

For Luca - the story of Player and his squad, a banana and a Lava Dragon

Player was bored, for weeks now he and his squad of elite ninja assassins had been practising their moves, their exercises and their strategies. They knew them all off by heart. What to do if aliens landed and tried to take over the world, what to do if the Russian Plague Zombies invaded Britain and, most importantly, how to kill them, making sure that they never regenerated and were actually dead. For there is nothing more annoying than a regenerated zombie, with bits of flesh hanging off and one leg shorter than the other so that they keep falling over, getting in everyone's way and generally being uncooperative.

Player had spent many months designing all the simulations and he knew them all forwards, backwards and inside out. But what really frustrated him was the fact that they were always just simulations, never the REAL THING. He knew all about how to zap aliens, how they were allergic to Coca Cola and that was his secret weapon. He could stop an intergalactic invasion just by getting his squad to open bottles of coke, shake them so that they became very very fizzy and then spray the aliens with them. Coke was an excellent secret weapon.

People thought it was just a drink but Player knew better for his mum used it to clean the loo, by pouring a can of coke down it and leaving the liquid to sit there all afternoon before flushing. When it was flushed the coke had removed all the gross brown stains at the bottom and the loo was sparkling clean. So what chance did aliens have against such a powerful weapon. Especially when it was sprayed from outside Player's fleet of high altitude airships directly onto the aliens' space ships, first it made them very shiny, then it actually disintegrated them.

But of course these were only simulations, he'd never had the chance to test his coke theory on invading aliens, because none had invaded. Or even arrived, or even been in contact. Nor did he have an actual fleet of high-altitude airships. So he'd put his great plan into a folder marked Aliens and moved on to designing anti Zombie simulations.

Those were easier. He'd discovered another secret weapon which he reckoned zombies would absolutely hate and which would make them slip over all the time. Bananas.

Player knew that Banana peel contained many vitamins and minerals and that these were really good for healing wounds, scars and itchy skin. And what were zombies? Nothing more than great lumbering piles of oozing wounds, scars and itchy skin.

So he had made a paste from his mum's leftover banana skins and stored it in big pots, ready for the onslaught of the Russian Plague zombies. He was pretty sure that by restoring their looks and their bodies to maximum efficiency, they'd probably want to stop being zombies and prefer to go home. He knew that the mad Russian General Maxim Bogalov, would be secretly jealous of the weapon which also a cure, for he himself was covered from head to toe in scars and warts and Player knew that he was only mad and dangerous because he had sore skin. Very sore skin.

So, after having practised every simulation with the Aliens and the Coke and the Zombies and the bananas there really wasn't much more for him and his squad to do.

So he decided they would go on manoeuvres abroad, to see if they could learn any new tactics from other squads. He had heard a lot about the Romanian squads, a lot of whispered information which he didn't quite believe so he felt he had to see for himself. Anyway he was sure that he could sell his Zombie beating banana weapon to the Romanians because Romania was much closer to Russia than England was. Maybe they'd have a chance to actually see some Zombies and use the weapon. Which had worked really well in all the computer simulations but it might be a good thing to try it out on some real, not CGI zombies, before selling it.

Feeling excited he told his squad that they were going on a mini break to Romania. It wasn't an official Ministry trip, so they'd have to go by bus as there wasn't much money available for them to take a plane. He suggested that they pack casual clothes, plus spare socks, some pants and face masks, the ones that looked like skulls. He liked those best as they scared people in the supermarket when he wore his.

Being trained ninja assassins they knew what to pack and each of the 20 men stuffed their kit bags very quickly.

He told the Quartermaster, Vole, to make sure that they had a good supply of bananas, both whole ones and ones already made into a sort of gooey mess, which was less wasteful than using whole bananas and equally effective.

So it was that three days later, after a very uncomfortable bus ride across Europe, they arrived at the castle of Dracula, the headquarters of the Romanian assassins. The bus stopped right outside and with a terrifying and bloodcurdling sound, the drawbridge of the castle started to open slowly.

The ninjas all stood around trying to look cool as they, out of the corner of their eyes, looked to see what was behind the drawbridge. Another bloodcurdling wail greeted them and they all stepped back as they saw,

padding towards them, VERY slowly and menacingly, the most enormous dragon. But it wasn't an ordinary dragon, from what they could see, it was an extraordinarily rare lava dragon. Player looked at it with his mouth open, he'd heard of them but never seen one. He hoped he didn't look scared as the dragon approached them, its nostrils trailing little puffs of smoke and when it yawned, he saw the hot red sticky bubbling lava deep in its throat. He actually wanted to ask it to roar and see what would happen but he didn't want to lose any of his squad and, anyway, he and the dragon had not been properly introduced.

He knew that Romanians were very keen on good manners and he didn't want to offend them, also he badly needed to sell his banana weapon to them as the bus had cost more money than he'd calculated. So he stood his ground and waited patiently.

As the dragon came nearer, he saw that a small dark man was walking beside it, wearing a uniform of sorts and with a saucepan on his head, the handle sticking out at the front. He heard the squad all trying not to laugh, which is difficult if you're wearing a mask because it means you can't turn your laugh into a cough. But they managed and stood taller and straighter in a very neat formation, as the head of the Romanian assassins came towards them his hand outstretched in welcome.

He muttered something to the dragon, who with a brief puff of deep red smoke from his enormous mouth, sat down and looked at the squad hungrily.

"Good afternoon, welcome to our headquarters, the castle of Vlad Dracul, who you call Dracula. My name is Dragos and I am the head of the Assassins and also keeper of the Dragon. Oh he won't hurt you, unless of course I tell him to..." he laughed as he said this and the Squad laughed with him, knowing that such bad manners was unthinkable between brother assassins.

"Hello Dragos. I am Player and these are my men. We are very pleased to meet you and your most impressive dragon. May we know his name?"

"He is called Plovdiv. And he seems very pleased to meet you all too. Please, follow me and I will have you shown to your quarters".

Following Dragos they entered the castle keep and looked around them with interest. It was huge with high black rock walls, hung with great thick and long heavy-looking chains, one of which had Plovdiv on the end of it. So he wasn't a FREE dragon thought Player, probably just as well, judging by the look of the lava bubbling away in that enormous stomach. One belch and there'd be no more castle.

Dragos led them to a small wooden staircase which ran up the side of the wall to their left to a sort of landing and indicated a wooden door with big brass studs in it. Those are your quarters, you will find all you need and there is plenty of hot water for I'm sure you'd all like to freshen yourselves after your long journey. If you run out, ring the bell by the bathhouse door and Plovdiv will light the furnace.

They thanked him and sprinted lightly, like Elves, up the staircase. Dragos' astonishment at their nimble speed was not lost on them and despite being tired and dirty they were proud of their squad and hoped to be able to show Dragos and his men what they could do and, of course, see what THEY could do. For among the international Assassins bands there was great pride and brotherly competition and when, on the rare occasions they met other assassins it was a real privilege and pleasure to swap stories of escapades, missions, adventures and to show off their individual skills.

Player was proud of his squad and badly wanted to show the Romanians how good they were. Little did he know that he would soon have the opportunity to do just that.

They were soon washed and with their top knots securely in place, for being Ninja assassins they all had long hair which they wore in the traditional way, a top knot on their head. Some were decorated with beads or pieces of cloth with strange symbols of power printed on them, some were secured by wicked-looking sharp steel pins, like chopsticks, but with sharpened ends which could be used as a weapon when required while others just used a leather cord. But even a leather cord could be lethal if used properly and the Squad knew how to use everything properly. Player's topknot decoration was particularly spectacular, a half sized steel tipped arrow, the colours of his fletch denoting the colours of the squad's standard.

Black for mystery and black ops, white for purity of soul and red for the blood which, when and only if necessary, they had to spill. But the red of the blood was also indicative of their blood brotherhood, for each member of the squad had to swear an everlasting Oath of Brotherhood by cutting their palms with a sharp knife and mixing their blood with that of all the others. Punishment for letting down your Brothers was dreadful and never referred to between the men. The shame of being outcast and sent away, being more terrible than the actual punishment itself.

"Ready amigos?" asked Player heading towards the huge heavy door. They said they were and together, in one swift elegant movement, they flowed down the wooden stairs and crossed the courtyard heading for the

delicious smells that were wafting from a doorway just to the left of a large stone well.

The castle of Vlad Dracul looked like something out of a film, all battlements and turrets and tiny windows and winding corridors. Very difficult to defend thought Player and equally difficult to keep clean he mused. For cleanliness was one of the main precepts of joining the Brotherhood. Cleanliness of mind, cleanliness of body and cleanliness of your surroundings. So each Ninja as well as being a finely tuned fighting and, when necessary, killing machine, was also a superb cleaner. Knowing the best ways of keeping their clothing, weapons and headquarters clean they had discovered many useful ways of cleaning kit and cleaning their surroundings. Nothing was wasted in the world of a Ninja assassin and Player was proud of this.

Walking into the dining hall, he blinked as his eyes adjusted to the candlelight inside. It was all very “Hollywood” he thought, but then realised that it was probably for their benefit as honoured guests, the room looked magnificent with the best china and cutlery laid out on long tables which were groaning with all sorts of delicious-looking but healthy food. There is no such thing as a fat Ninja, though after three days of pack rations and pot noodles on the bus, the squad was looking forward to a good dinner and a good workout afterwards, to restore them to their usual peak of fitness. Of course they waited for an hour after eating before starting their training session, using the time to research what new threats and opportunities there were. Or tonight, to chat with their Romanian counterparts and learn more of their way of doing things.

Dragos appeared, looking magnificent in a full length black cloak, his black leggings tucked into knee length very shiny boots and his snowy white T shirt emblazoned with their own Squad logo. A two headed dragon, a lava spewing dragon.

Through a grille in the wall they could see Plovdiv delicately eating something. His massive teeth picking bits of meat off several carcasses. Cooked carcasses, the identity of the original animal being somewhat difficult to discover as there were globs of rapidly cooling lava all over them. “Well that’s one way of cooking food” said Banjo, Player’s right hand man and best friend.

“Welcome my friends, please come and meet my brethren.” Said Dragos, leading them over to another long table laden with jugs, bottles and cans of various drinks. Other Romanians, all dressed like Dragos, but without the cloak, were standing around talking and as the British Ninjas approached came and said hello and offered them something to drink.

Now Ninjas don't normally drink alcohol but Player felt it would be rude to refuse their host's hospitality, so he allowed each of his team two glasses of whatever they preferred, and water afterwards.

They all chose a mug of the local beer which was cool and fizzy and delicious. Saving their second glass for the meal.

The Romanians were very friendly and great fun. They were also excellent hosts, offering the squad all sorts of delicious and unusual things. Most ninjas prefer to be vegetarian as eating too much meat was bad for their digestion and made them fart a lot. Which was not helpful when fighting. But tonight there were huge mouthwatering steaks and chops and whole hams on the bone as well as big bowls of steamed vegetables, great slabs of goat butter and cheese and still-warm homemade bread. Plaited loaves, a good six inches thick and filled with all sorts of healthy seeds and grains.

It was a delicious dinner and very much welcomed by the squad as their usual rations were braised tofu, miso soup, rice and shiitake mushrooms. And no pudding. Not even low fat yoghurt ice cream.

Here they saw, at another table, great bowls of creamy rice pudding, trifle, strawberry meringues with whipped cream and chocolate profiteroles as well as an enormous sticky toffee pudding. Their eyes were out on stalks as they looked at the huge amount of food.

Player wondered how it was that the Romanians weren't hugely fat and unfit, certainly they were larger than he and his men, but from what he could see, Dragos and his squad were pure muscle. And looked extremely fit and strong. He was looking forward to working out with them the next day.

After dinner they sat around a huge fireplace and swapped stories, sipping Green Tea with Matcha from huge earthenware mugs. The Romanians had, in the European fashion, tiny cups of wickedly strong espresso coffee with lots of sugar.

They discussed the formation of their squads, when and how they had been formed, they discussed the battles they had fought and the enemies they had beaten. And how they'd beaten them. Player was relieved to hear that not once had they mentioned using bananas or Coca Cola as a weapon, so he felt pretty confident that he might be able to sell their research on these for a good price. He just wished that there were some zombies around on which he could run some tests, as he'd only ever beaten them in simulation.

His ears pricked up as he heard Dragos mentioning zombies. They had had some problem with incursions from across the border with Moldavia, There

was a new warlord who had slaughtered everybody and with the help of his sorceress he had raised a zombie army and was starting to become annoying. Of course they were nothing like the mad Russian zombies, which both squads agreed were the worst type, but these were pretty bad.

“How have you been managing to keep them away?” asked Banjo. A Romanian called Mircea answered. “ We have had some success using Plovdiv and his lava jets, though the effect is only temporary. Yes they burn and get stuck in the lava flow, but as soon as it starts cooling and before it solidifies, they are up again and lurching forwards with blood-curdling yells. It’s all very inconvenient. And somewhat noisy”.

They all grinned at that, agreeing that fighting zombies was annoying because they would insist on vocalising everything. Whereas Ninjas fight with a few well-chosen exclamations which coincide with specific movements, thus making the process more effective.

Player felt it was time to tell them of his and his squad’s experiments with bananas. He thought it best to leave out the bit about his mum’s kitchen. So, nodding to Banjo to open the kitbag they’d brought with them, he moved to stand in front of the fireplace and cleared his throat.

“Hmmm mmmm. Well we have been developing something that may assist with eradicating the zombie problem” he said. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him.

“ Really? That would be magnificent” said Dragos, “we’d very much like to have a rest from fighting them as we’re fed up with having to clean up bits of bodies everywhere, even bits of lava burned bodies.... and we’d really like a holiday...”.

Player nodded, knowing that the Zombie problem here was much worse than at home, Romania was the front line defence against the Russian zombies and depending on how often they attacked, he could imagine that Dragos’ squad would have to remain on high alert most of the time. He understood about needing a holiday too.

Well what we have developed is in the experimental stage and we haven’t yet tested it because we have not perfected a way of launching it, but we’re pretty sure that it would work. At least in theory.

“Go on, tell us more”, said Mircea looking really interested and the others of the Romanian squad nodded in agreement. So Player outlined the Banana Theory.

“That is genius!” said Dragos. “We knew that the Russian Plague Zombies were fed up, which is why we think that they keep hurling themselves into Plovdiv’s lava, hoping that it will burn them all up and they don’t have to get up every day and be marauding zombies all the time. We also know that General Bogalov used to be very handsome and very vain, until he contracted his awful skin disease, maybe if we can cure him, he will stop marauding and go home and take up gardening. We hear that he has a beautiful garden and that his wife, who is also very beautiful, would love him to help her with their roses. He used to win prizes for them, did you know?”

Player said that he didn’t know but that he’d welcome the idea of General Bogalov retiring to his rose garden and that he was glad that he had a beautiful wife to garden with. Both squads nodded their heads in agreement and, pulling up chairs, they all sat down together to watch Player’s demonstration.

However, there was one problem, there were no zombies to test it on. Ignoring that for the moment, Player asked Banjo to open the kitbag and show everyone the pots of cream. They oohed and aahed appreciatively, some even learning forward for a sniff of the really gooey but yummy smelling cream. It was a bit of an odd colour, a sort of brownish grey, but, as someone said, that didn’t matter because that was the same colour as the zombies!

“To be honest, we haven’t had the opportunity to test this yet as you guys have been so efficient keeping the zombies away”.

“ But this is not a problem” said Dragos, who Player was liking more and more. “ Ionut, go and get our guest” he nodded towards a huge Romanian Ninja. Easily two metres tall and almost as wide, but not a centimetre of fat on him, he was pure muscle. His topknot was held in place by two bones, which made him look very fierce indeed.

“ Yessir” said Ionut, turning towards a door by the fireplace which, was to be honest, going to be quite a tight squeeze for him to get through, he was so massive.

They talked among themselves until, a terrible long gurgling howl rang through the castle. They stopped and looked at each other, wondering what it was. The Romanians leapt up, reaching for their weapons. Player and his team weren’t so fortunate because their weapons were still in their dormitory. It would have been unthinkable for them to attend a dinner in their hosts’s castle, bearing weapons and besides the age-old tradition of sacred hospitality was one of the foremost rules of their Squad. So they had come unarmed. Big mistake.

Luckily, one of the quick-thinking Romanians, seeing their predicament, showed them a cupboard absolutely stuffed with weapons of every type. Quickly, without trying them out, each Ninja chose a weapon and, together with the Romanians turned to face whatever was making the terrible noises.

As they looked towards the doorway they saw that Ionut was no more, bits of him were liberally splattered all over the walls and floor of the corridor and, coming down it, towards them, was the most disgusting and most enormous zombie they'd ever seen. The stench of its rotting body reaching them long before it did.

Trying not to be sick and immediately pulling up their bandanas to use as masks, they arranged themselves either side of the opening, ready to engage the zombie, their weapons at the ready. But as they watched, the bits of Ionut that has been so disgustingly decorating the passageway, were now slowly and oozily coming together and he was reconstituting before their very eyes, literally only minutes after his death. The quickest zombie regeneration they'd ever seen. A massive mountain of madness and mayhem.

"Banjo, help me get out the cream" gasped Player, racing to the haversack. Wondering as they hauled the biggest pot out of the bag, how they were going to launch it not only at the Zombie but also at what had been Ionut.

Hurriedly looking around him, he spotted some huge soup ladles at the dining table and reckoned that they would have to do in place of a proper launch device. Scooping up great globs of the banana goo he moved towards the front, directly in the path of the giant zombie and the rapidly growing Ionut. With not a second to spare he lobbed it at the zombie, one of its eyes, hanging out of its socket by a revoltingly red and glistening string, swivelled to look at him, he thought it looked somewhat surprised.

The zombie stopped in its tracks as the creamy gunge hit him and started slithering down his cadaverous body, wasting not a moment, Player scooped up another ladleful and chucked it at ex Ionut. He also stopped. Both monsters looked surprised and with what was left of their fingers, touched the creamy stuff, looking puzzled. The other ninjas were hurriedly copying Player and in a matter of seconds the two huge monsters were liberally covered with banana scented stickiness. Then something very interesting happened. Both zombies, slipped, sat down and looked at their goo-covered bodies in amazement. Tentatively they started touching them, lifting their fingers to where their noses had been and sniffing them. Little noises, which might have been pleasure, came out of the gaping holes of their mouths.

Even more extraordinary was the fact that ex Ionut was slowly licking the stumps of his fingers, like a puppy with a meaty bone. The giant Zombie's skull swivelled wobbily as he turned his head to see what ex Ionut was doing. Then he too started licking his fingers making funny noises and looking as if he was perfectly content sitting in a pile of slippery banana paste.

The ninjas all looked at each other with astonishment. It seems to have worked, but not in the way it had in all the simulations. It seemed that their experiments and simulations had been correct, for the banana paste, instead of killing the zombies was regenerating them, back to healthy glowing humanity. However, not wanting to reduce their level of battle readiness just in case this was a false alarm, they still stood in attack formation, wielding their weapons, but just a little less tense and a little more relaxed and a bit hopeful. If their new weapon had worked then it changed everything, but first they had to see how their two zombie adversaries were progressing.

They were both sitting down and as the ninjas watched their bodies started to reconstitute, bits of pink healthy skin replacing the disgusting grey and oozy red scrofula that had been their flesh. Soon, not more than 10 minutes later, two large pink men had magically appeared from the bodies of the rotting zombie and the recently dead Ionut. Both looked towards the Ninjas and Player was sure he saw a tear slide down from the now miraculously replaced and reconstituted eye of the giant zombie. Except he was no longer a zombie. He was a man with no pants on.

Hurriedly finding a tablecloth, Dragos threw it at the naked man, who took the hint and draped it modestly around himself, like a tasselled loincloth. Not a GREAT look, but better than bare bits, giant bare bits.

Slowly he lumbered to his feet, taking care not to slip on the banana encrusted floor and turning to Ionut, who was also now back to his massive self, offered him his hand - a whole hand with massive pink fingers - and helped him up, apologising in a creaky and croaky voice for having ripped him apart earlier. Ionut said that was quite understandable given the circumstances and forgave him, inviting him to join the others for a spot of supper.

Everyone laughed with relief and made way for him, showing him to the table and sitting him down on a stool, for he was too large for one of the chairs, and offered him a tankard for ale and some food. He tucked in as if he hadn't eaten for centuries - which he hadn't - with only a few bits of food and ale dripping through his not-quite-reformed belly. They forgave him this lack of cleanliness just this once and someone found a bed sheet which he could use as a napkin.

Ionut joined him as did the rest of the Ninjas, relieved that Player's weapon had worked and talking excitedly about its miraculous healing and regenerative powers. Once the huge former zombie's vocal chords had completely regrown, which didn't take long, he began to talk and to tell them his story.

His name was Anton and he was Bulgarian. He had been turned into a zombie in 1758, which, Player calculated, was over 200 years ago. He'd hated being a zombie and was almost glad when Dragos and his men had captured him because he didn't have to go out marauding with the other zombies. He explained that he found all the bloodcurdling gurgling really noisy which had given him a sore throat and that he'd not much liked ripping people to pieces before they were zombified. He'd been a blacksmith in Bulgaria before an evil Count, seeing the tactical potential of having such a giant zombie in his army, had killed and assimilated him.

The ninjas were fascinated by his experiences for it gave them an important insight into how to deal with the other zombies. Anton told them that no-one actually liked being a zombie as it was exhausting and smelly and staggering about with their rotting flesh and disintegrating bodies was painful. He was so grateful to the Ninjas for restoring him to himself and how could he ever repay them?

They discussed this long into the night and concluded that Anton's blacksmithing skills would be of immense use, for he could work with them on inventing a better method of throwing the banana paste, as using soup ladles wasn't really the most efficient means.

It was a happy bunch of ninjas and ex zombies that sat around the table late into the night. However, before they went to bed they had to try and find a way of clearing up the excess banana paste from the corridor. Dragos had the bright idea of asking Plovdiv to come in and burn it up. So they went and got him from his kennel, yes, dragons live in big ornate (fire proof) kennels.

He lumbered in, taking care that his tail didn't knock anything over, for it was a huge treat for him to be allowed into the dining hall. Dragos showed him the banana smeared corridor and Plovdiv, being a highly intelligent dragon, blew very gently onto the sticky mess. It was at this point that Player realised that this was EXACTLY how they could reuse the paste, not wasting a drop, but also how they could make more paste without having to always ask his mum for permission to use her kitchen.

Having cleared up the goo, put it carefully back into the pots, thanked Plovdiv and Dragos and said goodnight to Anton and Ionut, Player, Banjo

and the team headed up to their dormitory where they slept for a very long time.

The next day both squads got together to figure out how best to make and deliver huge quantities of banana paste. Mircea was sent into town with Anton to buy up all the bananas and Dragos went online to see whether they could have kilos and kilos of bananas delivered direct from the plantation across the world in Dominica. There was a bit of a worry about secrecy, for neither of the Ninja squads wanted the enemy to know what they were doing, so they pretended that they were making banana cake to sell at church fetes in order to raise money for keeping Plovdiv fed. For he was a very famous dragon worldwide, the only remaining lava dragon and now that he was growing up he needed to eat an awful lot of different things, full of healthy vitamins and minerals, so that he could keep generating lava.

That evening, with four cartloads of bananas now in the courtyard, they all sat down to figure out what to do and how best to do it.

Dragos has a telepathic communication with Plovdiv who informed him that if he could be fed bananas, he could make loads and loads of the anti zombie paste which they could then keep in huge iron barrels. Dragos thought this was a good idea and talked to Player about it. Player agreed but was secretly a bit worried because he HAD hoped to sell the paste to the Romanians and anyone else who might be interested. Dragos, being telepathic, picked up on this and generously suggested that they form a joint venture, Ninja Cream (a name that was deliberately misleading so that industrial spies wouldn't steal their idea) where Plovdiv would manufacture the paste and that they could stay at the castle for as long as they wanted in order to perfect the delivery method, which was something that Anton was working on.

Player agreed with relief. He really liked the Romanians and they had been such generous hosts and comrades. So he emailed the Brigadier, his boss, explained the situation and received his permission to share the secret formula of the banana paste, in return for a 60% share. Dragos said that was fine and the two squads celebrated their new relationship with another delicious dinner.

After dinner Anton asked if he could give them a presentation on his new weapon delivery system. Of course everyone said yes, not least because when Mircea and Anton has been in town, they'd heard rumours that the evil General Bogalov and his Plague Zombie hordes were planning an all-out offensive as they wanted to overrun the WHOLE of Europe and turn it into a zombie state.

“Not on my watch” said Player.

“Nor mine” said Dragos.

Anton, looking oddly nervous, and assisted by Ionut, set up some huge screens for the castle cinema projector which was usually used when the Romanians watched films about tactics and strategies. Ionut had worked all afternoon on a powerpoint presentation and as they turned off the lights, the slide show started.

Anton, standing by the screen explained his thoughts as to the type of weapon delivery system they should adopt. Obviously they were very lucky as they had Plovdiv and up on the screen came a photo of Plovdiv busily roasting bananas with his, slightly modified lava jets. Dragos smiled proudly at this.

The next slide was of a medieval war engine called a trebuchet which was usually used for launching rocks and stones at an enemy’s castle during a siege.

Anton explained that this was the best way to deliver large quantities of banana paste over a long distance, and that he would modify the buckets so that rather than delivering huge globs of goo, it could deliver a wider spread which meant that more zombies would get covered, in a quicker time.

“How many of these war engines will you need.” asked Player.

“ Intelligence reports that over half a million zombies are likely to attach because General Bogalov wants to throw everything he has got into the battle at once, so I estimate that we will need several hundred”

“Those aren’t very good military tactics “ exclaimed Player to nods of agreement from all the Ninjas. “ but actually it gives us an advantage if we can cover the spread of the revolting hordes AND keep up a constant and sustained barrage. But can we make several hundred? How much time do we have?”

“About three weeks apparently, they’re training in Moldova at the moment. The poor Moldovans have been completely overrun and of course this just adds to the zombie hordes”.

“Hmmm, yes” said Player, turning to Dragos he asked “can we do this? Do we have the resources and the money to do this?”

“Yes and yes” said Dragos. We have the resources as the local towns are used to supplying us with wood and iron because every time Plovdiv gets excited he has a tendency to destroy things and we are always having to rebuild them. As for the money, you forget that we are in the castle of Vlad Dracul, Dracula to you and his treasure is down in the cellars, there’s more than enough.”

“That’s very generous of you Dragos” said Player, making a note to ensure that he and his team paid for all the bananas and the import taxes etc so that both squads shared the financial responsibility equally.

Both men stood up and formally shook hands, then taking a very sharp stiletto knife from the sideboard, they slit open their palms and mingled their blood, sealing the pact in the oldest, most honourable and sacred way. Everyone cheered and Anton and Ionut grinned, looking pleased and proud that their Trebuchet idea had been accepted. From outside the window came a couple of small jets of lava fire and a happy burp from Plovdiv who was really excited about his part in the proceedings.

The next couple of weeks were a frenzy of activity. Tons and tons of bananas arrived from Dominica and Plovdiv was hard at work burning them all, taking care not to set sight his helpers, who were now dressed in fireproof chain mail with safety visors and helmets to protect their topknots. They felt a bit silly wearing this get up but realising how important it was to work fast and efficiently, they put up with it.

Anton and Ionut had formed the Corps of War Engine Deliverers and they were busy sawing and hammering at the huge trees which had been the wood to the rear of the castle, making the superstructure of each massive trebuchet. Anton had quickly remembered his blacksmith skills and with Plovdiv’s help was busy at the furnace making the huge scoops, modelled on the soup ladles that had been his deliverance out of orichalum a magical metal that was stronger than anything yet wonderfully flexible, which allowed the scoop squad to perfectly target their shots.

It helped that they had put up a huge poster of the evil General Bogalov to use as the target, his ugly warty face was now liberally splattered with bits of banana paste. And the great thing about the paste was that it was reusable, for the cook had suggested mixing alum powder in with the bananas so that they didn’t go off. There was a bit of a worry as to whether the paste would still work with the alum mixed into to, but it did and so everyone was very relieved.

The trebuchets were being painted in the black, white and red colours of the two squads of Ninjas and a Latin motto, ‘Platana Vincit Omnia’ (bananas conquer everything) had been added to their new standard.

The days were busy, the nights convivial as the two squads became like brothers, swapping stories about their exploits, training with each other and inventing new methods of attack and defence, so that they soon became a

highly trained, finely honed killing machine. Or in this case, resurrection machine for the idea was to resurrect, not kill, the zombies.

Both Anton and Ionut had allowed the team Medic, Basil, to experiment on them, to see if the effect of the banana paste wore off, to see if they were going to become zombies again or not. There had been many tests and the results were excellent. It seems as if both men were just that, both men in the peak of health, even if Anton was over two hundred years old. He told Basil that he felt great, that in fact he'd never felt better. It helped that he was no longer alone, without any friends and he and Ionut had become like brothers. They'd even been into town together on their night off and had drunk far too much in the local tavern, but Anton had seen a girl he liked and being too shy to tell her, had done what most men do, had another beer instead.

Life was good, for everybody. Plovdiv adored being the centre of attention and discovered that he actually really liked bananas. He'd often sneak off for a quick snack. He particularly enjoyed them with peanut butter, but that was quite sticky and sometimes clogged up his lava jets, so he had to be careful. He knew that Dragos would be cross with him if he mucked up. Especially on the big day. The day they were already referring to a Z-Day.

A couple of the ninjas had volunteered to slip across the Moldovan border one night to see how General Bogalov was getting on and when the all-out attack was likely to be. They came back looking worried. "There are an awful lot of them" said the leader. "And they look pretty ready. I think they'll probably be here the day after tomorrow".

Player and Dragos looked at each other and agreed that today would now be known as Z-day minus 2, tomorrow as Z-day minus 1 and the day after as Z-day itself. They gulped and got on with checking and resting the trebuchets.

The fun had stopped and serious hard work taken over. The Trebuchets were arranged in a circle around the circular walls of the castle, looking out over the countryside, some wooded, some open fields and some the river valley. Although Moldova was in a straight line to the east, any good General knows that the element of surprise is a great military tactic and so Player and Dragos fully expected that the first wave of attackers would probably come from a completely different direction. But which one?

To be on the safe side they told the Trebuchet crews that they would have to be ready all at the same time and perhaps even to start flinging the banana paste in all directions, all at once. They had calculated that they had more than enough stocks of paste, but the weak point was the loading and reloading. So they'd decided to stagger the great war engines, by bringing

one forward to hurl its gooey cargo while the second one was pulled back, loaded and ready to be pushed forward as soon as the first one had let go. So they made sure the wheels were well greased with fat from the kitchens so that they would roll fast and smoothly. The strongest ninjas had been chosen to lock and load, to push and to pull the trebuchets in and out of position and the ones with the keenest eyes had been chosen to act as range finders and firers.

They were all set. Huge covered iron cauldrons of the goo were beside each trebuchet station, enormous ladles lay beside them ready to load the “weapon” into each hopper, ready for the firer to line up the great machine, take aim, pull the lever and fire the gooey mess right into the zombie hordes. Then the pullers would pull him back, while the pushers made sure that the second machine with its own firer was lined up, loaded and ready to go. That way there would be a continuous barrage of bananas without stopping.

Plovdiv was also going to be on standby to send streams of lava to temporarily halt the army, long enough for the bananas to do their work. They’d seen from the effect on Anton and Ionut that it was pretty immediate. The problem was what on earth they were going to do with all the cured zombies who would no longer want to fight. The cook had thought about this and was making massive piles of sandwiches and chips and great buckets of Ribena and orange juice for the hungry newly humanised zombies and they had erected a makeshift rest area for them around the back of the kitchens.

They had thought of everything. At least they thought they had.

Z-day minus one was spent making sure that everything had been thought of, that everything worked and that all possible scenarios and unforeseen events were considered. They were pretty confident that they had thought of everything. Plovdiv however was a bit bothered. He knew what he had to do and he was confident that he could do it, but he was just one dragon and even though his squads of humans were well prepared, finely tuned fingers, half a million zombies were a LOT to deal with. He wished he had some help. The a brilliant idea struck him. Though he was, as far as he knew, the only lava dragon in the world, he’d heard of other dragons, that breathed not just fire but fire and brimstone. Maybe it wasn’t too late for him to try and find one to come and help.

He knew that the Bulgarian dragons were particularly vicious and he seemed to remember that he had a distant cousin on his mothers side in a town called Razgrad which was not too far from the border with Romania and about a half day’s flying. So he sent a message to The Razgrad Dragon, written in the most elegant and polite old-fashioned way. Dragons are very

keen on good manners and asking one to come, at the last minute, to help save humanity from a potentially disastrous Plague Zombie invasion has to be written in the MOST refined and cultured way possible. So he asked Dragos' Secretary, a lovely lady called Wenna, to help him compose a telegram and hoped that it would reach his cousin in time.

He started it "oh most terrifying and esteemed cousin..." and went on from there in the same way for several paragraphs, hoping that the telegram found him and his family well, assuring him of his best and most cordial wishes at all times etc etc. It was a very long telegram and therefore not cheap to send. But desperate times called for desperate measures. Plovdiv finished it by explaining, in a very few words, the problem and asked him for his help. Satisfied that he'd now done what he could, he told Dragos it was finished and so he gave Wenna the money from Dracula's treasure and sent her off to the telegram office to send it, keeping his claws crossed that it would a) arrive in time and b) be addressed to the correct Dragon. Dragons are usually named after the town where their ancestors lived, which is why Plovdiv was named after the city of that name. But it didn't necessarily mean that they still lived there. So he really really hoped that cousin Razgrad did indeed live in the town of the same name. If he was alive... he'd heard of some dragon hunting that had gone on in Bulgaria some years earlier when the townspeople, terrible stupid cowards that they were had not realised the advantages of having a dragon and instead had been scared and frightened. How stupid he thought and puffed out a jet or two of lava, almost burning one of the Ninja's shoes.

"Oi" yelled the startled ninja, "watch where you're breathing mate".

"Sorry" said Plovdiv feeling very embarrassed.

That night a very quiet and somber group of Ninjas sat in the dining room, eating very sparingly but good quality high protein food to give them almost superhuman strength and drinking tiny mugs of fermented honey, called mead, to calm their exhausted minds.

Someone had gone up to the top of the highest tower and looked out of the window just before sunset where he'd seen a great grey greasy wave of plague zombies lurching silently towards the castle, but still a long way off. Thankfully General Bogalov had very bad eyesight and preferred to attack in daylight when he could see. He was too vain to wear glasses and in any case his constantly exploding pustules kept smearing the lens of any glasses he'd tried wearing and even his binoculars.

So they knew that the attack would start at dawn when they knew that they would be the only force capable of stopping such an army. They also knew that if they failed and died trying, the world would not be safe from the marauding hordes and the very existence of human beings would be

threatened. No pressure there then Player thought grimly as he climbed into his bunk.

The next morning dawned seemingly only a few minutes since he'd gone to sleep, and almost immediately there came a cry from the battlements "they're coming". Grabbing his clothes and his weapons, he paused for only a second to throw a small cup of scalding hot espresso coffee down his throat, feeling the caffeine hit almost immediately and feeling much better for it. These foreigners have the right idea he thought, this is much better than a cup of tea in the mornings.

Thus fortified he made his way out onto the parapet and up to the battlements.

He heard them before he saw them, and smelt them before he heard them. First came the great stench of putrid bodies, then the relentless squelching noises as they heaved, slithered and limped their way forwards the castle. Zombies are incapable of walking in a straight line as they have problems with missing legs, missing eyes and lopsided bodies, so the sight of a whole army, a sort of great grey lurching wave of death made him feel slightly seasick and he was glad he'd had his coffee.

He noted that they'd been right to mount the trebuchets all around the battlements, facing in all directions, for in the night, the evil General Bogalov had moved his creeping cohorts all around the castle so that they were attacking - or about to attack - from every direction. The ninjas saw this too and had already loaded both the forward and aft trebuchets at each station and the cook was rushing around, with his helpers, stirring up the great vats of banana mush. In the night he'd had the bright idea of saving the banana skins, because as everyone knows, you can fall over and really hurt yourself if you slip on a banana skin. And it would be such a SHAME if the zombies slipped and fell over, wouldn't it?!

Dragos came to stand beside him and Plovdiv, still worrying about his telegram, came to stand beside them, puffs of outraged smoke emanating from his nostrils. Dragos could see that his dragon was really furious, because the lava in his belly flowed brighter, hotter and redder than he'd ever seen it.

The two blood brother ninjas turned to each other, hugged each other fiercely and hard and moved to their respective positions. They had deliberately decided to jointly be the Commander in Chief and their men had thoroughly approved of that. Both Ninja generals being equally respected.

So it started, the first wave came, Plovdiv slowed them by breathing slightly stickier and cooler lava at them so that they would get stuck in it and be still enough for the trebuchets to find their mark and cover them with banana paste. Everyone waited breathlessly as the first lot got covered, seconds seemed like hours as they stood still, watching with fascination as the paste started working.

The zombies did what zombies do best, wiggle, lurch and scream, but their screams changed to exclamations of horror, then curiosity then wonder as their disgusting suppurations, their afflictions and their general revoltingness began to transform. They stood still, dribbling with undisguised perplexity as slowly their awful wounds, the gaping holes, the missing limbs and the hanging shreds of flesh started healing and the terrible pain they'd suffered, some for hundreds of years, like Anton, started to disappear. They sat down on the lava which had rapidly cooled, and thanks to some miraculous herbal mouthwash that Plovdiv had been given by the cook, didn't burn them or imprison them. It just supported them while they healed.

They sat there muttering little sounds of disbelief while elsewhere on the battle ground banana paste was being curiously lobbed into thousands of zombies, it looked as if they were all covered with porridge but, judging by their reactions, it was working. Wave after wave of zombies sat down and watched in amazement as their bodies stared regenerating, quite content to have a bit of a rest as they struggled to understand their amazing transformations.

Some even lay down and went to sleep. In fact a LOT of them lay down and went to sleep, with great deep sighs of contentment as they lay, bathed in a banana body cream, looking up at the spring sunshine and watching the fluffy white clouds sail slowly by before they dropped into a deep and regenerative sleep.

The banana barrage continued, there was a bit of a problem with repositioning some of the trebuchets as they were no longer needed in one direction but had to be put to good use in another.

Hours went by and the very successful strategy of Plovdiv imprisoning them in the softened and herby smelling lava while they were doused in banana paste seemed to work extremely well.

Player and Dragos and the rest of the Ninjas could hardly believe their eyes as more and more zombies started snoozing or resting or even picking flowers. The ghastly screaming and groaning had long ceased and had been replaced by an almost musical litany of exclamations of happiness, pleasure and comfort as sleep took them over.

The Ninjas and Plovdiv, especially Plovdiv were beginning to feel very tired. The sight of so many relaxing former zombies, lying around in the spring sunshine, made them all feel sleepy too and they longed to lie down, just for a moment...

A howl from above made them look up. A blue and white striped hot air balloon was hovering over the castle, perilously close to the largest tower and a rope ladder was being lowered from the large wicker basket. General Bogalov and his Zombie captains were preparing to climb down and overrun the exhausted ninjas. Bits of zombie dropped off onto the upturned faces of the defenders, making noises of disgust and horror they quickly moved off, wondering how on earth they were going to fire the trebuchets directly upwards into the balloon. They couldn't, they hadn't foreseen an aerial attack and they had nothing with which to repel it.

"Plovdiv, quickly, fire upwards" said Dragos urgently, but poor Plovdiv, exhausted by all the hours of lava spewing that he'd done couldn't muster enough puff to shoot out a jet of flame, especially not upwards, as gravity would ensure that it fell back down and would, most probably, burn his snout.

"I can't Dragos" he panted.

"Well take off and fly above the balloon, hurry..."

Plovdiv tried but simply didn't have the strength to take off and also spew forth lava. He slumped down in despair.

Player and Dragos looked at each other in alarm. What on Earth were they going to do? Something smelly and disgusting shot past them, several large gobbets of putrefying flesh had dropped off the lead zombie who was already half out of the basket and starting to clamber down the rope, what was left of its face screwed up into the most horrible leer.

A blob of banana paste flew past his ear and landed on the balloon's basket. Banjo had seen what was happening and had mustered the ninjas into using the large soup ladles that the cook had so thoughtfully provided. More and more globs followed and the lead zombie stopped in disbelief as first one piece of him then another started feeling better. He could even see his feet regenerating on the ladder below him.

General Bogalov screamed madly at him and tried to make the other zombies climb down, but they were also being hit and, it seemed, thinking twice about climbing down. They were feeling really quite relaxed and besides the rope hurt what was left of their feet and they really didn't want to do that...

While they were thinking this, everyone else, including General Bogalov, noticed a huge black shadow creeping up over the ground, up the castle

keep and threatening to block out the sunlight. They all turned and stared, for coming out of the sun, was the biggest, blackest dragon they'd ever seen and, as they watched, it opened its mouth and sent forth a white hot stream of fire, straight into the balloon so that it caught fire immediately and started dropping like a stone into the courtyard below.

"Cousin Razgrad?" I asked Plovdiv hopefully.

"At your service" the great dragon replied sending another searing jet of flame down onto the battlements, just enough to reignite the great cauldrons of banana paste so that they bubbled up quickly, the last batch and, seemingly only just enough to use on the remaining zombies and the quaking and really quite revolting General Bogalov who squealed somewhat girlishly when he got caught by a drop of paste. He reached out to touch it and a look of wonder crossed his suppurating pustule of a face as he smelled the banana." Banana? I LOVE bananas" he exclaimed. He touched the mess and then, overcome at the enormity of his defeat, put his face in his hands. Right in the banana paste, which, of course, started working its miracles immediately. The oozing stopped, the boils shrunk and as they all watched fascinated, a really quite handsome older man emerged from the ravages of what had been his disfigured face. What was even more amazing was that he started to cry, great wracking sobs and between them words, that sounded like "sorry", "regret" and even "gardening".

Player and Dragos looked at each other in amazement and at the basket of the balloon which was now filled with good-looking guys all lounging around on its padded seating and hesitantly swapping tips about organic body scrub. They started laughing at the ridiculousness of the scene, they had done it, they and their bananas and the wonderful Plovdiv had defeated the greatest and most terrifying zombie army the world had ever seen.

Plovdiv was sitting in the courtyard talking quietly to his magnificent cousin Razgrad, who had a wing loosely draped around the shoulders of the younger dragon as if he recognised how exhausted he must be and how much he needed a fortifying hug. Not many people know this, but dragons are like cats and love being stroked and hugged - but on their own terms - also like cats.

The former zombie army were now queuing up at the kitchen window for some real food, the first for many years. Others had gone down to the river for a swim and yet more were just lying in the flower filled meadows round the castle, relaxing. It was a very satisfying scene!

Player and Dragos, together with Anton, Ionut, Basil, Banjo and the others all sat around the courtyard with mugs of beer, watching in astonishment as General Bogov "please call me Maxim" sat talking to the head gardener

about the roses and comparing the virtues of Floribundas with Grandiflora types.

He looked happy and asked if he could use the telephone to call his wife. Of course they said yes and he was heard enthusiastically telling her all about the marvellous regenerative effects of the countryside and a new health and beauty treatment using bananas. He even suggested she joined him for a short holiday.

Everyone was happily exhausted and enthusiastically discussed plans for manufacturing and marketing the anti zombie banana paste worldwide. Maxim, formerly General Bogov, said he knew many many zombie warlords who were fed up and wanted to retire and a lot more evil despots who were still using their zombie armies and mistreating them. He even told them that the zombies had formed a secret trade union and were desperate to live a normal life, without bits falling off all the time. It seemed that there were many many people who they could sell the Banana paste to, so it was a very happy and relieved Player who told his men that in a couple of days they could pack up and leave for home. He asked Wenna if she could book them return tickets on the bus, General Bogalov, overheard this and said under no circumstances were they to take the bus home. He would fly them home in his private jumbo jet, which Marina, his wife was busy preparing for a trip to the Chelsea Flower Show where the General could buy some world-class roses.

It was, therefore, a very happy group of Ninja assassins and former Zombies who sat down, at a huge long table set out in the meadow with a beautiful view of the distant mountains and had a really delicious dinner, with all sorts of their favourite food and drink.

Sitting at the top of the table, Player, Dragos and Iván Bogov “please don’t call me general anymore” discussed the future. Now the zombies were all but defeated there was little for them to do.

“Why not turn the castle into a health spa?” Maxim suggested.

“Hmmmmm, not a bad idea. We could leave Anton, Ionut and Boris, with Wenna and the cook and any of your former zombie commandants to run it, and my squad and I could hire ourselves out as mercenaries. Player would you join us? As mercenaries, not Spa management.”

“We’d like that very much” said Player, as his phone rang “excuse me one moment. Oh hello Brigadier. Really? That’s not good news. If you could hold on one moment, I might just have an idea, may I call you back in five minutes?”

He turned to Dragos. That was my boss, Brigadier Bolton, he says that NASA have called him asking for our help. It seems that there is a huge fleet

of aliens heading for earth and no one knows how to fight them. Are you interested in coming with us and helping us against them?"

"Of course," said Dragos, "but we don't have any practice at fighting aliens, nor do we have any weapons..."

"Well we MIGHT do," said Player, with a big grin, remembering their experiments with the Coca Cola... and dialling the Brigadier to say that they were all on their way.

But that is another story...