words. Noah, on the other hand, did. 'Just "no"? Not "no, it's not for me", or "no, I'd rather peel my face off and feed it to fire ants"?'

'Indeed,' Ed replied, then conceded, 'my grandfather taught me to be succinct.'

'Succinct?' Noah replied.

Ed was unsure if Noah didn't understand the word or was mocking him. The Barnsley accent gave everything a hint of sarcasm. Ed said, 'he told me once that "*only a Pollyanna or the dumb offer more words than needed,*" and I found it was usually best to avoid having my grandfather repeat himself.'

'Well, I've no idea what a Pollyanna is, but your grandfather sounds a charm,' Noah replied with just plain sarcasm this time, no hint.

As they boarded the coach, Ed mentioned, 'sounded. He passed last year.' Before Noah could answer, the din of voices on the coach, mixed with the searing heat and air-stealing humidity, distracted them both.

'Wow, so this is what a baked bean would feel like if you just threw its can on the fire,' Noah said as sweat beads collected on his brow.

'It is sweltering,' Ed said as he took his seat.

'A few words again, I'm sensing a trend. Don't you worry, I've got enough words for both of us,' Noah said as he tried to get comfortable.

'You're very broad,' Noah muttered. Ed didn't reply.

A middle-aged couple sat near the back. The type with fancy hiking gear and the best backpacks: career-gappers, Ed surmised. Besides them, the coach thronged with late teens and early twenty-somethings giddy on little sleep and early beers.

The loud group of selfie-takers boarded the coach with the encouragement of the driver—motivation in the form of deep, incomprehensible Spanish and a lot of gesturing.

With the back of the coach full, they piled onto the remaining seats in front of Ed and Noah. The coach, designed for smaller locals, not large enthusiastic westerners, rocked under the weight of the passengers.

‘They didn’t make this coach for big ones like you, did they?’ Noah said as Ed struggled to find a place for his knees.

‘I should have run there,’ Ed remarked as he turned his knees into the aisle.

‘I’m not a runner; I tend just to fall forward when I try and just about manage to keep my feet moving so I don’t hit the ground when I fall.’

‘Running keeps the body and mind in order,’ Ed stated as he looked at Noah’s dumpy body.

‘You’re thinking I’m clearly not a runner, aren’t you?’ Noah said, clocking the look.

‘Not many are these days,’ Ed noted as he moved his knees again to try for, if not comfort, at least something more bearable.

‘These days, how old are you? You sound 50?’

‘18,’ Ed murmured, wondering if there was still time to get off and run. ‘*Small talk is a distraction. Pay attention to it, but rarely engage*’, his grandfather’s voice echoed in his head.

‘So not 50?’ Noah mocked.

‘I travelled around a lot growing up. I socialised mostly with adults,’ Ed admitted.

As he answered, he watched a scruffy looking boy, the kind of scruffy that passed for cool as a gap year student – matted hair, baggy pants – throw a miniature football at his friend. The friend, paying more attention to the pretty girl at his side, missed the throw entirely, and it bounced off the back of his head and hurtled towards Noah’s face.

Ed whipped out his hand and stopped the projectile in its tracks, moments away from that schoolyard incident where the ball hits the geeky kid, and everyone laughs.

With a whip of Ed’s hand, the ball barrelled back towards the scruffy boy, who caught it with little grace. The boy composed himself, having barely avoided the ball hitting his face, then nodded at Ed. Ed offered a smile that suggested the boy put the ball away, and he obliged.

‘Wow, like lightening that, mate. So, you’re built, freakish reaction times and talk like Arnie. I was going to guess you were part of some kinda sex ring, spending all your time with adults, but now I’m thinking, super soldier, who are you here to kill?’ Noah asked as he gave his face a gentle rub, glad it didn’t have a ball mark in the middle of it.

‘Do you voice every thought you have?’ Ed said, bemused that someone could suggest to a stranger they might have been part of a sex ring.

'I think it's best; my parents *and* teacher told me it's for the best, to be honest,' Noah replied.

*'Children are now taught that everything they say is gold. Which, of course, it is not. And sadly, this leads to them telling the world ever thought, because, well, they are gold.'* Ed heard his grandfather's voice in his head. His view on modern youth was rarely a positive one. He didn't share this with Noah. Instead, he just offered:

'Did they also tell you that we can think three times faster than we can speak for a reason?'

'What?' Noah asked, and Ed resisted the urge to point out it was 'pardon' as he knew it would fall on deaf ears.

'Nothing,' he replied.

'Do you know what isn't nothing?' Noah said though he didn't wait for a reply, 'the fact that most of the girls on the coach are trying to catch your eye'.

'Are they?' Ed asked, his voice calm and even.

Smiling, Noah said, 'you're a super soldier. You know perfectly well they are. I've seen Jack Reacher, and that other one, the Bourne one, with that Jason todoings guy in it, you know the one?'

'Jason Bourne?' Ed said, correcting his friend's slight stupidity and instantly wishing he hadn't.

'That's the one. See? You know what I mean. You're a super soldier for sure.'

The coach hurtled down a tarmac road lined by dense jungle, and with little warning, the driver hit the brakes and the rickety vehicle screeched to a halt.

As the driver cranked the coach into reverse, he was met with jeers and rowdy comments about his driving abilities. He backed up fifty feet before turning through a tiny gap, right into the tick of the jungle.

A heavy canopy blocked out the sun, and it felt like the coach had entered a tunnel. The road, with more potholes than tarmac, bumped and jostled the coach's passengers. Most fell silent; others let out moans and groans as they hit the larger holes.

Most, not Noah, who continued with, 'so, yes, a super soldier, you know for sure the girls are staring at you, or at least they were before we risked falling into some giant crack in the road. And I bet you know how many exits there are on the coach.'

'Two,' Ed said over the top of the guy in the seat in front of them who yelled each time they hit a bump.

'See! Most people would have said one; you also pointed out the emergency exit,' Noah said, jumping in his seat with excitement. Unfortunately, he jumped between potholes, and as he landed, the coach hit a massive one that bounced his head up to the luggage rack above.

After letting Noah gater himself and finish rubbing the top of his head and cursing, Ed said, 'would they though? Surely everyone knows there's an emergency exit?'

Braced to the seat now with a vice-like grip, Noah replied, 'can we just agree that you're a super soldier and get back to the girls looking at you?'

Martial arts filled his formative years, along with angry sergeants upset at having to teach a youngster field craft, military tactics and covert ops. Languages, weapons training, and much more led to a hectic childhood. It was hardly surprising then that a nosy boy might think him a soldier—a super one, at that.

However, this wasn't something he would ever admit to for fear of dishonouring his grandfather's memory. The professor saw Ed as his protégé, creating not just a gifted soldier but a true renaissance man. A man with abilities across a whole spectrum of skills. If nothing else, he was someone the revered psychologist could role out and show off at his many speaking engagements.

'I have a little military training, I'll agree to that, and that's, well, that is what it is, regarding the girls,' Ed replied.

The coach swerved sharply, and the driver yelled 'jabalí!' Ed offered 'wild pig,' when Noah looked at him confused.

'You speak Spanish?' Noah asked, but again before Ed could reply, he said, 'oh, my goodness, you speak ten languages, don't you? I bet you do. And now I'm thinking perhaps not a super soldier, but a super spy. But still, please, can we go back to the girls trying to catch your eye. I mean, even crashing about, they are still looking. They really must be keen!'

'I'm guessing you read too many comic books growing up,' Ed said to which Noah murmured, 'graphic novels.'

'And, as for the girls, I am not sure what you want me to say?'

'Ah, you're into boys, of course, don't worry, I'm totally woke, more for me and all that. This whole muscle you've got does give off a certain vibe,' said Noah, with a wry smile.

'No, I am not into boys, and I am not giving off any sort of vibe, gay, straight or any of the other fun letters you can be these days. I'm just taking in the sights.'

'There you go again saying, "these days", you did have a strange upbringing, didn't you?' Noah replied, squeezed Ed's shoulder, and whispered, 'dear Lord, made in a superhero lab.'

'Have you finished being weird? We're nearly there?' Ed said as the coach pulled out from under the jungle canopy into a clearing.

'I'm not weird. You're weird,' Noah replied but then seeming to realise how childish that sounded, he said, 'either way, when we get in the pools and go for a swim, the girls will come a running.'

'Or swimming?' Ed added.

'That's the spirit,' And both of them laughed. For Ed, it was the first time in a long time.

*'It won't be long now,' James had told Ed from his death bed. 'My time is nearly here. Shed a tear at my funeral, son, but not now; while I still have breath, I still have things to teach you.'*

Ed had not yet shed that tear; his grandfather had taught him to be strong, control his emotions, and of course, when and where it was appropriate to cry. Sadly, holding the tears in had meant holding in much of the laughter.

*'I've taught you about the true Renaissance Men, great polymaths capable of the extraordinary. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Incredible men who sucked the very sap out of life. And not long later, those great explorers saw the world... No, my son, not seeing, experiencing the world and all it has to offer. I want this for you. Promise me that once I'm gone, you will travel. You have the means, so please do this for me.'*

His grandfather, an obsessive early adopter, bought into cryptocurrencies when people still screamed 'bitcoin is for drug dealers and money laundering,' He had bought and held, getting out shortly before the crash, which served him very well. Crypto, along with a lifetime of investments, properties, and a commitment to financial security, had left Ed with considerable means.

*'Imagine, my boy, if you did not have to work, you chose to do it, or whatever else you might enjoy, enriching your mind, body, and soul. Imagine what you could achieve.'*

'Are you with me, Ed,' Noah asked, 'you seem... distracted.'

'Hold on!' Ed replied as the coach careered forward, smashing into a series of low branches that echoed thumps and thuds around the tin can vehicle.

After thrusting his arm out to hold Noah in place and grabbing the seat in front to hold them steady, Ed replied, 'I am good, thank you. I get distracted sometimes.'

'Is that because you're on a mission working through all the variables before you unleash hell? You know, on your, oh, oh, what do they call it? quarry, prey, mark, target...?'

The handsome teen watched as his companion bumbled through a seemingly endless list of options. Finally, Ed said, 'will you please stop? If I were some kind of operative, do you think I would answer that question?'

Noah did stop, but not before murmuring, 'errm, operative.'

With a heavy foot slammed onto rusty brakes, the coach jolted to a stop, much to the relief of everyone on board. The coach emptied much quicker than it had filled.

Ed and Noah let it empty before getting up. The selfie group burst forward, desperate to get shots of their face obscuring various natural wonders.

A blast of cloying teen bodysprays and treacly perfume left over from the previous night came with them.

'I think they might have gotten a discount on Lynx Africa,' Noah said as they stood to exit the vehicle.

'It appears that heavy set boy has bathed in it,' Ed replied. The heavy-set boy stood over six feet, and though he clearly worked out, it looked like he also used the gym as an excuse to overeat.

'There you go again, what teenager says "heavy set"?' Noah said as they reached a sizeable map with all the points of interest marked by coloured dots.

'Raised by my grandfather, I have told you this already. I am pretty sure it is not that hard to grasp?' Ed did his best not to snap in the Guatemalan sun's baking heat. He knew that once you lose your temper, your opponent has already won.

It wasn't that he saw Noah as an opponent, more an annoyance he probably should ditch.

'You say that like it's the most natural thing in the world,' Noah said with a smile. Then asked, 'why are you staring at that "heavy-set" lad? Who I think might be called Dimitris, and I'm pretty sure he's Greek from the shouting I heard earlier.'

'Dimitris, hey?' Ed said as he followed in Dimitris direction and the rest of the selfie group.

'Where are we going?' Noah asked as he quick-stepped after him.

'There and back to see how far it is,' Ed said over his shoulder.

'That makes no sense.'

'That's true, just something my grandfather would say.'

'Did your grandfather often make little sense?'

Coming to an abrupt halt, Ed turned to a heavily sweating Noah and said, 'oh, he always made sense; it just often took hours to work out what that sense might be.'

Unphased by the odd reply, Noah said, 'your spidey senses are tingling, aren't they? You think that lump is up to something?'

Marching again, Ed replied, 'something like that, yes.'

In the dark eyes of Dimitris, Ed had noticed something unsettling. He couldn't see the future, but he did know a trouble causer when he saw one. He felt it wouldn't hurt to keep Dimitris in his sights.

'Here's me thinking we were just coming for a swim, and now I feel like I'm on a secret mission!' Noah said, breathy as the intense midday sun took its toll at marching speed.

'We *are* going swimming. Look, there is an excellent spot over there.'

The path from the coach park opened onto the full glory of Semuc Champey. A cascade of water moved from pool to pool over a series of low waterfalls. The dissolving minerals did just as the guidebook had claimed, causing the water to run an extraordinary aqua blue.

Ed watched as Dimitris and his group set up at the side of the largest pool. There was very little room, yet they pushed and manoeuvred until they had enough space to sit.

The vast site had plenty of accessible seating, but it was clear that Dimitris wanted the best spot, and he just happened to choose one at the side of two teen girls.

A level up from Dimitris's group, the lads made themselves comfortable on a small grassed area. The spot allowed Ed to sit with his back against an enormous tree, protecting him from behind and providing a vantage point over the water and their group.

'We're on a mission, aren't we? Is it find and protect? Something like that?' Noah said as he watched his strange new friend surveying the scene.

'You might need to protect those girls at this rate, they only just look 18 to me, and your chunky boy seems keen,' Noah added when Ed didn't reply.

One of the girls was tall and athletic, with dark brown hair and even darker eyes. Her friend, a redhead, was wrapped up from head to toe to stop herself from scorching in the blazing sun.

'You would make pretty babies with that dark-haired girl, don't you think?'

'We should go for a swim', Ed said, having had enough of Noah's incessant chatter.

Both guys were already in swimming shorts, so there was no need to change under their towels awkwardly. When Noah agreed, Ed stood up and pulled off his shirt.

'Shit, mate, you look like a cartoon superhero! Did someone just draw you all perfect like that?' Noah said and, as he stood up, added, 'I think I'll keep my t-shirt on.'

Noah continued, getting used to the lack of replies, 'you know everyone is staring at you, right? You've intimidated most of the guys, and I can't tell you what you've done to the girls, not in polite company.'

'Do you ever stop talking?' Ed asked. There was no malice to his tone. He just did not understand how one boy could speak so much.

Noah just smiled and replied, 'what can I say? I'm making up for you saying so little. Speak more; I'll speak less.'

Both smiled as they walked to the bank's edge and dangled their feet into the water. They eased themselves in, a refreshing and welcoming feeling on such a blistering day.

The depth of the pool allowed Ed to stand head and shoulders out of the water. As Noah ventured in, Ed caught his arm and eased the shorter boy back to the bank where he could keep himself afloat.

Laughter emanated from the group taking selfies, accompanied by the bullying tone of banter: slightly aggressive, judgemental AND mean. Ed watched as the two girls, uncomfortable with the situation, got up and headed for a swim; the boisterous Dimitris was too much for them.

‘Oh, look, that girl you like is coming this way,’ Noah said as he watched them make their way to the water.

‘Not our way; they are going into the other pool,’ Ed replied.

‘So, you admit it! You like that dark-haired one, then?’ Noah said and then swam a semicircle towards the middle of the pool and back.

‘Do you have to be so childish?’ Ed asked on his return.

‘I’m a teenager; I’m pretty sure I’m allowed to be a little childish. You’re the highly trained super soldier who acts 50. I’m also pretty sure you should be waving that big chest of yours about to get those pretty girls to head this way. I’ll take the redhead, even if she does look like she’s about to catch fire in this heat.’

There was no reply from Ed. He lifted his feet from the bottom of the pool and floated. Calm and relaxed.

Noah badgered.

‘So, what did your grandfather say about girls? Do girls have no place in a super soldier’s work?’

The mention of his grandfather brought Ed’s feet back down to the floor with a bump. The rocks on the bottom felt slippery and he held the bank to keep his balance.

‘Actually, my grandfather was a big believer in love, attraction and companionship.’

‘And sex? What about sex?’ Noah asked, trying to get a reply more suited to their age group and not that of middle-aged men.

‘Now that was something he talked about less, though he implied that if you find those other three things, you’re likely to find the sex, too,’ Ed answered, and then at the sound of a huge splash, he floated out a few feet from the bank to take a better look.

Dimitris and some other boys in his group had dive-bombed into the water next to the two girls. They were fussing around, splashing water and according to Noah, they were ‘making a tit of themselves.’

In one swift movement, Ed swam back to the bank and thrust himself up and out of the water. Gymnastic training gave him an explosive power allowing him to almost bounce out of the pool.

‘I feel we should go swimming in the big pool, how about you?’ Ed said, and giving Noah very little choice, he leant down, and with one hand, he grabbed the boy’s arm and lifted him clean out of the water.

'Fuck, dude, you're a machine! Did they start you on the steroids as a baby?' Noah asked as he found his footing on dry land. It wasn't every day your entire body was lifted by your arm.

'I was taught that swearing was the first bastion of the stupid,' Ed replied as he turned to walk towards the growing commotion in the pool below.

'If I knew what that meant, I would totally agree, though I'm pretty sure you're going to get us both into trouble if you go barging into that fuss,' Noah said as he followed after Ed.

By this point, Ed's lack of comment did not appear to phase Noah. Instead, he wittered, 'I'm not much of a fighter; you can probably tell by now, I'm much more of a talker.'

'Come on, go for a swim with me, just us, you know you want to!' Dimitris loomed over the brown-haired girl, who stood her ground despite the height difference.

Ed was aware that, in these modern times, it would be wrong for him to storm in and assert his masculinity. That would be a toxic reaction.

*'It is challenging to be a man in this modern world. Everything that used to define a man, strength, fortitude, and resilience, are now things that have been stripped away. And as much as your superior strength, skills, and training mean that you have these qualities in droves, you will fare better being considerate of the current world mood.'*

'Who said anything about fighting? Let's try some distraction,' Ed said as they walked almost in line with Dimitris. At which point, he nudged Noah into the water. The considerable splash covered the Greek boy's head and caused him and the equally soaked boys around him to splutter and flap.

'Well done, fat boy, that was fucking great!' Dimitris said, turning on Noah. However, before he could move any closer, Ed jumped between them.

'It was an accident; I knocked him by mistake,' Ed said, looking down on Dimitris, his eyes loosely fixed on the Greek boy, which allowed him to use his peripheral vision to monitor Dimitris's friends.

'Who the fuck are you, GI Joe,' Dimitris said, stepping towards Ed and glaring upwards at him.

The tall, heavy-set boy stood three inches shorter than Ed, forcing him to look up, something he didn't like.

'My grandfather told me that swearing is the first bastion of the stupid,' Ed replied.

Dimitris grinned and said, 'well, your grandfather must be fucking stupid.'

Stepping out from behind Ed, Noah said, 'oh, that's clever. Did they teach you that in Muppet school?'

Glaring down at him, Dimitris grunted, 'eugh!'

'You know, where they train Muppets? To be, well, Muppets. Either way, wow, that was a dumb reply.'

Turning to look at Noah, Ed shook his head, 'you are not helping that no fighting thing.'

On the word fighting, Ed turned to face Dimitris; he knew what kind of reaction this word would get out of a thug like him. Yet that didn't stop him from saying it.

'Who's fighting?' Dimitris snapped, adding, 'looks like we're fighting, bros.'

Being heavy-set did not lend itself to quick movements. Dimitris threw his fist up towards Ed's face, yet it did not make half its journey before Ed's training took over.

*'We train to fight to the point where we no longer have to think about fighting, our reactions taking over,'* James's voice rang through Ed's head as he lashed his open hand towards Dimitris's neck.

Ed knew that he couldn't just block the punch and punch back; that would bring the rest of the boys into the fight, leaving Noah vulnerable.

Instead, it needed a grand gesture, something to stop the fracas in its tracks. With a spade-like hand, Ed wrapped his fingers around Dimitris's neck and with a turn and thrust forward, he lifted the boy out of the water and planted his back hard on the bank.

Winded and in shock, Dimitris gasped, as did anyone who caught the Herculean strength it took to perform such an action.

Before Dimitris could catch his breath and struggle, Ed placed his other hand down hard on his chest, pinning him on the spot.

Leaning close to Dimitris's face, knowing full well that, as it stood, if he let him go, the boy would have to fight to defend his ego, he said, 'if we fight, you will lose. And not just lose, you will lose badly, in front of all your friends and those girls. And I will make sure you look like a childish idiot. Do you understand?'

As he spoke, he pushed harder onto the boy's chest to ensure he did. If Dimitris had been stupid enough to doubt Ed's strength after lifting him out of the water, he certainly didn't now.

Ed pushed down hard again, and Dimitris replied, 'fine, whatever. Just let me go.'

After releasing his neck, Ed took a good step back, just in case Dimitris was stupid enough to throw another punch.

He did not. He got up, brushed himself down and saying nothing, he stormed off and out of sight. Leaving the other boys to scurry after him.

'Yeah, sure, totally not a super soldier. I mean, my Lord, that was some Marvel Universe type shit. Sorry, I mean stuff,' Noah said as he watched Ed lift himself out of the water and sit on the bank.

'I am sure if you had kept your mouth shut, I could have talked us out of it,' Ed said, though the look on his face perhaps showed that he had not minded the action.

Before Noah could defend himself, the brown-haired girl approached them.

'Well, 'GI Joe, that was kinda impressive, though I can take care of myself,' the girl's brown eyes shone in the sunlight and caused Ed to blush ever so slightly.

'Thank you, I think,' Ed replied, 'though I could see you had everything under control, I was just defending my verbose friend here. And I'm Ed.'

'Verbose, what a wonderful world. Fit, strong and smart. Is there anything you can't do? I'm Amelia,' she said, smiling.

'He can't string more than two sentences together. I can tell you that,' Noah chimed in.

James had very much wanted his grandson to be a well-rounded man. Not just a fighting machine, or able to speak many languages, but worldly. They talked about philosophy, read the major works of fiction and discussed classic films.

After watching an old film, 'It Happened One Night', where Clark Gable met the stunning Claudette Colbert, James explained the concept of a Meet Cute.

*'It is a charming first encounter between two characters that leads to the development of a romantic relationship between them.'*

Little did Ed know that this was his Meet Cute, and years from now, after the most thrilling of lives, he would look back on this moment with the biggest smile.

Just like the one he had now.

The End.